Misfortune: a novel of historical and detective fiction

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MISFORTUNE: A NOVEL OF HISTORICAL AND DETECTIVE FICTION

by Samme Chittum

a Dissertation

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Abstract

*Misfortune* is a work of historiographic metafiction that takes as its subject what many regard as an unsolved crime: the suspicious death on Sunday September 8, 1560 of Amy Robsart, the wife of Robert Dudley, the favorite of Elizabeth I. The plot revisits the black-legend of Robert Dudley, the wife killer, by casting him as the victim and his wife as a co-conspirator in a scheme to assassinate her husband. *Misfortune* connects the events and personalities surrounding the death of Amy Robsart to *Leicester’s Commonwealth*, a work of political propaganda published in 1584 that accused Dudley of murdering his wife. This novel is concerned with and comments upon authors as historical actors, stolen stories and fiction masquerading as nonfiction. Because it is a novel of detection, the story of the crime is gradually reconstructed via investigations conducted by two amateur detectives working in two different centuries. The dominant narrative is that of the investigation that unfolds in September of 1560 at Cumnor Place during the week after the murder. The subordinate investigation is set in Sir Water Scott’s country estate of Abbotsford as he writes *Kenilworth* in September of 1820. Sir Thomas Blount is the sixteenth-century detective and the primary narrator; Lady Louisa Stuart is eighteenth century detective whose journals entries both add to and contradict Blount’s findings. Blount is modeled upon the hard-boiled detective who has a personal stake in the investigation. Lady Louisa is a classic armchair detective whose strength is her detachment. My dissertation draws upon a diverse and extensive body of historical evidence, both factual and circumstantial, the sources of which are cited in my afterword, “The Thing That Thou Saw Only in Thought: Crafting a Creative Dissertation.”
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Chapter One: Elizabeth Tudor

Whitehall Palace in the winter of 1588; three months after the death of Robert Dudley

“Here lies the noble lecher, who used art to provoke.
Here lies the constant husband, whose love was firm as smoke.
Here lies the politician and nut worm of the state.
Here lies the Earl of Leicester
That God and man did hate.”

An excerpt from an epitaph by an anonymous author written after Robert Dudley’s death at age 56 on September 4, 1588, four years after the publication of *Leicester’s Commonwealth*, a scurrilous account of the circumstances surrounding the death of his wife.

Francis Walsingham makes his reverences, nostrils flaring as he dips his head and inhales a bright, ticklish whiff of mint. And what else? The sweetish sharp scent of roses in spirit water and something confectionary as well, mayhap almonds ground fine. All mask something sour—her person, smelling like Sunday’s clotted cream gone off by Monday and comprised, top to bottom, of pinched toes and nails gone yellow, brittle knees, ribs like clapboards, withered breasts and a scalp all but bald beneath a red wig curled in the Roman style.

The Queen is distracted. She sighs and touches her wig, as if yearning to scratch an itch or tap her brain. He clears his throat and waits but a moment before she narrows her bird-like eyes and surveys him with a gaze both scrutinizing and fond. “You wear each day of your life upon your countenance, Sir Francis. A pipe with your posset is what you need. Dries up the rheum!”
“Your Majesty is my only looking glass,” he says. “It is upon you I rely for an honest reckoning. Your good health makes a mockery of all physic. As for me, treacles are of no avail, but I shall try Raleigh’s herb, if you judge it to be restorative.”

He is rewarded with a sly smile, her vermilion lips closed to hide teeth gone grey-brown. Her skin crinkles, fissuring the sediment-like layer of white lacquer on her cheeks. He is almost out of humor after being kept waiting while her women painted her face, taking pains to conceal every flaw as they dabbed her high forehead with a paste compounded of alum, tin ash and a dash of moth wings, for all he knows. How unbeautiful she is, he thinks, but enduring, and that is all that matters—that and her command of the old gods who still meddle in the affairs of men. Four months have gone by since Neptune opened his sea-foamy maw and swallowed four hundred Spanish galleons, as if intent on declaring his violent love for her, his queen among mortals. “I have of late been thinking,” she says, “of the incalculable harm done by lies enshrined in print.” She tilts her chin toward the table. There they are, laid side by side, a pamphlet containing an epitaph defaming Dudley and something much worse—a copy of the banned book they have both tried so hard to suppress, to no avail. “To let him have the last word, it rankles, sir. I cannot abide it.”

The Queen need not name the author of whom she speaks. He knows him all too well. Sir Charles Arundell, dead not quite a year. Her troublesome second cousin, leader of the English Catholics in France and author of the book that has blighted Dudley’s legacy: *Leicester’s Commonwealth. A discourse on the abominable life, plots, treasons, murders, falsehoods, poisonings, lusts, incitements and evil stratagems employed by Lord Leicester.*
Out of habit, he makes his face as private as a wardrobe. “Your grace, this scurrilous tract was and is no more than idle gossip, a bundle of railings bound in leather.” Yet it is also dangerous, a seditious treatise printed in Paris, or possibly Antwerp in October of 1584. The pages are edged in gold, as if it were a book of law and not a sordid tale of intrigue and lust. Amnesty was offered to anyone who surrendered a copy of the forbidden book. Not a soul came forward, and Leicester’s Commonwealth was read and re-read for its salacious tales of seduction and murder, all committed by Dudley, a villain so depraved that he had his own wife slain.

His words have failed to pacify her, and the thunder in the Queen’s face warns of the lightning strike to come. “Tittle-tattle it may be, sir! Yet thanks to its author, the flowery lies it contains are so cleverly concealed among the leaves of truth that it makes itself most convincing. You and I could ride from Bath to Norwich and not bump up against an Englishman who believes Dudley did not murder his wife,” she says, rising from her chair, the better to hold forth. “My subjects, sir, see mischief where there was but mischance—no matter what the jury ruled and court decreed! Once the cry of murder most foul has been raised, it will not be silenced. We have denounced these lies and denied that a crime was ever committed. Yet the ragged bear and staff shall be forever defamed until the true villain is unmasked, and a fresh tale devised to ensnare him.”

He is taken aback by this speech, as much as by the vehemence of the speaker. He cannot recall hearing the Queen refer, even obliquely, to Robert Dudley’s dead wife, and never once in tandem with the baleful word murder. He shifts his gaze beyond the Queen to a wall covered with a Netherlandish tapestry in which a cloven-hooved satyr cavorts in a shady glade.
Nearby, two nude cherubs play with a cluster of fruits wound with ribbons. Why this, he thinks, and not a rendering of the Acts of the Apostles?

“This remedy you propose,” he says, “may cure the disease, or it may merely bring on a fresh fever.” His advice remains the same now as four years ago when Leicester’s Commonwealth first appeared. To publically confront Dudley’s enemies would be a grave error, no matter that the man is dead, having fallen ill on his way back from Buxton just eight weeks ago. At first, she shut herself in her bed chamber, refusing all succor. Her gentlewomen whimpered and pawed at the door like spaniels. To no avail. In the end, Cecil was forced to order the door taken off its hinges.

This day he finds her freshly animated by wrath, her preferred restorative. “I have thought on that as well,” she says, undeterred. “Any fever brought on by opening this old wound shall pass. That matters less now than it did before, when he was alive. What remains when the fever subsides will be a body free of disease. History, my dear Sir Francis, cannot be the purview of cozeners and liars. One day, when you and I are beyond caring, tavern idlers and court gossips will cease trading tittle tattle about Robert Dudley and sober minds will look to chroniclers to learn of his legacy. Memories fade, stories change and witnesses perish. But words, Sir Francis, words on paper endure! If we cannot purge the world of Leicester’s Commonwealth, we shall bring forth a fresh indictment.”

Above the Queen’s head, a twig taps upon a diamond-shaped glass set in Caen stone. His feet ache. He feels quite old, discouraged. He shakes his head. “Forgive me, your Majesty, but you run ahead of me. Am I to understand that you are suggesting that another book be
written, one that purports to solve the murder of Lady Amy?” He pauses and raises one eyebrow. “A murder, I hasten to add, that never took place.”

“I know that as well as anyone, sirrah,” she snaps, rounding on him. “My answer to your question is, Yes! That is precisely what I wish. A new book, bound in crimson with gilt edging. Printed here, at an Aldgate printing house, by a London printer who can be trusted to be discrete.”

“John Day would be the man for the job,” he says, then instantly regrets signing on to her risky scheme. “Your Majesty, so many years have passed since Lady Amy died...” He breaks off and begins again. “Perhaps it is best for all concerned to let the dead rest undisturbed.”

Coffins are nailed shut for a reason, he thinks, to keep old foes from clawing their way out and up to trouble the living.

The Queen closes her eyes, as if pondering the wisdom of his advice. Yet when she opens them again, he is certain that she is still determined to have her way. “Yet surely you must see that now,” she says, “lo these many years since then. How long has it been?”

He exhales, whistling like a whale forcing air from its blowhole. As if she does not know! She forgets nothing. “Twenty-eight years and four months,” he says, reciting the numbers as if they are mere facts, and makes some quick calculations. Dudley died on 4 September, 1588, and his wife on 8 September, 1560. If Dudley had perished a mere four days later on the anniversary of her ladyship’s death, it would surely have been read by all as a sign from God—the final confirmation of his guilt.
“Twenty-eight years hence,” she intones, and resumes sitting, as if weary. She looks away, as if this simple statement has reminded her that she is no longer young, that all of the sweet years are behind her and life has become as sour as her breath. “And yet after all this time, sir, no one but you and I and a handful of Dudley’s true friends are satisfied that Amy Dudley fell from a pair of stairs and broke her neck. For you must agree, that a play that ends with death by mischance will never capture one’s fancy the same as a tale of murder. The first is regretted and soon forgotten, whereas the second is seared into memory as a wrong never set right. And then retold until it takes on a life of its own. Consider as well the authority of the printed word, and the impression made by a story that can be read and re-read. How genuine it seems, no matter how it mangles the truth!”
Chapter Two: Henry Fitzalan, the 19th Earl of Arundel

Nonsuch Palace in Surrey, at the estate of Henry Fitzalan, in August of 1560, one month before the death of Amy Robsart

“I think Dudley to be the cause that my Lord might not marry the Queen’s highness. Wherefore I would that he had been put to death with his father, or that some ruffian would have dispatched him with some dagger.”

Arthur Guntor, a retainer of Henry Fitzalan, writing to a friend in September of 1560

Henry Fitzalan shuts his small, lashless blue eyes and rests both hands on the arms of his high back chair in which he sits as upright as a judge. His mind is made up. He cannot allow his son-in-law to naysay him. The difficulty is, of course, that each is accustomed to having his way. Since they are sure to clash, one of them must concede. He blinks, and sees Tom Howard throw himself down onto a settle, shoving aside a satin cushion as if it were a heap of soiled rushes. Howard fingers the gold chain draped across his velvet waist coat, then raises one hand to cover his mouth as he belches.

Fitzalan frowns. A man ought to be able to bring up wind without regard for niceties, another sign that Howard has spent too much time at court. “I have a powder for a weak stomach, if that’s your trouble,” he says.

“Tis not my stomach that needs strengthening,” says Howard, sounding too snappish for his own good. “It is your argument that is weak, sir, and your will to deal with Dudley.”

Howard’s jaw is clenched. One eye twitches. He rubs it with his right hand, on which he wears a
silver ring set with a large bloodstone given to him by his Mary, dead two years now, may God rest her soul.

Fitzalan does not relish arguing with Howard. Yet he is close to losing his temper. They are both thoroughly nauseated by the sight of the Queen fawning over Dudley. Howard especially, after returning from five awful months in Scotland, where the bodies of English men and boys had piled up like cordwood without even a clean victory to show for it. Only a piddling treaty that would not last the year. While Howard was gone, Dudley was free to roam about court like a fox among hens and insinuate himself into affairs of state. Even, God help them, the debate about whom the Queen should marry. Howard is livid. He drags his anger behind him like a muzzled dog on rope. He is convinced that the only solution is to assassinate Dudley.

Fitzalan has a much better plan, which is to keep Dudley alive and make him suffer, to humiliate and ostracize him. “Listen to me, Tom,” he says. “Dudley is the same as his father. He is supremely vain and grasping. He will o’er reach himself and bring about his own ruin, with only a little help from us. For he who sews iniquity reaps infamy.” He came across this last phrase in a book on rhetoric, and had thought of Dudley. Ever since, he had been waiting for a chance to use it.

Howard ignores his eloquent phrasing and catapults himself off of the settle. “I am sick to death of empty rhetoric, sir! While we waste time arguing, the Queen waxes hot and cold whenever anyone dares mention the Archduke. And behaves as if I am tedious when I talk of how to tame the French. Then she whistles for her Master of the Horse and saddles up to go hunting, as if she hasn’t a care in the world, and comes back all in a lather, with Dudley riding
behind.” He glares at him, daring him to disagree. “I swear to you, sir, there is not a right-minded man at court who would not cheer to see Dudley put in his place, once and for all.”

Fitzalan grimaces. He dislikes being reminded of Henry’s daughter and her shameful preference for a married man. Bile rises in his gorge every time he thinks of the pounds he squandered to entertain her at Nonesuch, and the airy way she kept him at arm’s length. Despite having been gifted with enough plate to fill a cupboard, never mind the endless possets and cakes she picked at and pushed away. After all that, she made light of him behind his back at court. He would show her. The Queen has many weaknesses, chief among them her fondness for a scoundrel.

As for Howard, he is puffed up like a fish bladder with his own importance, and he means to stick a pin in him. “Where are these right-minded men of whom you speak, sir? Who among them can get close enough to Dudley to put a blade between his ribs? Need I remind you that there have been two attempts and two failures!”

Howard is ready with an answer. He has been thinking about how to murder Dudley and little else since he returned from Edinburgh. “This time will be different,” he says. “This time we can get at him, away from London. When he pays a call on his wife while he and the Queen are at Windsor. Because now we know precisely where he is going and when. For once we have him! We cannot forfeit this opportunity. Too much depends on it. There is a risk, yes, but think of what we have to gain.” Fitzalan presses his fingers against his forehead, and tries to think. Mayhap Howard is right.
But no! Elizabeth is young, yet vengeful, the same as her father. “Consider your cousin, sir. She is a woman, and a slave to base passions that cloud her judgement. And she is also a sovereign with the law at her command. If Dudley is murdered, she will not hesitate to put to torture anyone she suspects has evidence.” He glares at Howard. “Someone will talk. Names will be given. No! That will not do.”

The younger man makes a face. He wants to protest, but is holding back. He resumes sitting, but is restless. “Do not think to make me lose my nerve by putting on the black cap, sir,” says Howard. “My cousin’s crown is not so firmly affixed to her pretty head. She requires my allegiance, and yours. She dares not move against us if Dudley is slain. He has many enemies who wish him dead. We are two persons in a large crowd.”

“Be that as it may,” he says. “I have a better plan. One that is, moreover, less hazardous and more sure of success.”

“You are always quick with a moreover or a besides. You would have made an excellent lawyer.”

He ignores the insult. “Whereas you, sir, are beside yourself with impatience.”

The younger man crosses his arms, assuming the pose of one forced to heed bad advice from an elder. “All right. Go on!”

“I grant you, sir,” says Fitzalan, “that the picture of Dudley lying dead with a dagger in his heart is one I have painted time and again in my imagination. However gratifying that would be, it is as nothing compared to the prospect of seeing him humiliated.”
In his darkest moments, when he fears that all he has worked so hard to achieve is about to be taken from him, he remembers the day that John Dudley was destroyed. At the time, it had seemed impossible to set a trap for one so cunning. Yet he had succeeded rather handily, promising to back the older Dudley when he tried to put his son and daughter-in-law on the throne. Then betraying him as soon as he was able, running to Mary and rallying the peers who feared Dudley’s rise to power. He made sure he was there to watch when his enemy was handed the proclamation declaring Mary to be the Queen. John Dudley wept as he read, like some second rate actor. After he was arrested, the mob had jeered and pelted him with offal as he was escorted to the Tower. He would never forget Dudley’s twisted smile, as if he found laughable his own enormous failure.

“How are we to achieve this,” Howard says, biting off each word, “if everything Robert Dudley has done so far has not caused him to drown in disgrace?”

“Only because the Queen stands by him. If Dudley becomes a pariah, if he is so compromised she must throw him off to save herself, then we shall prevail. The Queen loves Dudley, but she loves her crown more.”

Howard is pouting. “Granted, sir. But what of it?”

“It is one thing to practice adultery in public, but another to murder your wife. Such a heinous crime would create a scandal that would all but burn down Whitehall.”

Now his son-in-law is staring at him as if he has two heads. “What do you intend, sir? We cannot make Dudley do away with his wife. And if we do it for him, he will be the happiest man in England.”
“It’s quite simple, really. If Dudley’s wife is slain, then all of England will know who killed her and why. The Queen will be forced to distance herself from her favorite. If she is foolish enough to marry a man that the world knows to be the lowest sort of villain, she risks all. Need I point out the obvious, that unlike Dudley, his wife is unguarded? That she, in fact, believes we are her allies and is therefore vulnerable.” He studies Howard to see the effect of his words. His son-in-law is a man who fancies himself a gentleman in more than name.

“I asked you to enlighten me, sir, not to provoke me with a cowardly scheme to kill a lady.”

“I do not aim to provoke you, but to persuade you,” he says, keeping his voice level and his temper in check.

But Howard is having none of if. “You have not succeeded!”

“Tame your choler, sir!”

Howard leans forward and all but hisses. “What you propose is odious.”

He snorts. “Truly? It is I who am dismayed,” he says. “You perhaps know something of saintly mothers and dutiful sisters, but nothing of women and even less of wives.” He does not try to conceal the scorn he feels for Howard’s naivety. “Every other so-called gentlewoman at court is more deadly than an African viper. Disagree with me if you dare.”

Howard is pale and silent, a sign that he is on the losing side of the argument.

“As for scruples, they give them up more readily than their maidenheads. I admit that dames of the merchant class are the most brazen, but the wives of nobles are by far the most
t treacherous. Lady Amy is the worst sort, a commoner who married for advantage and who has been cast aside."

“And who, as you well know, has been ill used at every turn by her husband.”

“That is not our fault or concern!” He slams his fist down on the arm of his chair. “Listen to me, Tom. I am your senior, taught by hard trial. The treachery of the Dudleys can only be dealt with by making them victims of their own vile schemes. You have seen how freely Dudley carries himself in the presence of the Queen, and how those at court who thoroughly despise him nonetheless come running with their hands out, have you not? It is not because they love him. Rather because it is being bandied about that Lady Amy is likely to die before the year is out, mayhap sooner. After she does so, and makes her husband a widower, he will do what his father could not, and put a Dudley on the throne of England. Is that what you want?”

He hears himself shouting and pauses to compose himself. “And when that day comes—if it comes—Dudley’s triumph will be our ruin! If you will not heed me, your own father-in-law, consider William Cecil and how he has been dealt with by the Queen these last few weeks. You yourself have seen how he slinks about like a whipped cur with his tail twixt his legs! I used to believe that Cecil could plug every leak in this rat-infested ship of state, but no more. Mark my words, Thomas, if Cecil sees the waters rising so high that he is prepared to flee to Stamford to save himself, it is because he, like me, has already been remanded to the Tower. Once was enough for him, by God, and me as well! Now tell me, sir, if you dare, that I am wrong about any of this.” He is winded and breathing heavily. He hates long speeches, and is tired of hearing himself yammer, which is Howard’s fault.
“You plow the same ground with a new blade, sir. When you know very well that I do not disagree. What I contest is the notion that such a foul deed is the proper remedy.”

“Oh but it is! Of that I have not the slightest doubt.” He makes his voice hard. “I am not toying with you, Thomas. This is a matter in which I can brook no dissent. If you do not agree, then you must not interfere. As usual, you will be the beneficiary of all I have accomplished. And so will Cecil, by the by. Then you can both be delighted by Dudley’s disgrace as you look down your long noses at me. I don’t mind at all.”

It will all be worth it, he thinks. His son-in-law will keep intact his precious opinion of himself, and he will have his way. He will cook Dudley’s goose to a crispy brown and serve it to the Queen on a golden tray. He cannot suppress a cynical little laugh, which makes Howard throw a resentful look his way.

He is disgusted by Howard’s sentimentality. “As if either you or Cecil would give two pence for Dudley’s jade! To say that she is not a virtuous woman is too kind. What sort of wife schemes to murder her own husband?” He lets Howard chew on that while he summons forth the proper indignation. “If you think for one moment that I will shrink from doing what is best for England, I can assure you that I will not. And for that you can be grateful. All I need from you is to make arrangements to speak with that man.”

Howard is twisting the bloodstone ring on his finger and will not look at him. “I have no idea to whom you are referring. What man?”

“That priest,” he says. “The one that Sir Charles keeps on a short leash. Norton or Dokes. What’s his name?”
“Nokes.”

“That’s him.” Fitzalan finds him to be repulsive, priest or no. But that is beside the point. “I have already spoken to Sir Charles about all of this.” Naturally, he has omitted one salient detail. That it was Sir Charles who first came to him with the plan to ruin Dudley by killing his wife. It doesn’t really matter whose idea it was, he thinks, as long as Amy Dudley is slain before she dies in her bed.

“Tell Sir Charles,” Fitzalan says, “to send word to that priest Nokes.” Howard is already half way to the door when he calls out and stops him. “Better yet, let Sir Charles handle it. He’ll know what to do.”
Chapter Three: What the Cruel World Shall Bruit

Monday morning September 9, 1560

“Life is death and death is life”

Frontispiece from the first edition of *The Acts and Monuments of the Christian Church; Being a Complete History of the Lives, Sufferings, and Deaths of the Christian Martyrs From the Commencement of Christianity to the Present Period* (1563) by John Foxe

My tale begins with a journey on horseback that commenced on a dreary Monday morning, as journeys often do. My head was tender after too much punch the night before, and I slouched in the saddle, content to let Kerwiden plod along, lest a more robust pace jar my joints. My drear companion, melancholy, once banished, had returned and rode along beside me on my way to Cumnor Hall, less than half a day’s journey from Windsor Palace, where my employer remained, pursuing all the pleasures to which he was entitled. I had been dispatched, yet again, to act as Dudley’s proxy, to parlay with her ladyship and take the brunt of her wrath. This time making futile apologies for Dudley’s absence on Sunday, when he pledged he would ride to see his wife, but did not.

I had been instructed to do my utmost to persuade her to take physic and live quietly, so that Dudley might make a show of being a dutiful husband. That my ride from Windsor to Cumnor Place would be a short one was small consolation. I misliked both my errand and the ancient grange itself. To me it would always be the bailey to which Dudley had consigned his distempered wife, the Janus-faced Amy, who one day sent frantic pleas for help, lest she die, and the next vowed she would live forever, if only to spite her husband.
O’er head, a whir of wings made me glance heavenward, where a sooty cloud of blackbirds beat at the sky, blotting out the sun and jangling my poor brain. My gut turned over in queasy sympathy. I sucked in a draught of cold air to steady myself, and shut my eyes, giving in to a memory disguised as a figure concealed behind shroud-like draperies. When the curtain was drawn, twas no pale shade that appeared, but Anne alive and bright of hue. Teeth white as chalk, skin golden as honey, her brown eyes wide and imploring. I felt once more the old longing to say things left unsaid, before it was too late. She vanished, as she always did, yanked from the stage of my fancy and replaced by the specter of Anne as I last saw her—toes touching air, her small body held aloft by a rope drawn taut round her neck. I shuddered and opened my eyes to banish this awful specter, but could not hold back the sorrow that swam forward in a rush like fish to an empty net.

This dismal reverie was broken by a disturbance on the road ahead. My right hand found my sword hilt as I squinted to get a better look, and saw the conjoined form of palfrey and rider churning up clots of mud and grass. I recognized Bowes, bouncing up and down like a fat sot in a shugging den, and took my hand off my weapon. In a nonce, rider and mount pounded to a halt a few feet away.

“Tearing up the road for your health, are you cousin? Or have you fresh news?”

“Naught that you would call good,” he said, breathing hard as he drug his sleeve across his brow.

“Well, winged Mercury, speak your peace. I shan’t interrupt.”
“The present advertisement I can give to you and his lordship at this time is that my Lady is dead. Since this Sunday past, most sorry to say.” Though Bowes did not appear sad, or even downcast. “Found her lying at the bottom of a pair of stairs at Cumnor Hall. Her neck broke, so it seems, from a fall.”

I felt Kerwiden’s broad back ripple beneath me as I willed Bowes and his malignant intelligence to vanish. In truth, I required more than a moment to gather my wits.

“Broken? Are you quite certain? Was no surgeon called?”

“Too late for a blood letter,” said Bowes. “Less he could wake the dead.” He seemed pleased with his crude witticism, and this nettled me. I knew with a cold certainty how grave was this matter. That the ailing Lady Amy had died was no cause for astonishment. But for her to have perished in such an unseemly manner was unthinkable. A lady is obliged to gasp her last on her standing bed, velvet curtains drawn round. Not tossed on the floor like a broken poppet.

“Come cousin, don’t leave me sitting on needles. What more? When?”

“Yesterday late, afore dinner. She must have tripped and fallen, I reckon. But how or from what cause no one knows. Forster had two porters tote her body up the steps and lay her out on her bed. There she lies as we speak, awaiting Pudsey.”

“And who, pray tell, is he?”

“Sir John Pudsey of Slipton, coroner for Abingdon and thereabouts.”

“What sort of man is he, this Pudsey?”
Bowes shrugged. “Dunno.”

Bowes seemed incapable of telling a story, and I resigned myself to extracting the whole of it bit by bit. “Did anyone see her fall?”

“None that I know of,” he said. “It were the servants who found her—after they come back from the fair.”

“Who was with her? Surely she was not unattended?” It was more than passing strange that Amy had been left to fend for herself.

“She shooed ‘em off, sour as a peck of crab apples. Ordered all of hers to the fair. Said she wouldn’t have them hanging about. Some tried to countenance that it weren’t proper for her to be alone, but that only provoked her. She stamped her foot and wouldn’t hear of aught else. Then she went straight away to call on the Widow Odingsells, and bade her go to the fair as well.” Here Bowes paused, as if reluctant to continue.

“Go on! Look about you,” I said. “There’s naught but the two of us.”

“The Widow would not give way. Said she would be bashed if she would be seen at any fair of a Sunday, which is a day for tippling servants and cutpurses, not for a gentlewoman such as herself. This provoked Lady Amy to such a degree that she grew red in the face. Said the Widow must please herself. Then the Widow came back at her, saying it weren’t proper for her ladyship to dine alone of a Sunday. Well, Lady Amy was quite sharp, and answered back that she would dine with Mrs. Owen, which was her affair and not for the Widow to say yea or nay. Then lifted her skirt and showed the Widow her heels.”
“Were you present when this little scene was played out?”

“Nay, but Mrs. Pirgo were.”

I was sure that all the servants would have heard every detail of this quarrel by now.

“And where was she when Lady Amy fell?”

“At the fair as well.”

I decided not to state the obvious. That Amy’s maid had no business traipsing off to a country fair while her ailing mistress sat home by herself. None of it made any sense. I took a moment to ponder what to do next, and decided to dismiss Bowes and let Dudley do his best to get more news out of him. “Tell Dudley to send his man with his letter for me to the Saracen’s Head at Abingdon. I shall lodge there for the night. His lordship will be wanting more news. As for you, it’s not that far to Windsor, but it won’t do to dawdle.” I waved off Bowes, who touched his hat and rode away. Both of us would reach our destinations before the sun set.

I thought about Dudley and the Queen, and their gay progress to Windsor Palace where they chased hinds all day in the great park, then sat up late playing one and thirty and nibbling marzipan. Elizabeth picked at her food in public and took her meals in her withdrawing chamber. Whatever her diet, it must be modest, since she was as trim as a goshawk. I knew more than most about the Queen. For I and all of Dudley’s people were scholars in a college in which there was but one subject taught – what the Queen does and does not like. For while all basked in the radiance of her good humor, the same fawning cohort had reason to dread her displeasure. Dudley especially made it his business to be spared the Queen’s wrath. And she
favored him to such a degree that others looked to Dudley for advice and access to Her Majesty. Dudley was closest to the crown when it came to matters of how many pounds to pay for a Spanish mare and which Paris merchant sold the finest silk hose. For a nimble man such as my master, it was but a skip and hop from this place of proximity to giving counsel as to what to make of the Duke of Anjou as a suitor, one of many foreign princes pursuing the Queen, who was more interested in affairs domestic.

All who served Elizabeth knew that her serene highness could be a splenetic bitch, but never dull-witted like her pudding-faced half sister Mary. Dazzling as a diamond was our Bess and as cutting. The entire court had been delighted some months back when some poxy prick of a bishop sent by the Emperor had the gall to stand before our Queen and lecture her in Latin, smug in the assumption that she would be befuddled, humbled. In the presence of the assembled crowd of courtiers, most of whom could not conjugate a verb in that dead tongue to save their hides from skinning, the Queen had taken in every word of the bishop’s rehearsed speech, then drew herself up and proceeded to hold forth in fluent Latin, fairly scorching the air with her contempt.

A few clouds scudded o’er head, strays from a grayish mass to the West, the direction in which I was bound. August had been a dismal, rainy affair, and all the Berkshire cotters were more than usually morose. I never wished to return to the life of an impoverished freeholder, which to my best recollection was spent mucking sheep shit and watching seeds rot. My parents had tilled a small holding adjacent to Dudley land. Lady Jane took pity on me and ordered me brought in to work in the stables after my parents both died – my mother giving birth to a stillborn babe and my father from swallowing water when he fell down drunk in a
ditch. I had remained loyal to the Dudleys during the dark times when the Earl of Warwick was sent to Tower Hill to have his head hewed from his elegant shoulders by the none-too-sharp axe of the headsman – despite the crowns lavished on the knave to make a clean job of it. I had not been there to witness it, but Dudley had seen it all from his room that overlooked the killing ground.

My mind ran ahead to Amy’s funeral. There would be no largesse for me or the others after Dudley turned his purse inside out to pay for a burial worthy of a great lady. A carefully chosen coterie of women relations would serve as official mourners on the long trudge to the churchyard—venerable dames in shiny black silk and young cousins with scented hair pulled back from their foreheads and captured in French hoods. Amy’s two stepbrothers would carry the banners and lead the horses that would pull the bier.

As for me, it was time once more to tidy up the affairs of the dead. A funeral is sufficient to bury a body. Still and all, letters and other papers must be burnt, servants bribed, suspicions quieted and unflattering accounts amended. The dead themselves were the most truculent. Anne had taught me the mysterious power taken on by women in death that they lacked in life. Not all unsavory deeds are put to rest by driving nails into coffin lids. Twas said a corpse would bleed if the murderer were brought forward. I had seen many a corpse and a few murderers as well, and even some under the same roof. But I had never seen this theory made manifest. Still, even the greatest sinner, if he possesses a spark of conscience, trembles before the righteous dead.
I arrived at the Saracen’s Head before dark and made sure Kerwiden was properly stabled and watered. I kicked a hissing gander that lunged at my leg, and passed a drunkard pissing in the bushes. The Saracen’s Head was no thieves’ den, but a watering hole for local tradesmen and laborers. To my right was a trestle taken up by sheep men who planted their elbows on the table top and ate their dinner in silence. They were flanked by a baker, his cheeks dusted with flour, and another man who looked to be a dyer wearing a cloak of Madder-root red. To my left, a pair of colliers sat hunched over steaming trenchers. A hollow-cheeked clerk held forth while his companion chewed and nodded. Both wore their work on stained jerkins.

I took a seat at the counter and called for dinner. The tapster who waited on me returned with a trencher that held a shank of mutton swimming in brown gravy scented with woody herbs. I got a good purchase on the horn handle of my knife and prepared to saw away. To my amazement, however, the meat was tender, and the sauce savory. I ate my supper and marveled that the Saracen’s Head employed a cook who could do more than stew coneys destined to be shoveled into maws of louts who were raised too high in the world when the innkeeper addressed them as “master."

“How do you find it then, sir?” I looked up to meet the eyes of the tapster, a slender man standing on the other side of a scarred oaken counter.

“Sir, I find it most respectable. The man who disparages your fare deserves a thrashing.” This I followed with a polite smile. For try as I might to affect good cheer, most men and women too drew back when I entered a room. I had let him see the gold in my purse, and the innkeeper
oblige by giving me his full attention. This encouraged me to commence my line of inquiry, not unlike releasing a well-fletched arrow with a tether attached. I had not gone out of my way, after all, for the pleasure of supping at the Saracen’s Head, but rather to commence my schooling in the weighty matter of the recently dead Lady Amy. I composed my features into an expression of what I hoped was bland curiosity.

“What news hereabouts, innkeeper?”

“Have you not heard? All of Abingdon has talked of little else since Sunday. The wife of Lord Dudley was found dead yesterday at Cumnor Hall just four miles from town. A great misfortune indeed. Young still, or not that old, and comely as well, they say.” The innkeeper leaned in and lowered his voice. “Dudley has Bess to wait upon, doesn’t he? We never see him in Abingdon. Neither did his wife, I hear.”

“What took her? Mayhap an ague or the flux?”

“That’s just it, sir. No cause you would call natural. By all accounts she broke her neck from a fall down a pair of stairs while her servants and such like were at the fair, and no one about to see to her.”

“Or say who it was that pushed her!” This from a leering yeoman settling his buttocks on the stool next to me.

I speared another chunk of mutton and looked about me. The tavern was steeped in the familiar funk of spilled ale and sheep dung. But the air was infused with a more subtle odor—the tantalizing scent of scandal. I caught a whiff of it as I pushed open the groaning door. It
must have wafted into town last night, a whispering wind of gossip that swept through the
servants quarters at Cumnor Hall late Sunday, blowing past postern gates and rushing down the
hill, rustling the rusty leaves of beech trees. The same wind caught up with Bowes as he rode to
Windsor Palace, whooshing through wood and meadow, seeking out the tapestry draped
rooms and damp corridors of Whitehall, where it would not be spent. By no means! From there
it would race through the streets of London, picking up bits of rubbish and evil odors before
sweeping southward to the river, making sails shudder in its wake on its course across the
channel, into the heart of Europe. There the same fuggy air it carried from the distant
Berkshires would settle and be inhaled into the twitchy nostrils of all the Queen’s enemies.
French fops with more hair than wit and rump-fed countesses, those purveyors of rumor, the
currency of life at court in Paris and Toledo, where the Holy Roman Emperor himself would
rouse himself, sniff the air and smile. Whatever bodes ill for the Protestant Queen is sure to
please all the papists who rise each morning scheming fresh sorceries to ruin Elizabeth, so
eager are they to see her vilified by her own people. For a fresh scandal might find its mark
more surely than any assassin’s dagger.

Throckmorton and others among the Queen’s men would be tasked to find ways to
make wine from the vinegar of court gossip. What I wished to learn was of far greater import.
What do the good citizens of Abingdon have to say? Let a tinker’s wife break her neck, I
thought, and there would commence a great deal of tut-tutting. But let a lady trip on the hem
of her gown and land on the flagstones of a manor house, and all about will be as cats lapping
cream from the trough of rumor.
Surely the landlord had an earful of local wisdom, or what passed for it. “What is your judgment of this matter, innkeeper? And that of others?”

“Some are disposed to say well, and some evil. By my troth, I judge it to have been a misfortune because it chanced in Forster’s house. His great honesty much curbs the evil thoughts of the people.”

“Those that waited upon her ladyship should know something.”

“No sir, but a little. For they say she rose that day very early, and commanded all her sort to the fair, and would suffer none to tarry. And thereof much is judged.”

It did not take a subtle intellect to think it suspicious that Lady Amy was determined to be alone on the last day of her unhappy life. For Amy was discontent, made heavy, no doubt, by melancholia. What wife would not be tormented by jealousy as she lay alone, cold as a frog in a bog, thinking on her absent husband, by all accounts in love with another? And if that woman were none other than the Queen herself? So much the worse. The darling daughter of a country knight could sob and fling her slippers, or feign illness and make a show of not eating, and whimper that she was being poisoned. A doctor would be summoned and gifts sent, certainly. But nothing would move Dudley to abandon the Queen for a mere wife.

It was the tapster’s turn to eye me. I fancied myself presentable. At least I was barbered like a gentleman, my beard freshly trimmed, mustache tamed and tapered. I wore a cloak made of fine blue wool and riding boots of costly leather—Spanish workmanship. “May I ask what brings you to Abingdon?”
“A bit of business. I’ll need a room for the night.”

“You won’t be sorry, sir” he said. “There’s not another tavern twixt here and Oxford that’s fit to call itself an inn, unless you fancy sleeping with your purse.” The innkeeper raised his right hand and waved over a boy with a face that would cause a stir among the crowd of sodomites at Whitehall.

“Make ready the room at the end of the hall,” he said, then turned to me.

“By what name shall I call you, sir?”

“I am Blount, Sir Thomas Blount.”

“So you be he? Pleased to make your acquaintance. George Karwill, proprietor. A man was here asking for you, and there he stands.”

I turned to regard the familiar face of Anthony Dent, who tilted his head toward the door to signal that I should follow him. I laid down a crown for the innkeeper. “I’ll need a good candle, if you please, and a pot of ink.”

“We don’t keep ink. There’s not much call for it.”

I doled out two more shillings. “Send the boy out to find some then.”

Outside the dark had closed in and the torch by the door was not yet lit, leaving Dent’s face in shadow. He said nothing, but thrust out his hand in which he held a well-worn satchel. I took it and made it vanish beneath my cloak.

“Where is the lord and master?”
“The Dairy House at Kew. Kicking foot stools and awaiting word from you.” Dent was the youngest to wear Dudley’s livery. His beard was waxed in the Spanish fashion popular at court. An ungentlemanly grumble issued from his gut.

“Your belly wants filling. The landlord here serves a fair piece of mutton. Ask for the closet next to mine.”

“I shall sleep with my breeches on.”

“See that you do. And don’t go sniffing about for Meg or Sally to help you out of them. Keep to yourself.”

Dent grinned. “No need to sermonize, parson. I know what I’m about.”

“I’ve a long, treacly letter to read before I say my prayers. But I’ll be up with the birds. Don’t keep Dudley waiting, or it will be the worse for you, boy.”

“Have no fear for me, old man. I daresay Dudley has tasked you with acting as inquisitor in this ticklish affair, so it is you who must take care. Whereas I am but a humble messenger,” he said, and doffed his cap while performing a supercilious bow.

“Bugger off, Anthony.”

“Gladly.”

I knew without looking at it that the letter had been hastily scribbled, the writer infected by worry that seeped into the ink. For Dudley feared scandal as other men fear the plague. I trudged back to the reechy dining hall, scattered with soiled rushes. The unhappy youth with too-pretty face was muttering to himself as he struggled to set fire to damp kindling. I saw no
one remarkable. Until I peered into the darkest corner, and spied a slouching figure with a saturnine aspect. He was wrapped in weeds better suited for a London gaming room and wore a well-oiled rapier, the sort the Queen forbids courtiers to carry at court. I knew him at a glance—and heartily despised him. For where ere Sir Richard Verney went, the serpent of sin slithered behind. It was only a matter of time before Verney put himself in my way, and caused me some fresh grief. Why not deal with him now? It would be no bother to knock him to the ground and crack the bone in his nose with one well placed kick that would ruin his fine looks. Verney had no doubt been watching me, but he pretended not to see me.

What might Sir Richard be doing here, I wondered, so very soon after Lady Amy had been discovered with her neck broken? Was he, by chance, on his way to Cumnor Hall as well? Or had he been there all along? Whatever Verney had been up to, it was likely at Dudley’s behest. I was Dudley’s right hand man, and Verney was his left. Still, I had to consider he might be at the inn unbeknownst to Dudley. I knew him for a scoundrel who was never content to walk a straight line. Whereas I told myself that I lied only to serve a good purpose, Verney was a professor of deceit. He wore the Dudley colors, but he was ever on the lookout for a soft place to land if his lordship fell out of favor. For Verney loved Verney above all others, and therefore had his own interests at heart in all his dealings.

I was surprised to see him alone. For I had never met a man other than Dudley himself who knew so much about women and yet thought so little of them. If there were a lusty widow perched on Verney’s knee, one could be sure that somewhere, not far so down the lane, a flaxen-haired maid pined away for the absent courtier with the tongue of a poet and the heart of a dog. We shared a long history. We were once fast friends when we were young and found
much in common. We learned how to calm skittish colts and made jests behind the backs of the
dour tutors who schooled the Dudley children. When we read Terence and Plautus, Verney
could recite with ease the part of Phaedra, while I struggled to read from the page the lines
spoken by his brother.

I relished every chance I had to best him in a contest of strength, since I was a head
taller and several stones heavier. Yet he always rose from the dust and brushed off his defeat
with the air of one who was my better, and so he was in the eyes of the world. For his family
were well-to-do land owners in Warwickshire. His parents sent him to the house of the Earl of
Warwick, a rising star in London, to acquire contacts and courtly manners, whereas I was
nothing more than a charity case. As we grew up together, and the differences between us
became more apparent, I came to wonder if Verney were Warwick’s bastard. For Dudley senior
favored Verney, while Lady Jane found small ways to show her dislike of young Richard.
Warwick enjoyed devising contests to try his own sons, setting them against one another to
enliven slow summer days. He was an impartial judge who pronounced me the winner as often
as not when Verney and I took up swords. Though neither of was the equal of Dudley, who
possessed a lethal grace when armed with any sort of sharp weapon. Dudley was brave as well.
Yet I would learn that he lacked his father’s genius as a leader on the battlefield. He had,
however, inherited the senior Dudley’s silken manners, and an exotic Gypsy cast to his features
that entranced the young Queen.

While I could have handily beaten Verney insensible with my fists, I never once bested
him in a contest for the favor of a maid. When we were both twenty, Verney had handily
seduced Anne. Before I could summon the courage to speak with her, he got under her
p Petticoats and put a baby in her. By the time she came crying to Verney, he had already tired of her. The day she died, I heard that she had been let go, and went looking for her, and found her body hanging in the stables. A coroner’s jury was called and the head jury man carefully chosen by Warwick. A cursory inspection of the body and shillings passed around insured the proper verdict. It was ruled that Anne had been the victim of misfortune, some accident unspecified. Her family collected a purse from Warwick and said nothing. It was a far better outcome than to have their daughter declared guilty of self murder and denied a proper burial. Verney and I had been cold to one another since then. I shot a hard look in his direction but said nothing and tramped up the narrow stairs to my rented chamber and shut the door. On a small table I found the promised stick of tallow and pot of ink. After lighting the candle from a sputtering torch, I settled myself on a stool too short for a tall man and retrieved the letter from Dudley.

9 September 1560

Cousin Blount,

Immediately upon your departing there came to me Bowes, by whom I do understand that my wife is dead by a fall from a pair of stairs. Little other understanding can I have of him. The greatness and the suddenness of this misfortune does so perplex me, until I hear from you how the matter stands, or how this evil should light upon me, considering what the malicious world will bruil, that I can take no rest. I have no way to purge myself of the malicious talk that I know the wicked world will use, but one, which is the very plain truth. I do pray you, as you have loved me, and as now my special trust is in you, that you will use all the devices and means you can possible for the learning of the truth, wherein have no respect for any living person. And as
by your own travail and diligence so likewise by order of law, I mean by calling of the Coroner, which Forster has done, and charging him to the uttermost to do his duty. Choose no light persons for the jury, but only the discreetest and substantial men, who will search thoroughly and duly, by all manner of examinations, to the bottom of this matter. I also desire that the body be viewed and searched accordingly. And in every respect to proceed by law. In the mean time, Cousin Blount, let me learn from you by this bearer with all speed how the matter does stand. For the manner of her ladyship’s death troubles me, and I can not rest till the full truth is known. I therefore entreat you, do not dissemble with me. Let nothing be kept from me, but send me your true opinion of the matter, as to whether it happened by chance or by villainy. And fail not to let me hear continually from you.

And thus fare you well in much haste; this 9th September in the evening.

Lord Robert Dudley

So this is how it stands, I thought. Trust and diligence. Discretion. The rule of law. No dissembling on my part. So be it. As if I had ever shared my true, unvarnished conceit of any matter touching Dudley without first consulting my own judgment as to what Dudley wished to hear. That I loved Dudley was certain. Yet whether I thought it wise to tell him all that I might uncover was another matter. I knew him too well to trust his instructions when he was distressed. Say what he might, Dudley would eventually demand to be told a tale that cleared the tangled path before him so that he could return to Whitehall and his place beside the Queen.
My first missive would be no trouble to compose. I would give a full reckoning of what I had so far learned. I removed from my satchel a sheaf of paper, and folded the left side to form a crease that would serve as the margin. My quill I also retrieved – a black crow feather taken from the right wing, for I am left-handed. I was dipping the tip into the ink pot at my elbow when the peace was shattered by an eruption of furious curses, punctuated by the sound of a face being slapped. This was followed by the cry of what was either a maid or a boy taking a beating beneath my casement. Another yelp made me throw down my quill. My blood was running warm, and my heart began to thump to a drum beat of anger. My father had been a drunkard who spent his scant earnings on ale. Afterward he would stumble about, cursing and ordering my mother to complete some petty task, and then beating her when she did not satisfy him. I therefore harbored a grudge against all bullies. That night, however, I had important work to do, and bent my head to the task at hand. All I wanted was a bit of quiet in which to write. Another cry, this one a shriek, brought me to my feet, determined to restore order.
Chapter Four: Abbotsford

Saturday September 9, 1820

Journal of Lady Louisa Stuart

“Unfortunately for the admirers of Sir Walter Scott’s romance of Kenilworth, the historical interest in that work is entirely marred by the fact that the leading incidents in that otherwise interesting novel are at variance with historical fact.”

Inquiry read at the Congress of the British Archeological Association held at Newbury in 1859, being a refutation of the calumnies charged against Sir Robert Dudley, Anthony Forster and others.

I am comfortably ensconced at Abbotsford, where Watty has only just put the finishing touches on his tale about Mary Queen of Scots. I arrived yesterday to find him awaiting galleys to proof. Such is his prodigious mental energy that he is already preparing to begin work on another historical tome about Amy Robsart, whose mysterious death scandalized the world some 260 years ago. Dudley’s wife was not an inferior person—except that she seems so as she stands always in the shadow of Elizabeth. So little is known of her that W.S. may freely invent an Amy of his choosing without fear of contradicting the historical record.

Lady Charlotte threw a new light a few weeks past on a subject that has puzzled me. I always thought I hated historical novels. Why then do I like the novels of Walter Scott? She told me exactly: because all such novels, excepting his, take the famous persons for their heroes and heroines. And then the reader who comes to the tale having read a bit of history is naturally disturbed at the fictional work’s violation of both the truth and character. Whereas W.S.
chooses to romance upon inferior persons who might have lived at the time, and keeps close to
vraisemblance when he introduces the superior ones, adhering to the probable truth.

I have with me a rather substantial portfolio of old papers entrusted to me by my dear
nephew, Sir Henry, who found them among the manuscripts in the estate of his father, who
must have taken possession of them by virtue of his oversight of the estate of the earl of
Sandwich. They appear to have come from the library of the very first Sir Henry, who was a
contemporary of Elizabeth I. The provenance is unclear. My nephew says that he has removed
most of the papers that pertain to our family, legal documents and such, but believes the
remainder comes directly from Sir Henry’s collection of old manuscripts, most of which are
merely curious but unimportant. He wants me to make certain that is the case before he sells
them to a London autograph dealer, one William Bird, who is interested in buying the lot of
them.
Chapter Five: Knights Be Not Born

Monday night September 9, 1560

“Knights be not born, neither is any man a knight by succession, no, not the king or prince; but they are made either before the battle to encourage them more to adventure and try their manhood; or after the battle ended, as an advancement for their courage and prowess already shewed.”

From Holinshed’s Chronicles (1577) by Raphael Holinshed and William Harrison

When the moon waxes full, wit is on the wane, my mother was fond of saying. Before me was the proof. A leering brute was pleasuring himself with one hand while he stood over a boy crouched on the ground at his feet—the same youth I had spied in the tavern. A cheddar moon cast a mellow light down on the scene, the better for me to be amazed anew at the disharmony between the serenity of the heavens above and the monstrous doings of mankind below. I sized up my foe, who had not spied me concealed in the shadows. He was a big fellow, but bandy-legged and most likely slow on his feet.

“What sayest thou now, little quent! I’ve a mind to turn thee over and make thee show me thy buttocks.” The boy said nothing, but stared as he raised a hand to wipe away the blood that trickled from one corner of his mouth.

The brute stood with his back to me. I was quite near, although hidden, and had no difficulty hearing him. “I reckon as thou has been on all fours afore, so’s those randy monks could make thee squeal.”
The youth winced, then cleared his throat. As he began to speak, his voice sounded so sweet and pleasing to my ears that I could not help but lean forward, the better to hear him.

“You must know, sir,” he said, “that we are not alone. For God is everywhere and in all things.”

He paused to brush his tangled hair from his forehead, as if measuring the effect of his words.

“God in his glory and wisdom,” intoned the boy, “has created a great chain of being in which every creature owns a place.”

I had seen stranger performances, but very few before such an uncouth audience, though London theater goers are a loathsome lot, and as apt to turn on the players as applaud them. I pondered the power of the spoken word to cast a spell, and knew from my own time spent abed that talk of God is seldom an inducement to lust.

“The angels are set over man, man over beast, beast over fish, and so on, so that there is no bird that flies, nor a single minnow that swims which cannot be assigned its place in the natural order.” The boy’s voice was light and lilting. “All are interconnected, you see, and ranked in a perfect progression. God created this infinite variety, not simply for man’s enjoyment, but to ensure that every person may name both his superior and inferior.”

As he spoke, the brute’s leering grin shrank to a pout and his eyes glossed over with puzzlement. He appeared dazed, as if he were witnessing the appearance of a comet that held some clue to his destiny. He had, moreover, ceased pleasuring himself and stood gaping like a jackdaw awaiting a clot of cheese.

“All men, even the most lowly and unlettered, such as yourself, has an important place in the great chain of being. Now you may wish to inquire, what is my place, and to what higher
position might I aspire?” The boy frowned as if gathering his thoughts. “And thereby resolve that no one is so base that they may not know God!”

He seemed most pleased with his summation, yet his rhetoric had the opposite effect upon his listener, who yanked the boy up by his tunic. “Thou drivelin’ tosspot! I’ll teach thee a lesson.” He clenched his free hand in a fist, my cue to play an active role in this bit of theater, which had elements of both drama and comedy. I stepped out of the shadows and hoisted my left leg, planting my boot in the brute’s ass, and sent him tumbling face forward to land with a thud and a grunt, narrowly missing the boy. My adversary lay sprawled on the ground, stunned at the sudden reversal of his fortunes, before struggling to rise, an insurrection I put down by kicking him in the ribs, causing him to gasp.

“Stay put, thou son of a harlot, till I say otherwise.” I looked on with satisfaction as the knave collapsed in defeat, one hand clutching his ribs, his head turned to the side.

He blinked and rolled his eyes up to regard me with dismay. “You’ve no cause to abuse me!” His snarl had turned to a whine. “What’s he to you? The little gutter dog was askin’ for it.” This I found offensive on principle, for I knew it to be a self serving lie. Nearby I saw a pail of slops that the boy had been carrying out to empty when he was molested. I picked it up and poured it on the villain’s head. He spluttered and swore vile oaths as shit and piss rained down on him.

“Shut up fat brain! Or I will summon the sheriff and see thee put in stocks.” I felt I had made my point, and threw the bucket aside before turning to leave. As soon as I heard the boy stumbling after me, I began to regret my impulse to interfere.
“Stay a moment, if you please, sir.” I cursed under my breath and kept walking.

“Take me with you, sir. I beseech you. If only to the next village.”

“Nay, lad,” I said, and moved along more quickly, hoping to lose this fresh nuisance.

“I can work! I can make myself useful, truly.”

I turned and glowered at him. “I’ve nothing for you, boy. Do not meddle with me.”

He shrank back, but continued to gaze at me as if toward his savior. I know that look, and it always leads to disappointment. “I am no pauper. I can pay you! I have five shillings and eight pence.” He rushed ahead of me and fell on his knees. “It is worth my life if you leave me behind, truly. Have mercy! I swear by all the saints and on the grave of my mother, if you condescend to rescue me from this predicament, you shall never regret having done so.”

It was my turn to snarl. “Do not speak to me of regret, thou scattpop! Tis the sea in which I swim, the very air that I breathe.” The boy began to tremble, and I resigned myself to having the conversation which I did not wish to have, but could not escape.

“Cease your babbling, boy, and tell me your name.”

“Theobald Cave, at your service, sire.”

“Get up then Cave. I’m bound for Cumnor Place. I’ll take you there, and no further.”
Chapter Six: Cumnor Hall

Tuesday morning September 10, 1560

“And thrice the raven flapped its wings around the towers of Cumnor Hall.”

From “Cumnor Hall” (1784) by William Julius Mickle

My eyes blinked open to a dawn as sullen as my mood. Feeling no inclination to cast off my bed clothes, I listened to a cock trill its gurgling salute to a new day. And saw him in my mind’s eye, a fool stoked by optimism, his throbbing neck stretched heavenward, his red-gold cape rippling over a purple breast—a singer infatuated with his own voice. It was only a matter of time before some rustic snatched him up by his yellow legs and treated him to a last glimpse of a world gone topsy-turvy before he landed with a squawk on a blood-stained chopping block.

I heaved myself up and onto my feet, stepping round Cave, who was snoring like a yeoman. A kick to his side rousted him and a bit more prodding got him off the floor and stumbling out to the stables to saddle Kerwiden. I found Anthony, who was already on his horse, and handed him the satchel with my letter. Cave led Kerwiden from the shed that served as a stable and stood back so I could tug at the cinch and hoist myself into the saddle. I turned to Cave, who was light enough to ride pillion, and gave him a hand up. After we set out, he did not protest but only looked downcast when I gave him the news that our bellies would remain empty till we reached the grange. And as we rode, I consoled myself with thoughts of pottage burping in a flame-licked kettle and crusty loaves set out to cool.
My first glimpse of Cumnor Hall, however, filled me with foreboding, so much so that I longed to abandon Cave on the spot, turn my mount round and ride away. How much grief would have been avoided had I done so. Instead, I let Kerwiden go at her own pace and noticed the many changes wrought since my last visit. Forster had replaced all of the cracked panes of glass and hung new shutters. Yet the effect was no more cheering than looking on the face of a painted hag. I had been told that long ago, while the monks were in residence, the grange was a prosperous farm. Hives yielded honey, ewes gave milk and the ponds were stocked with perch. But the day came when all of the celibates, man and boy, had been turned out like lamed dogs after the last abbot agreed to surrender the abbey to the crown, provided he were allowed to stay on until his death. That holy man went to make his excuses to God not long ago, and old King Henry sold Cumnor Hall to his physician, George Owen, who left it to his wife and son, William. Will was a bankrupt in need of an easy remedy, which was to lease the hall to Forster, whose pockets were deep.

Yellowing vines clung to the grey stone walls, most of which stood in shadow. Tall hemlock and pines with drooping boughs crowded round, reminding me of the night winds that made them moan. I am not one to stare into shadowy corners looking for haunts, but I could not deny that I never felt myself to be entirely alone after sunset when I walked the long torch-lit passages that led to Amy’s corner apartment in the west wing. I passed beneath the mossy archway with all the enthusiasm of a condemned man going to the scaffold, and was struck by a curious sensation that I was being watched.

We dismounted and ambled to the yard in back of the kitchen where bleating sheep were tethered to posts in readiness for slaughter. A pack of stag hounds with red-rimmed eyes
devoured fresh fish entrails. All was being made ready for the jurors who would want victuals to stuff their muzzles while they pondered the testimony of witnesses. I tethered Kerwiden, and Cave and I stepped into the cavernous kitchen where John Hart presided over his reechy domain.

The cook saw me and laid down his bloody cleaver. “I’ll be firked and yerked if it is not Sir Thomas himself!”

“Keep up that swearing, John. At a penny fine per oath, you shall soon be beggared.”

“You are an early stirrer, sir. What high charge brings you to Cumnor Hall?”

“To answer you, which you do not deserve, my travelling companion Theobald Cave and I are here to sample your fine fare.”

He winked at me. “Death comes a callin’ and Sir Thomas is not far behind. I reckon that you’re here to attend to Dudley’s business, now that the Lady Amy, that gentle lamb, has breathed her last. I should say God Bless her that were Dudley’s wife. ‘Cept false praise doth stick [sc1]to the roof of my mouth.”

“Then lick it off, cook. Better still, hold thy tongue.”

“What happened to your hostler yonder, if that who he be? He looks as if he was set upon by wild Assyrians.” One of Cave’s eyes was blackened and his cheek badly bruised.

“I am not by temperament a brawler, Master Hart,” said Cave. “I was attacked without provocation by an uncouth ruffian. Sir Thomas came to my aid.”

“It was,” I amended, “a quarrel of no import with a lout of no merit.”
“Well now,” remarked Hart, eyeing Cave. “He looks right familiar, he does. Holds forth like a Bishop’s boy. I saw one parading down the high road in Abingdon some years past, followed by twelve more like him. The monks put on quite a show, afore King Henry put a stop to all that St. Nicholas Day folderol.” He turned his attention to me with a sly, impudent look. “As for you, Sir Thomas, I know what you be after. Sent here by his lordship to beat every brake hereabouts ‘til you find the culprit that slew her ladyship.”

“Culprit? You amaze me with your ramblings, John. Since the news is that her ladyship died of a fall.”

“And yet they say that her hood was still fast to her head when they found her lying there.”

“They say that, do they? I say that Cave and I want porridge. Then he can make himself useful in the stables while I speak with Forster.”

“Serve yourself, then, Sir Thomas, since you’re amongst plain folk. There’s oat bread on the board. You best get your share before the jurors descend like a plague of locust.”

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Forster, I soon found, had his own written instructions from Dudley, who regarded him as one who conducts his affairs with an eye to propriety. I was a soldier and he a keeper of ledgers, yet between the two of us existed an understanding. Forster knew the part he had to play, and would conscientiously attend to all details regarding the funeral and demands made by the Assizes in Reading. I was charged with handling all things ticklish that lay beyond the
purview of the law. William Owen, I soon learned, had been absent on Sunday and had wisely chosen not to return, leaving Forster to oversee the inquest.

When I entered his study, he bade me sit, and I produced Dudley’s letter and explained his orders: I must seek out the truth, with no respect to the persons involved.

Forster listened with care, and smiled politely, as if he and I had met over a pitcher of beer. “Let us understand one another, Sir Thomas,” he said, gazing down his hooked nose, his eyes as grey as his hair. “Tell me what it is that you think I should know and no more. If there is something that needs to be done that requires my hand, I shall do my utmost not to disappoint. Otherwise, I leave it to you.”

“There is the matter of the inquest and Lady Amy’s body. I wish to see it. And I want to be present when the jury members are called in by the coroner.”

He rubbed his chin, no doubt mulling over the controversy this would provoke. “I have no objection, naturally. I shall speak to Richard Smith, the foreman. He has a reputation for being sensible.” He hesitated, and cleared his throat. “Are you aware that Sir Richard Verney is here, or I should say, has been here?” Forster was sounding me out. He knew something of the bad blood between us.

“I saw him, last night at the Saracen’s Head. How long has he been here?”

“He didn’t say?”

Perhaps Forster wondered where Verney had been keeping himself. “No,” I said. “We did not speak.”
He made a graceful gesture, his long fingers tracing a line in the air. “Sir Richard comes and goes. He has stayed here at Cumnor Hall on occasion, yet not always. Otherwise, I suppose he’s in London with Dudley, or back to Warwickshire.”

“Was he here this Sunday?” Verney might have kept to the shadows, or he might not have bothered to hide his presence. For he was like the Devil, and made his own laws.

Forster chose his words carefully. “Entre-nous, I believe he was. Sir Richard answers to Dudley, and his own whims.” He raised his brows, as if to say, you know that as well as I.

“What can you tell me of Lady Amy? Her health, and so forth?”

This last question prompted Forster to shift his gaze to some point beyond my shoulder. “You will forgive me if I am about to tell you what you likely know quite well. That she was deeply unhappy, oft times peevish. Certainly so whenever Dudley was mentioned by anyone, or especially in the same breath with the Queen.” He shrugged his shoulders, as if to say, what else might be expected, given that every housewife from Leeds to London was scandalized by the latest reports of Dudley’s dalliances with Her Majesty. “Whether you give credence to it or not, London gossip wends its way here rather quickly,” he said. “If Dudley sent thirty-six shillings to have a hood made for Lady Amy, and then spent twice that to buy a pair of kid gloves for the Queen—well, somehow her ladyship learned of it. If not the exact sum, then she knew about the gift, and was never over fond of the hearing how Dudley waits hand and foot upon the Queen while she was left to shift for herself. Although she lived very delicately, and wanted for nothing.”
I had witnessed the Queen reveling in displays of the latest token of devotion presented by her Master of the Horse. She was vain, and proud of her lovely hands. Dudley had given her a pair of white calf skin gloves lined with felt and trimmed with ermine—a costly gift for my master, who lived on credit, in part because of his bad luck at cards. It was said of Dudley that he would play himself naked if given a chance. Four weeks ago, I spent the evening drinking Canary wine and watching him lose twenty pounds in a game of dice, then half that sum again at cards.

“You no doubt recall,” said Forster, “how her ladyship fell into a great temper when Dudley came to Throcking last summer and asked to borrow forty shillings from Hyde.” We were both acquainted with William Hyde of Throcking. Dudley had housed Amy at Hyde Hall in Hertfordshire for several months, keeping her far removed from London and the jealous gaze of the Queen. Forster did not mention the violent quarrel that erupted between Dudley and Amy. From two rooms away, I could hear her weeping and him shouting, calling her a bitch and a shrew before he stormed out. He slept in his own room and rose early the next day and left without saying goodbye. That was in June of last year. Amy left Throcking soon thereafter, never to return, and took herself off to Camberwell, then Warwickshire. Before she left, she was cold as ice to Hyde and announced that she was leaving to stay with the Scotts, relatives on her mother’s side of the family. Only last year, she was still mindful of propriety to the degree that she gave vent to her spleen behind closed doors. It was only this past summer that her bad humor had been on display for all to hear if they did not cover their ears.

In November of last year, Dudley sent me to see to the task of piling the contents of Amy’s entire household in carts, and hiring twelve horses at a cost of twenty-five shillings. Her
beddings and hangings had been sent in advance, to be ready for her when she arrived at Cumnor Hall. With no warning to Dudley, she first went to London to camp out at Christchurch for four days and made a point of spending most of her time in the best shops. She ordered new plate and several gowns, including one of russet taffeta that all admired for the way it set off her red hair and white skin to superior effect. Pirgo was part of the entourage. I was there as well, and watched Dudley fume each time his wife handed him a fresh bill of charge for hose or lace. Still, both Forster and I knew that Dudley could spend as much in one evening at his favorite tavern on the Thames as his wife did on a new gown.

“I have been going through the ledgers,” said Forster. “And anyone who does so will find everything in good order. As you are well aware, however, not every piece of gold that is converted to some useful purpose is written down as such.” Left unspoken was the truth that almost everyone was better served if coins spent on a bribe or to settle a gambling debt were disguised as other items in Forster’s ledger. I wondered if Forster and Amy had clashed over how her income from her Norfolk estate was spent, and thought it likely.

“What of Lady Amy’s humor these past few days?”

Forster sighed, then pursed his thin lips before speaking. “That is difficult to say, since she would not confide in me. Or really anyone who is a friend to Dudley, which is, naturally, nearly everyone residing at Cumnor Hall. And she refused to be seen by Dudley’s physician, although she made a point of consulting Dr. Bailey.” Forster looked rather tired, as if he had not slept well. It would be a long day for both of us.
I knew very well who Bailey was, but hoped to draw Forster out. “That green physician who was brought in to examine her at Compton Verney?”

“You would know better than me,” he answered. I doubted that, however, since Forster often pretended to know much less than he did. He left unspoken the shared knowledge that Amy had flown into a rage and accused Verney of trying to poison her while she was his guest at Compton Verney. Verney had summoned Bailey to examine her without asking her permission. After Amy told Bailey that she feared she might be poisoned, he refused to leave any medicine in Verney’s hands, despite Verney’s repeated demands. This defiance on his part had won Amy over. Bailey had since set up a practice in nearby Oxford.

“When was it that she last saw the good Dr. Bailey?”

“That was back in June,” said Forster. “She made some excuse about why she needed to travel to Oxford for the day. Mrs. Pirgo let slip that they went to visit Bailey. Again, between you and me, I believe she put great store in the benefits of the mithridate he gave to her.” We both knew that mithridate is not only taken to ward off disease, but also as an anecdote for poison. Amy was convinced she remained in danger of being poisoned by Verney, whom she rightly suspected of acting as Dudley’s cat’s paw.

“There’s something else,” said Forster. “I hear from Mrs. Odingsells that Lady Amy has been consulting a cunning man, Howard Ady. I would never have guessed it. Yet the odd thing is that she truly seemed somehow altered in the last few weeks.”

“Altered? In what way?”
Forster’s former air of caution vanished, and he seemed more at ease, as if glad to report something that could not be misconstrued. “I would say that she had changed for the better. She had begun to leave her apartment more often and take her meals in the Great Hall with Mrs. Owen and Mrs. Odingsells. If I spoke to her, she would reply in a civil fashion. Ceased acting as if she would beat you to clouts as soon as look at you. The servants weren’t giving her as wide a berth as usual. Even Mrs. Pirgo looked a bit less ill-used. And I suppose you could say that she simply made a better appearance. It wasn’t her gowns or her hair, about which she was always particular. It was her color, I suppose, the way she held herself. That’s the most I can say.” He made another careless gesture. “I’m hopeless at predicting what women will do or divining why they do it. If you wish to learn more, you should speak with Mrs. Pirgo, or Mrs. Odingsells. Perhaps Mrs. Owen, though her memory is less than reliable. She and Mrs. Odingsells were the last ones to see her before she fell, if I am not mistaken.”

“Who was it that found Lady Amy’s body on Sunday?”

“That would be the steward, Donald Whitgift. He will testify.”

I considered what else to say, and how much I could get out of Forster, who was as careful with his speech as he was with his accounts. “The servants say Lady Amy’s hood was still on her head when they found her.”

Forster remained sanguine. “I have heard the same rumor. It’s all idle talk, Sir Thomas. There’s really nothing that can be done to silence such reports, which are pure invention. I asked Whitgift, and he told me that her hood had fallen on her shoulders, which is what he will tell the jury.”
“Did a doctor look at her? Bowes said her neck was broken. I am sorry to trouble you, but these are things I need to hear from you first.”

“I had the body brought back up to her room. It did not require a physician to see that her neck was broken.” His manner was cool, and he made no show of pretending to be grief stricken. Neither one of us was overly fond of her ladyship. The less said of Dudley’s personal affairs, the better.

“And you heard nothing that afternoon, when she fell?” Forster’s apartment is in the East Wing of Cumnor Hall, and his wife was in London. I expected him to brush aside my question, but he did not.

“That’s just the thing, Sir Thomas. I heard nothing at all. If anyone surprised her, or tried to harm her, someone would have heard her cry out. Certainly Mrs. Odingsells would have heard something, yet it was quiet as a church all day after the servants left.”

“One more thing, Sir Anthony. I need to look through her ladyship’s belongings. In the meantime, no one other than the women who will handle the body should be allowed in her bedchamber. I should like to see the room for myself, while there is still light.”

He glanced toward a window in back of me that let in the late morning light, which was warm and golden. “It’s dark a bit earlier every day now. The vigil for Lady Amy will be brief. Dudley wants her ladyship’s corpse seared without delay.”

Forster explained that he had made arrangements, following Dudley’s instructions. A lead lined coffin was to be made in Oxford and transported by horse and cart to Cumnor Hall. It
would be at least two weeks before all was ready, and Amy’s body interred at the church in Oxford. In the meantime, the coffin maker told Forster that he would send an ordinary wooden coffin for keeping the body, and two women to wash and dress the corpse. I knew what that entailed. Amy’s eyes and mouth would be closed, her body wrapped in linen and a ruffled cap set upon her head. These formalities were just that, since there would be only one night’s watching and no wake. The corpse would be seared this very afternoon. Pirgo had been told to sit up with the body tonight, in her lady’s bedchamber.

Burying a poor woman is a simple matter. The body is washed and wrapped in a winding sheet, then waked and put in the ground. Not so with great persons. Amy’s corpse would be slit from sternum to groin and her entrails, lungs and heart plucked out, so that the cadaver could be sluiced out with an aromatic wash. Dried herbs and straw would be used as stuffing before her body was sewn up, the better to slow putrefaction. An ointment made of spices would be rubbed into her skin by a pair of old crones who knew their business before the scented corpse was bound in linen and laid in a coffin lined with lead, out of respect for the noses of the mourners and to guard the body from the mortifications of decay.

Once preserved, the corpse might lie about for weeks while funeral arrangements were completed. I had previously overseen this process and knew it well. When Dudley’s brother Henry had been killed in France, his body had been seared and made ready for the long trek by land and sea back to Staffordshire. The jolting first leg of the journey over rutted roads had been perilous. Two days of rain had churned up sucking mud and turned ruts into fast flowing streams. The cart became mired every mile or so, and cart and coffin twice came close to overturning. It was no surprise when the coffin developed a crack. During the final overnight
stop in a village near the coast, I was awakened in the dark by the snuffling of a hungry cur that
came to lap up the blood seeping through the crack and onto the ground.

I wondered how long Amy would lie in her wooden box before the lead-lined coffin was
delivered, and whether her box might also spring a leak. She would like that, I thought, if her
blood draining out on the floor would prove embarrassing. What would become of her heart
once the old crones had cut it out? Would it be thrown out with the greasy kitchen stuff? Not
likely. Some hag would lay it in a box to be buried in the cemetery in back of Cumnor Hall. There
would be no marker to declare that here lies the heart of Amy Robsart Dudley. I could not help
but wonder if a heart such as hers, so full of rancor, could ever decay. Or whether it might
simply harden and turn to flint, so brittle that it would throw off sparks if struck.

I left Forster’s study and went to a room that had been prepared for me and took a
moment to think. Last spring, Amy had been grievously ill, yet determined to live, or rather not
to die, and thereby spite both Dudley and the Queen. In April I had delivered to her a hastily
scribbled missive from Dudley, who expressed his concern for her health and offered the
services of his physician, but said nothing of coming to see her. She snatched the letter from my
hand and sent me away while she read it in private. Afterward, she summoned me back to her
bed chamber, where she was sitting up in a chair next to her bed, which was unmade. And I felt
that even this effort had cost her. For I had heard that she had been lying abed for a week and
complaining of a painful swelling in her breast. She wore a velvet robe over her nightdress.
When I entered and made my salutations, she did not bother to greet me, but glared at me
while she tore the letter up and flung the pieces on the floor at my feet. Whether flushed by
fever or fury, her cheeks were near as red as her hair.
“Tell him,” she said, her voice catching, “that I do not require the services of his physician. Tell him that I shall soon recover, that I have no intention of dying and leaving him free to marry his whore! Tell him that. And that his father on his worst day was twice the man that he will ever be on his best.” Her look was so bold and challenging, that my face grew warm, which I attempted to conceal by bowing. This graceless performance made her laugh, which I found even more disquieting. I left quickly, stung by her anger.

There had been a time when I was first introduced to Amy, when we both very young and living at Ely House, she as a guest, that my younger self had been deeply stirred by her sensual beauty. I had not yet become expert at tamping down the envy I felt for Dudley and the ease with which he conquered so many desirable women. Not by paying them clumsy compliments, as I did, but rather by keeping himself at a remove, as if he were pleasantly distracted by some person more amusing.

However, the day I delivered the message to Dudley from his wife, I no longer envied him. I instead felt something very much like pity for Dudley when I returned to London and described for him the scene in his wife’s bed chamber. While I spoke, employing as much tact as I could, Dudley kept his back turned so that I could not read his face. I repeated what Amy said about his father, and saw Dudley’s shoulders sag before he took a moment to set them straight again. He turned to address me, and I could not but help notice that he was wearing a new style of doublet, no doubt made for him by his clever Flemish tailor. In those days, Dudley’s attire was so closely watched and imitated that if he had but strapped on a fish barrel and worn it to Whitehall, a drove of courtiers would have descended on the docks and bought out every spare cask.
“How did she appear to you, Cousin Blount? Tell me truly.” On the table between us sat a wilted salad, a sign that Dudley’s appetite was poor.

“She seemed quite weak,” I said. “And feverish, although she may simply have been angry. You have that effect on her. Perhaps if you had seen her yourself, she would have been softer.”

“No, I think not. If Lady Amy was ever soft in my presence, that time has long past.” To this I said nothing, for to agree was to give offense, while to disagree would have been ingenuous. It was obvious that my employer was troubled.

His usual insouciance had vanished. “Do you think she is dying, Thomas? I don’t wish it on her, despite what everyone says. I would like to know how things stand with her.”

I wanted to believe him, but I sensed he would have been relieved to hear the worst. “Speaking plainly, I believe her to be gravely ill. Yet I would not pronounce her near death.” A knock at the door interrupted us with a reminder that he was due back at court.

He seemed in no hurry to leave. “You knew my father as well as anyone, Thomas. And that before he died, he was able to choose wives and husbands for all of his sons and daughters. He selected them with great care, because he wanted us to marry well. But did you ever wonder, Thomas, why it was that I, of all my brothers, fared so poorly, why he aimed so low?” I detected more than a trace of bitterness in his voice. Dudley was aloof by nature, but when he gave vent to strong feelings, they came rushing forth in a current that could not be checked.
He put both hands on the table between us, and leaned in the way he did when he wanted to make a point. He was tall, and intimidating to most, but I knew him well enough to see that he was frustrated and giving vent to long-buried resentments. “Mind you, Thomas,” he said, “even my sisters fared better than I! Have you ever thought on that? Because I have, very much at the time, and since then as well. And I have decided that the cause was not that my father thought less of me. I now wonder if it wasn’t because he wanted Amy for himself.”
Chapter Seven: The Heart Doth Choose

The Journal of Lady Louisa Stuart

Monday September 11, 1820

“The eye doth find, the heart doth choose, and love doth bind, till death doth loose.”

Inscribed on four bands of a puzzle ring commissioned in 1569 by court musician Thomas Whythorne

Watty rose early to sit for his portrait and does so holding Binty on his lap. These daily sessions take place in the library, Watty’s lair, which suits him, and which the portraitist John Watson finds agreeable as well because of the large eastern facing windows. Although he is perhaps a good ten years younger than Watty, who turned forty-nine on the 15th of August, Mr. Watson is sensitive to noise, which is unfortunate, since Abbotsford has been invaded by an army of heavy-footed laborers armed with saws and lathes.

W.S. draws a portrait of Amy Robsart as an ingénue in love with the dashing Dudley, who keeps his pretty wife sequestered in the Berkshires to deceive the jealous Queen, who does not know her favorite is married. This flatly contradicts the historical record, which reveals that Queen knew very well that Dudley had a wife, since she attended the wedding of Robert Dudley and Amy Robsart! What It is clear to me is that W.S. has conflated the life stories of Lady Dudley and that of the Queen’s gentlewomen, Lady Douglas Sheffield. It was Lady Douglas with whom Dudley carried on a secret affair, and whom he hid away in the country in order to disguise her pregnancy. Lady Douglas later charged that she and Dudley were married in secret,
though she was never able to prove it. I am troubled by W.S.’s decision to depart from the facts and wonder what this bodes for his novel in the making.

W.S. tells me he must absent himself for two days, and asks me if I will be comfortable staying here alone. Why not? I enjoy solitude and have a house full of servants to wait upon me—too many in fact, since a few are so ancient that I think Watty keeps them on because they have nowhere else to go. I have begun to read the musty papers passed on to me by my nephew, who no doubt would have put a match to them if he had not found a dealer willing to write out a check. To my astonishment, I have come across some most curious sixteenth century documents written by a man unknown to me, one Theobald Cave, who claimed to be an antiquary—though he has left behind no important historical accounts. He seems to have been hired as a secretary to the first Sir Henry of Nottinghamshire. It appears all of his manuscripts and letters were mingled with those of his employer and have never been examined since. I am tempted to say that I have made an important discovery, since some of what he wrote about directly concerns persons and events tied to the lives of Robert Dudley and Amy Robsart.

I do not doubt that these papers are genuine. Yet I mistrust the intentions of the writer, who seems more of a storyteller than a historian. He claims his accounts are based upon his recollections, then goes on to state that he received the information second hand, and weaves together historical fact and his own speculations. This particular account, which I am including, is set at Stanfield Hall in the year 1559, yet was written by T.C. some thirty years later. According to this long dead author, Robert and Amy married in haste because Amy was pregnant! This seems credible to me, for both were quite young. In any case, what I have here
is not so much a book as a collation of papers. They are all out of order. This entry seems to be based upon an interview with Amy Robsart’s brother, John Appleyard, when he was held prison in Norwich Castle in 1574. As for the Sir Charles referenced below, I believe that to be Sir Charles Arundell, who was a traitor and leader of English Catholics in France.

It is said that weddings and hangings go by destiny, and perhaps there is more than a bit of truth in this saying, as in so many others. The following was told to me by John Appleyard, Esquire, and some of that to him by his sisters. I was sent to speak with Master Appleyard by Sir Charles while Master Appleyard was being held prisoner at Norwich Castle in the year of our Lord, 1574. I was tasked by Sir Charles with sifting Master Appleyard regarding what he knew about the death of his sister. But he was loath to broach this topic, since he had long given up his quest to name the murderers. While I was there, however, I was able to coax from him something of the history of the ill-fated Lady Amy, especially regarding the story of how she met and married Robert Dudley.

Suffice it to say, that if John and Amy’s uncle, Robert Kett, had never commenced tearing down hedges and convening a makeshift tribunal beneath an oak tree, John Dudley, the Earl of Warwick, would not have been sent north with a great force to crush the rebellion that threatened the reign of the boy King Edward. The Earl took with him two of his sons, Ambrose and Robert, a boy of good stomach, who commanded a regiment of pike men. Despite the prospect of bloodshed, the day the Dudleys rode up to Stanfield Hall took on the air of a feast day. Maps were unrolled and weighed down with stones, and servants aimed
kicks at hounds blocking the path twixt the main hall and kitchen. Outside, several thousand armed men made a great clatter, frightening the sheep, who shifted about like clouds blown by high winds before they were driven up into the hills.

The commotion within and without made it easy for Amy and her lover to slip away and find a quiet corner of the sprawling gardens in which to loiter and flirt. As for Amy’s goodly father, he may have been engrossed in plans to rescue his stepsons, who had been taken captive by the rebels. Or mayhap he wisely chose not to notice that his daughter and the Earl’s son both absented themselves at the same time. The reader can perhaps picture the setting for this meeting, with hyssop gone to seed at the close of the gentle season when a plush, golden light gilded the untended gardens at the back of Stanfield Hall. It was, for Amy, a time of life when each fresh joy did not foretell sorrow. According to John Appleyard, the courting of Amy was not a tale of love at first sight on the eve of a great battle. For Amy had clapped eyes upon Robert when she was a companion to the Troutbeck children in their house at Bridge Trafford, in Chester, and also later on during visits to Ely House, the Dudley’s London residence.

All this was due to her Protestant father’s good relationship with the Troutbecks, longtime allies of the Earl of Warwick. Sir John Robsart’s willingness to lend money on liberal terms to the cash-poor Troutbecks helped secure a place for his daughter as a companion to the Troutbeck daughters, Joan and Francis. Sir John sent his daughter away so that Amy could live amongst her betters, and learn to speak and act the part of a gentlewoman, who if invited to court would be noticed and perhaps singled out to wed a young lord. Sir John’s ambitions were shared by Amy, who was, so said her brother, more handsome by far than
her stepsisters. Above all, she possessed a precocious poise that came of her own desire to marry up. For having left the comfortable but rather dull precincts of Stanfield Hall, Amy wished never to return.

Think on it, how a wide-eyed maid, the daughter of a country knight, found herself the companion of children born to luxury and the art of making oneself admired. Whether young Amy was modest by nature or vain, I cannot say. However, it was certain that both she and her parents desired that she marry well. I have refrained from describing Amy Robsart as she was then, as most others now remain silent on the subject of her exceptional beauty, fearing to offend the Queen. For all who met her noticed the degree to which Amy Robsart bore more than a passing resemblance to Princess Elizabeth. I am not suggesting that if they had stood side by side that Elizabeth’s regal bearing would not have marked her as the Princess she was and the great Queen she would become. Yet seen from across the room, young Amy and Elizabeth might have been mistaken for cousins, or perhaps even sisters.

Amy’s hair was a rich, coppery red, several shades darker than Elizabeth’s. She too was taller than most and so slender that it took little tightening of her stays to fit her into her gowns. Her skin was as smooth as Devonshire cream, and her features well balanced. And whereas Elizabeth’s small eyes were dark and clever, disconcertingly so, Amy’s were large and green, and it must be said, somewhat feline. Where the Princess was serious by nature and ever conscious of propriety, Amy was full of play and eager in her affections. In time, her jealous rivals would whisper behind her back that she was too bold by half. For she sought out the attention that Elizabeth knew to be her due. Some were even heard to say, although never within earshot of the Queen, that Dudley married Amy because she resembled the
Princess. Amy was not a king’s daughter, with all eyes upon her, but an untitled maiden who felt free to invite a kiss, or wear a gown with neckline scooped low.

Attached as Amy was to the Troutbeck family, and serving under the watchful eye of the Troutbeck’s aunt, Lady Alice, she saw the young Princess on several occasions during the time John Dudley was Lord Protector. From the cradle, Elizabeth’s worth depended upon her suitability as a bride. When she was not yet two years of age, her disappointed father, having packed his infant daughter off to Hatfield Hall, thought to barter the Princess by proposing she be pledged to marry the Dauphin, son to the King Francis, whose allegiance to Henry was much sought after. Before Princess Elizabeth’s birth, Princess Mary was betrothed to the Dauphin to seal the fragile alliance between France and England. After Henry declared invalid his marriage to Queen Katherine, Mary was made a bastard and rendered unsuitable as a future bride.

From across the channel came rumblings that the Dauphin would be pledged to marry the Emperor’s daughter, with loss of face and friendship to Henry and England. Henry argued for the daughter of his second marriage, and a French delegation sailed to Hatfield to inspect the Princess, whose already impressive wardrobe must now rival that of the Emperor’s own daughter. Seamstresses were set to work sewing pearls upon caps, and satin-covered buttons on gowns adorned with golden threading and pink rosettes. The French inspectors, ushered into the royal nursery, sniffed and ordered the Princess stripped of all her finery, the better to view every limb, digit and other delicate parts for defects. Our future Queen, plump and pale, was exposed to the gaze of the imperious French, and her small thighs opened, gently or not, for inspection, her tiny bottom up ended and displayed, perhaps even pinched like a soft
cheese. Weeks went by before word was sent from Paris that Elizabeth would be accepted as an adequate substitute, a message greeted with sighs of relief in London. Yet I have been distracted from telling you of Amy’s youth. For just as the moon is but a pale mirror of the glorious sun, so Amy was destined to live in the reflected glory of our Queen.

Young Amy had perhaps only an inkling of the peril that made life at court both exciting and fraught with deadly rivalries and intrigue. What maid would envy the motherless childhood of Princess Elizabeth, living each day to prove anew that she was not the likeness of her mother, the Great Whore Nan Boleyn, adulterer and seducer, whose last gift from her husband was the coin he spent to hire a French swordsman to cleanly sever her neck. Amy at sixteen knew nothing of the perils awaiting her as the rival of a Queen. What she did know was that on two memorable occasions, when she whiled away bucolic summer days amongst the Troutbeck sons and daughters, was that she liked very much what she saw when Robert Dudley came to call. If the Troutbeck boys, John and Elias, won a round of lawn bowling, it was only because young Robert let them. Meanwhile, Francis and Joan vied with one another for the chance to sit next to Robert on a blanket spread out on the ground, to brush his hand while sharing sweet cakes or entice him to chase after them to avenge a playful insult.

If her father wished Amy to marry well, perhaps to the son of an Earl, then what she wished was the same. She wanted Robert in a way she found difficult to express in words, but felt most keenly whenever he chanced to look her way. This wanting grew into a fixed yearning to be noticed by Robert Dudley, to be graced with his knowing smile, and perhaps to sit near him at table—or play against him in a game of bowling pins, and laugh with delight when she succeeded in knocking one of his pins in the bushes, so that everyone would jest
about the two of them in the same breath. And he, Robert Dudley, might linger as the gay
crowd meandered back to the hall, seeking a stolen, private moment with Amy—she who
adored him and boasted no special pedigree, but was simply smitten. Robert’s attachment to
a Princess meant nothing to Amy, who burned like a little flame set alight, determined to
fulfill her father’s ambitions to have her wed the son of an Earl.

If that Earl were John Dudley, the man who was closest to the young king and who
had four fine sons old enough to marry, then so much the better. As a middle son, Robert
must be content with whatever bride his father chose, even if it meant being matched with
the daughter of a country knight who came with no title but a very large dowry. Amy, so said
her brother, was in love. As for Robert, he was already fixed upon Princess Elizabeth as a
sailor fixes his hope upon the North star, and had higher designs for himself than his father
entertained. For Robert had spent his boyhood at court, having been placed at an early age in
the household of Prince Edward as one of the young lords attendant—just as his mother,
Jane Guildford, was reared at court and served as a companion to Mary Tudor. He had
breathed deeply of the rarified air that circulates at higher climes and came to feel that he
would thrive in these lofty environs, and nowhere else.

In the year before Amy and Robert were wed, the Earl of Warwick was at the height of
his power and influence, and therefore busily occupied on several fronts. Yet he did not
neglect his family duties, and the vital task of arranging advantageous marriages for his
offspring, by order of birth. His wife Jane had given him thirteen babes, six of whom died
before their tenth birthday. Henry Dudley, the eldest Dudley son and heir, had been killed
during the Siege of Boulogne in 1544, and the title of Viscount Lisle passed to the next eldest,
John. That the Dudley family legacy would not be shaped by John, but by Robert, was beyond the ken of the even the most inventive astrologer.

John was first in line to be wed to a suitable bride, and was soon betrothed to the Anne Seymour, the daughter of a Duke, while Robert was to wed the daughter of a Norfolk grazer. Even Robert’s younger brother, Ambrose, fared far better in the marriage lottery, and had been matched with the daughter of Henry VIII’s Lord Chancellor, Thomas Audley. Years hence, many mistakenly thought the Dudley-Robsart wedding a love match. Yet as the Robsarts and the Dudleys knew all too well, the wedding of Amy and Robert, taking place the day after John was wed to Anne, was a far less illustrious affair. It had been, moreover, hastily arranged. For Amy was with child. Whether the father was truly Robert Dudley or in actuality one of the Troutbeck sons, was moot. For Amy had been in the company of Robert Dudley on several occasions, along with Joan and Francis, who were sent to Ely Place in hopes they might be matched with a Dudley.

Both weddings took place at the Royal Palace of Sheen, with the young King Edward VI in attendance, and his sister, Princess Elizabeth as well. It is not difficult to imagine the humiliations endured by young Robert. For Master Appleyard over heard him complaining bitterly to his mother that his wedding was nothing more than a second-rate affair. After an impressive display of jousting on Saturday, the same guests upon Sunday were treated to the sight of six drunken country lads who strove to be the first to take away the head of a goose hanged alive on two cross parts. That was perhaps an omen, bloody and gross as it was, of all that was to come.
Chapter Eight: Two Dints to Her Head

Tuesday September 10, 1560

“Lady Amy there and then sustained not only two dints to her head – one of which was a quarter of an inch deep and the other two inches deep – but truly also, by reason of the accidental injury or of that fall and of Lady Amy’s own body weight falling down the aforesaid stairs, the same Lady Amy there and then broke her own neck.”

Excerpt from the testimony given in August of 1561 before the Berkshire Assizes in Reading by jurors assembled for the inquest conducted in September of 1560.

After leaving Forster’s study, I went directly to the west wing and was unhappy to see a boy scrubbing the floor where Amy’s body had lain. Both his rag and the water in his pail had turned a brownish red. I walked slowly up the stairs and looked for more traces of blood, but saw none. Eight steps I counted above and another eight below the landing on the dog leg staircase that bent to the right. Anyone below or above would have heard her cry out if she had been attacked, yet no one in the grange had heard anything, or would not admit it if they had. If Amy had come here expecting to greet her husband, or anyone else, she would have had to go to the landing to see that person approaching from below. Conversely, anyone standing at the top would not have seen her body at the bottom of the second set of stairs. I inspected the floor of the hallway leading from her room to the top of the stairs, uncertain of what I might discover, but saw nothing. I proceeded to the landing and walked down the second set of stairs. The edges were sharp. Perhaps Amy had cut her head when she fell.
Yet why would she fall on that particular day when she had gone up and down these stairs so many times? Unless she were in a hurry, or very ill, and had fainted on the stairs, or even on the landing. Was it possible she had been running from someone, and that made her fall? I could not rule out the possibility that she had been killed elsewhere and her body moved to make it appear she had fallen. Of course, she might have been pushed by someone who stole up behind her. But surely she would have been on her guard, unless she were distracted, and had not noticed an attacker sneaking up behind her in order to strike her with a blade or a stick. She might then have fallen hard enough to break her neck.

I considered the rumor that Amy had been killed by her husband’s men. It was no secret that Dudley wished to be free of his ailing wife. Yet only I and those near him knew him to be sore distressed to learn that Amy had died by a fall. I had no doubt that Dudley had been caught flat footed. Was he expecting other news? Or was he entirely innocent? If someone wished to defame Dudley by murdering his wife, then why disguise her death as an accident? Surely Dudley’s enemies would prefer to leave no doubt that she was a victim of foul play. Unless they were so subtle that they thought that a murder staged as a mishap was more sinister, more like something Dudley would have done to cover his tracks. Then there was the matter of her actions the day that she died. Why did she behave as someone who wanted no witnesses, as one determined to be left alone? If she were expecting Dudley, why would she want that kept secret? I could not disregard the possibility that she was intriguing with enemies of Dudley to have him ambushed, and her conspirators had turned upon her. But why?

The jury members had begun assembling in the hallway outside of Amy’s apartment where her body had been laid on a long table. I ambled upstairs to join them and was given
hard looks by several. One little banty amongst the judicial flock fluffed himself up and made it clear that he resented my presence. “He has no proper writ, no summons. Whereas all the rest of us have been sent for by the court. What says the coroner? And where is he, by the by?”

All of this was aimed at Forster, who listened with the air of one practiced in the art of appeasement. “A bit of patience, Master Jones,” said Forster. “All your questions shall be answered and concerns laid to rest. If I am not mistaken, the coroner is on his way.” No sooner had he spoken, then John Pudsey arrived, his clerk in tow. The jury men parted for the coroner, who was almost as wide as he was tall, and he trundled past them and into the apartment, dropping his bag on the floor. He greeted no one, but instead approached the body on the table and stood over it, his hands clasped behind his broad back. We all followed, but kept our distance. I was regarded with suspicion. For by now all knew that I was Dudley’s man, his lordship’s eyes and ears. More than one looked at me askance. I said nothing, and watched as Forster approached the coroner, in that smooth way of his, and motioned for another man that I took to be Richard Smith. The three of them conferred. Pudsey glanced my way and nodded. I saw Smith take Jones aside and speak with him in hushed tones while Pudsey’s clerk commenced sharpening his quill.

A chill had set in during the night and most of the jury men had not shed their cloaks. No fire had been lit, the better to keep the body cool. I stood in the second row and considered how strange was this gathering in which we stood about in awkward imitation of student anatomists at an Italian college for physicians. Amy’s body, draped from the shoulders down with a cloth, lay before us, her skin as colorless as the linen that covered her. Her corpse put me in mind of dead soldiers on the battlefield. Mouth slack, head canted to one side, her red hair
matted with dried blood. A servant had taken the trouble to arrange her arms in a demur pose, with one hand resting upon the other across her belly.

“One quarter of an inch, as you gentlemen can see.” The coroner held up his right thumb, streaked with blood. Pudsey’s beardless face was as square as his body. His brows were as tangled as uncombed fleece pasted above widest eyes. He did not blink, but stared at his audience, indifferent to our discomfort. All other eyes were drawn to the spectacle of Pudsey’s digit. Without pausing the coroner went back to work and dug his thumb into another gash concealed by Amy’s tangled tresses. After a bit of speculative probing, his thumb sank a bit deeper. The juryman to my right winced, and another looked away.

“Two inches!” The coroner’s clarion call reminded me of a sailor using a weighted drop line, testing depths. The only other sound in the room was the scratching of the clerk’s quill, recording the evidence that would be presented at the next Berkshire Court of Assizes. Such a wound might have come from her head striking the edge of the stone steps, but it was so deep and clean that it reminded me of battlefield wounds left by blades. Pudsey swished his hand in a basin of water on Amy’s dressing table, where a cloth had been laid out. Pots of paints and powders had been pushed aside. One had tipped over, the oil seeping into the wood and smelled like cloves in rancid butter. Amy’s apartment was sumptuous by country standards, with two good turkey carpets, and three leaded windows that provided good light. All told, I counted ten jury men, mostly burghers from Abingdon, so Forster had told me. Smith, he said, was a sensible man, and could be counted on to do his duty. And from this simple statement and Forster’s attitude of calm resolve, much could be discerned. As for Pudsey, he was a physician of good reputation.
Brow furrowed, shoulders hunched, the coroner stood over the body, lifting first one limp arm, then the other, turning each limb about, puppet like. “Note that there are no cuts upon the hands.” He pulled aside the linen drapery and repeated the same motion with each leg, brushing away stray seeds that clung to the skin. “The same for the legs,” he said. “No heavy bruising or cuts. What say you gentlemen?”

No one spoke, but I heard murmuring from behind me and to my left. No doubt some were suspicious. Why are her hands so clean, with nary a scratch to show that she might have used them to break her fall? But who would dare say so? No doubt some had been called in before to decide whether or not a louse-bitten trollop dumped on the road had died by violence. Amelia Robsart Dudley, aged twenty-seven, was no drab, but the wife of Lord Robert Dudley. And those chosen to arrive at a ruling as to the cause of death were discrete men, as Dudley requested—and cautious. Who would dare speak first? What careless word uttered among the jury of eleven might find its way to the ears of Dudley? Or the Queen herself? Better to say nothing. Pudsey took up a position in back of Amy’s head, which he grasped in both hands, pressing his fingers into the neck bone while he moved the head to the right and then the left.

He surveyed the room. “Her neck is broken. Quite cleanly.” Silence followed and more scratching of the clerk’s quill.

Finally, someone spoke, since all had one question in mind. “Is that what killed her then? In your opinion?” This from the man to my right.

“Oh yes. Without a doubt, sir.”
“And the two dints in her ladyship’s head?” I recognized Jones’s voice. “What caused them?” Pudsey took his hands from the basin of water and dried them with the piece of muslin.

“Ah! I have no idea, Master Jones,” said Pudsey, laying down the damp cloth. “That sirs, is for you to say.”

“That is a neat trick,” I heard another man whisper. “He washes his hands of it and leaves it to us!”
Chapter Nine: Sir Richard Verney

Tuesday September 10, 1560

“I have brought all the artillery I can to bear upon him, and by my faith if it were not for some fear of our own house, I would soon give the historians something to talk about. Not a man in England but cries out at the top of his voice that this fellow is ruining the country with his vanity.”

A commentary on Robert Dudley in a letter written during the summer of 1560 by the Spanish ambassador Don Alvaro de la Quadra

I was disgusted yet unsurprised to return to my room and find Verney sitting in the best chair. He held the quill I had left out and was examining it at his leisure. “Leave it to you, sir, “he said, “to prefer the wild crow to the barnyard goose.” I snatched it from his hand.

He smiled broadly, affecting good cheer. “Good morrow, Cousin Blount! I trust you slept well at the inn, despite the commotion beneath your window?”

His very presence was irksome to me. “Aye, having said my prayers. Sadly, God does not hear me, for I see you are still among the living.”

He was his usual self, smug and mocking. “Come now, Thomas. Don’t be churlish. Let us put aside old grievances, shall we? Perhaps we can help one another.” The same sort of help you lent at St. Quentin, I thought, when you left me unhorsed and surrounded by Hussein lancers. I gave him a hard look as he rose and ambled toward the open door, affecting a studied nonchalance.
“With your kind permission, I shall shut this. There are spies around every corner here at Cumnor Hall, sir. They dangle from the roof beams like bats! Spies spying upon other spies!”

He swept his cap from his head and tossed it on my bed, then stood regarding me with the air of one who knows he is not welcome and does not care. “The old crones Forster hired should have her ladyship’s corpse in their grimy paws by now, I suppose. I expect they’ll hide that voluptuous red mane of hers under some trifling ruffled cap and swaddle her like a newborn babe. Why is it, do you think, that we wish to make the dead masquerade as blameless infants when they were so much more interesting as sinning adults? Wouldn’t you agree?”

I pushed aside his cap and leaned back on the pallet that was my bed. “Say what it is you have come to say, Verney, before I serve you notice. Then feel free to fly.” If I were diligent, I thought, I could be done here in a week and put some miles twixt myself and Sir Richard. I had been given, at my request, a room in the West wing, not far from Amy’s apartment. Forster had seen to it that I was provided with a thick pallet with a flock bed on top. A table and chair had been brought in, as well as a pitcher for water and a pot to piss in. My soldiering days were done, yet every room I slept in of late was but a makeshift camp. That was fine with me.

Verney ceased roving and looked down at me from the remote height that he occupied with a self assurance born of privilege. “Such spite!,” he said. “I see the reproof in your eyes. Admit it. You think me callous and disingenuous.” A smile flickered across his handsome face.

“Both,” I said. “And more, none of it flattering. My time and patience are both in short supply, Verney. Say on, omitting the lies, if that is possible.”
“You mistake me, Thomas. You always have. It is not my fault that we have once again been thrown together in awkward proximity. I myself have only the best intentions. There is much good that can come of our separate exertions on Dudley’s behalf. You may never admit it, but you and I think alike. I know, for instance, that you made haste to visit her ladyship’s apartment. I arrived first, of course, to see what there was to see, and found nothing surprising—at least nothing that would prove unpleasant for Dudley if someone else discovered it.”

“If you say so.” I had done more than survey Amy’s bedchamber and closet after the jury and coroner had left and the women had taken her body away to be washed. Forster had given me the key. I made fast the door and began a search of the usual hiding places. I shook out her bed clothing, and looked to see if anything had been wedged between the mattress and ropes. Amy knew she was being watched. If she had wanted to hide something, she would have been inventive.

I leafed through the pages of her prayer book and glanced beneath the cushion on the window seat. Then emptied out her perfume censors and looked among the papers in her desk drawer, where I found receipts for payment of ordinary household expenses and also four empty vials of mithridate and six unopened ones, sealed with wax. I picked up one and put it in my pouch. If she had been hiding anything else, she had found a site more secure than her room, or kept it with her.

All of Amy’s jewels had been removed on Dudley’s orders, but her gowns still hung in her wardrobe, while her shifts, stomachers and kirtles were folded and stored in a large chest.
As I looked inside, bending low, I caught her scent among the soft layers, and it brought her back to me, unmanning me in a way the sight of her corpse had not. Was it possible, I wondered, to smell the heavy, musk-rose fragrance of a woman’s sadness. Does disappointment have a scent? I went deeper and found a false bottom that yielded with a bit of prying. Underneath lay a small treasure trove of amulets and talismans. Most surprising of all, among the witch bottles and herb sachets was a plain rosary made of wooden beads. I had no intention of telling Verney any of this. Naturally, I wondered what he was keeping from me.

“Think on it, Thomas,” he said. “What two persons are more apt to keep secrets from one another than husband and wife?”

I folded my arms. “Why are you here, Verney? If I wished to banter, I know of two taverns nearby.”

“For the same reason I have been here all along. To see to the interests of Robert Dudley, and forward his cause. As you know, the Queen is bound to keep Dudley at Kew until this matter is laid to rest. Whatever took place, the outcome will surely be what the Queen says it should be—a ruling of death by misfortune—as long as Dudley remains in her good graces. And yet,” he said, “there is the problem of that deep dint in Lady Amy’s head. A bit troubling that.”

Though he was correct, I was bound to disagree. “She could easily have cut her head when she fell, or if she threw herself down the stairs.” I knew this last theory must be considered, yet I disbelieved it. Amy was determined to live and prevent her husband from marrying the Queen.
“In addition,” he continued, “we are to believe that she tumbled down a flight of stone steps without cutting her hands!” He did not wait for me to respond, but made a show of looking about the empty room. “Have you no proper looking glass? How do you dress yourself?”

“You seem to know a great deal for someone who was not present when the jury viewed the body.”

“No need,” he said. “Master Smith has been most accommodating.” So that is who Verney had consulted, or bribed. “You should know, sir,” he said, “that a secret kept at Cumnor Hall is more rare than sightings of virgins at court, with the exception of Her Highness, of course.” I detected a subtle smirk and was certain that Verney believed Dudley had long ago bedded the Queen. But I was not convinced. How could the Queen risk allowing a man to plant his seed in her womb when all the world would see it grow? No gown could long disguise it. And the gentlewomen who dress her would know of it as well, and soon all of court.

“However, no mystery looms as to the outcome, as you and all else shall soon see. The Queen has sent Dudley away. What else could she do with his wife lying dead at the bottom of a pair of stairs? Yet you and I both know that Bess will want her gallant Master of the Horse back again, sooner than later, unless Cecil convinces her otherwise. Yet I doubt he has more sway with her than Dudley.” While I was at Whitehall, I had seen Verney huddling with more than one of Cecil’s men. He was ubiquitous at court, and yet never in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I made a show of yawning. “Are you quite finished with your peroration?”
He ignored my question and stared at my soiled boots. “Have you no proper shoes?” His own were made of blue silk. He owned eight pairs at least, each a different color.

I sneered. “To compliment my coat of goose-poop green?”

“Try not to be crass, Thomas. Now what was I saying? Even a slow pupil such as yourself can surmise that the jury will drag out their inquiries long enough to empty Forster’s larder. Then affix their signatures to anything Smith writes, which will be to declare that Lady Amy fell and broke her neck, regardless of what really took place.” He smiled and gave me a knowing look. “Then they will climb on their sway-backed mules and ride back to Abingdon and talk out of the sides of their mouths. So that long before the four wise men of the Assizes read the report, every sot and sanctimonious prelate in the Berkshires will swear that Lord Robert’s wife did not die by misfortune, except that it was her misfortune to be married to Dudley.”

I was honor bound to contradict all of Verney’s arguments, and this one was no exception. “It is an easy matter to indict a man by rumor and inference.”

He did not answer straight away, but instead opened the door, and glanced each way before shutting it and resuming his discourse. “Even Dudley has his own suspicions as to whether it was truly an accident. His enemies would have a great deal to gain by murdering her ladyship, knowing Dudley would be blamed. Or mayhap someone thought to aid our employer by removing the one obstacle that prevents him from marrying.” He raised one dark eyebrow.

I sat up and planted my feet on the floor. “Your thesis seems to be that she was murdered,” I countered. “With you being the chief suspect, since you were nearby on Sunday.”
“Come now, cousin! The same can be said of you. Though you claim you are earnestly searching out the facts, and that Dudley wants the same.” He laughed his dry little laugh, which was meant to goad me. “To forward the cause of justice, you will put yourself to a great deal of trouble, no doubt, and prove quite vexing to all concerned. Do you think that your exertions on Dudley’s behalf will satisfy John Appleyard that his sister did not die from foul play? When more than half of England declares her to have been slain on Dudley’s orders?” He paused to pluck from his sleeve a bit of lint. “Although having been made Sheriff of Norfolk, I’ll warrant brother John has nothing to gain by protesting a finding of death by misfortune.”

“That it is his concern, and not mine.”

“As for Sir Thomas Blount, whatever you tell yourself when you lie abed at night, unable to sleep, everything that you do here you do for the sake of appearance. Nothing more.”

I had heard enough. “Fuck off, Verney.”

He widened his eyes and drew back, as if shocked, and made a tisking noise. “Subtlety was never your strong suit, Thomas, but I take no offense.” He reached underneath his cloak and drew out a letter. “From Dudley. A messenger brought it by this morning.” He tossed it on my table.

I rose and made a show of opening the door. He plucked up his cap and settled it on his head as he walked through the doorway and into the hall where he turned to inspect my room. “You should tell Forster to have one of his men hang a looking glass before you pay a call on the Widow Odingsells. It might be worth your while to reacquaint yourself with a comb.”
I shut the door in his face, and bolted it. Than sat down to read the letter which was dated yesterday.

Cousin Blount:

Until I hear from you again, how the matter falleth out, in very truth I cannot be quiet. And yet you do well satisfy me with news of the discreet jury you say are chosen already. Unto whom I pray you say from me that I require them, according to their duties, to earnestly, carefully and truly deal in this matter, and to find it as they shall see it fall out. And if it fall out a chance or misfortune, then so say it. If it appear a villainy, as God forbid so wicked a person should live, then to find it so. And God willing, I will never fear to prosecute, disregarding what person it may touch, and seek as well just punishment. For I would be sorry in my heart that any such evil was committed.

So shall my innocence be seen by the world by my dealings in this grave matter. And therefore, Cousin Blount, I seek only the truth in this case, which I pray you to seek out without any favor shown either one way or the other. I require, nay I insist, that you do not refrain in any way from searching thoroughly to satisfy yourself, so that I may be satisfied as well. And to proceed with as much speed as you can conveniently make.

Fare you well.

Yours in haste from Kew,

Robert Dudley
Chapter Ten: A Falsehood Once Received

The Journal of Lady Louisa Stuart

Tuesday September 12, 1820

“We find but few historians of all ages who have been diligent enough in their search for truth; it is their common method to take on trust what they distribute to the public, by which means a falsehood once received from a famed writer becomes traditional to posterity.”

From The Character of Polybius and His Writings (1693) by John Dryden

Unearthing old bones is never a wholesome occupation, whatever the justification. For confirmation I need look no further than the condition of Newstead Abbey after it was sold by Lord Byron to Major Wildman, who found the poet’s ancestral home in a most deplorable state. Lord Byron had ordered the grounds around the house dug up to gratify his passion for skeletons; it had once been a cemetery for monks, and their skulls and bones lay scattered about the feet of visitors as they came and went!

And so I must pose this question. What passion am I attempting to gratify by disturbing the bones of Amy Robsart? And yet I feel that history has done a great injustice to Robert Dudley, who remains the villain in this set piece. And what of Lady Amy herself? I find it difficult to see her as the vivacious coquette and adoring wife that Watty has brought to life in his novel, Cumnor Hall—a title his editor dislikes and wants to rename Kenilworth. Whether she fell down the stairs and broke her neck or was murdered is a subject that has already been much debated. What new truth can I unearth? Modesty is a becoming trait, yet to be candid, I do think that I can shed some light on this matter, which has been much romanticized but never
truly examined by anyone who departed from the original thesis of *Leicester’s Commonwealth*: that Dudley sent word to his man, Sir Richard Verney, and that Verney paid a henchman to do the deed.

I could not resist taking Watty to task on a point as regards historical veracity. To wit, that he has chosen to portray Elizabeth as the woman she was in her later years, not as a young woman of twenty-seven—a woman in love with her childhood friend but also, in my judgement, deeply reluctant to marry. Abbotsford’s wonderful library has permitted me to read rather deeply into the history of Elizabeth’s long reign. The more I read, the more I marvel that it was Lady Amy who died under suspicious circumstances and not her husband, for no man was so reviled by his peers. History has shown that her ladyship’s death, far from clearing the way for Dudley to marry, dealt a mortal blow to his chances of becoming king consort.

I have another letter from Sir Henry who tells me that the London document dealer, William Bird, is travelling in Scotland and has requested permission to pay a call on me here at Abbotsford, and will I receive him? Bird is accompanied by one Samuel Cave, who claims to be a direct descendant of Theobald Cave. These two gentlemen are now in Edinburgh. Ordinarily, I would say no to such a request, since I am only a guest here. However, my nephew seems to be in need of extra income, to put it delicately. Now that I know Watty will be gone for several days, I see no harm in receiving them. Watty is agreeable, and I have sent word to my nephew and instructed him to tell these two that they may spend the night here at Abbotsford if they wish, since the Tweedbank inn is quite rustic. However, they should make plans to return to Edinburgh the next day.
Chapter Eleven: My Husband’s Whore

Tuesday afternoon September 10, 1560

“Sorcerers are too common, cunning men, wizards and white witches in every village.”

_The Anatomy of Melancholy_ (1621) by Robert Burton

Temperance Pirgo sat perched on a chair in Forster’s study, her face sour, her round breast heavy beneath a white apron fitted snugly over a worn grey frock. She reminded me of the pigeons I fed when I was a boy. I made pets of them, until my father picked out my favorite and wrung its neck, then tossed its limp body at my feet to carry to the kitchen for my mother to pluck. I stood and looked down upon her—not very courteous of me, but I was not being paid to be polite. “You must be entirely honest with me, Mrs. Pirgo. You spent more time with her ladyship than anyone.”

She shot me a look rich with resentment. “Ask anyone if Temperance Pirgo tells tales. I’ve nothin’ else to say.”

Pirgo had been married at age twenty and widowed at twenty-five. She was short and round, yet all else about her was hard and sharpish round the edges. “You served Lady Amy for many years,” I said, probing for a tender spot. “Yet if am I not mistaken, you have not shed a single tear since she was found dead.”
Her face flushed and her eyes shone with anger. “Why should I cry? What for? Just cause I waited on her don’t mean I cared for her, or her for me.” She crossed her arms and looked for all the world like a petulant child.

“Come now Mrs. Pirgo,” I said, “all I am asking is that you to tell the truth, even if it is not pretty. Is it possible her ladyship might have had an evil toy in her mind that led her to commit self murder?”

She tossed her head like a horse with a bit in its mouth, and avoided my gaze. “You ain’t the law,” she said. “And I’m not obliged to answer.” I realized she regarded me as no better than a servant, albeit one who dressed well and put on airs. Another approach was in order.

I found a chair and sat down across from her. “See here, Mrs. Pirgo. Lord Robert has a right to know every particular pertaining to the death of his wife. And he has sent me here to make inquiries. He pays your wage, and it is your duty to be truthful in this matter. I need you to tell me all that you know about what took place on Sunday morning. But first, you must give me your opinion. Do you think her ladyship meant to die by her own hand?”

“That were a sin,” she said, still evasive. “If her ladyship could not be buried in a church, ‘twould shame Lord Robert. Besides, I already swore before the jury men that it were most likely a mishap. I reckon her heel must have caught in the hem of her new gown.” She looked me up and down, as if I were slow witted. “I said this all afore and the clerk wrote it down. You can read it for yourself, if you know your letters.”
I considered her testimony, which I had read twice over. She had been dismissed early in the day by Amy, and returned from the fair only after the body had been found. Pirgo had little to add regarding the day’s events, but I thought I might learn how Amy had spent her time in the weeks and days before she died.

“Can you read or write?” I knew she could not, but I wanted to see if she would lie to make a better impression.

She huffed. “What’s the good in it? Lady Amy was always writin’, and look what she come to.”

“Forster tells me that you will be sitting up tonight with her ladyship’s body.”

She remained defiant. “It ain’t my place. One of her stepbrothers ought to have come by now.”

“Are you afraid to be left alone with her corpse?”

“Nay! I ain’t scared of the dead. I sat with my Stephen after he died, and my father as well.” Still, I thought her bravado disguised a hidden fear. Of what? Ghosts or someone living?

“Did you ever see Lady Amy speaking with any strangers or know if she met with anyone in secret?”

She looked down, as if the answer were in her lap, and began twisting a dangling cap string around one finger. “I can’t say for certain,” she said. “She might have.”
“See here,” I said, willing myself to be patient. “When we’re done, I shall have cook give you a cup of small beer and prepare something savory for you, whatever you like. How does that sound?” This consoled her, and I saw that I had finally set us both on the right path.

She pursed her lips as if considering how much to say. “There was a stranger I seen once,” she said, “lingerin’ about the sexton’s cottage whilst Lady Amy was there. And another time, a week or so ago, leavin’ the grange by the back way. But I don’t rightly know why he was here.”

“What did he look like?”

“Tall,” she said. “With dark hair and a thin beard. But I never got a good look at his face, cause he kept his hat pulled down.” It wasn’t much of a description, but it might lead to something later on. What would become of Pirgo, I wondered, now that Amy was dead?

“Forster tells me you have a boy who is being reared by your mother.” Her bottom lip began to quiver and tears spilled down her cheeks and fell on her apron.

“I am sure that Master Forster will speak with Mrs. Odingsells. A place will be found for you.” Amy had brought Pirgo with her to Ely House from Stanfield Hall after the wedding. That was more than a decade ago. Amy was only eighteen then, and Pirgo all of fifteen. Over the years, Amy had rejected all of Dudley’s offers to send her a maid who knew more about the needs of a gentlewoman, and who was demure and well spoken. All of them, she had once told me, were spies for the Dudleys. She preferred Pirgo, perhaps because she was unschooled.
“Tell me what happened on Sunday morning. Remember, the sooner said, Mrs. Pirgo, the sooner done.”

Her brow remained furrowed, but she was no longer testy. “Her ladyship rose early and had me dress her in her new taffeta gown, with her best smock and kirtle. She spent more time than usual on her hair. She wanted it combed and left loose down her back. She were very particular about that.”

“Others have said that Lady Amy was agitated that morning and sent all her servants away, even you. Did that surprise you?” We both knew Amy had been ill for many months, rising late in the morning or never leaving her bed.

She considered this a moment, then found her voice. “That Sunday she were changed. She weren’t so sickly and peevish. I reckoned at the time that she could do for herself, and that she might want to be alone if she thought his lordship were comin’.”

“Did she speak of him?”

“Nay, she did not.” Again she avoided looking at me, and I wondered if that were true, but let it pass.

“Did she ever mention the Queen?”

“Aye, she said terrible things about her. Nothin’ a Christian ought to repeat.” Outside, the autumn light had begun to lose its mid-day warmth. An insect chorus was chirring. Their droning, rhythmic song would soon be silenced by the first frost.

“If someone were to ask you what sort of man Robert Dudley is, what would you say?”
She drew back, as if I had asked her to season her cream with pepper. “That would be insolent, to speak of his lordship as if I could pronounce on him.”

“You must be entirely honest with me, Mrs. Pirgo. No harm will come to you, I promise.”

She arranged her skirt, and a mild expression stole over her round face. “His lordship were always civil to me and the others. And when he was about, he went to church of a Sunday, which her ladyship did not do. She was always pleading her head or her humors, as you know.” She glanced at me, and I nodded to encourage her.

“That was afore we came to Cumnor in early December. As for his lordship, I never heard him speak a bad word, or saw him strike any man that works for him.” I noticed that she had omitted any reference to the verbal brawls between husband and wife.

“When did you see him last?”

She squinted. “That were in June, last year, when he came to visit her at Sir Richard’s house at Compton Verney. That’s when she began to carry on.”

“About what?”

“Pains in her breast, and bein’ poisoned.”

“How is that?” Everything I had heard came from Dudley or Forster. I wanted to hear what she had to say.

“The same as you yourself have heard! Last summer, her ladyship became sad and heavy. Many a day she left her food upon her plate and sent me away, cursin’ her fate and his
lordship in the same breath. If I come back to look in on her, I could hear her behind the door of her closet, praying to God to deliver her from her misery. Most times I lay in the truckle bed of a night, in case she should need me. I could hardly sleep for her sighin’ and tossin’ from one side to the other, as if her mattress were stuffed with stone. Complainin’ about the cold and carryin’ on like a bedlam. ‘I’m cold,’ she says. ‘Cold as a stone. As a rock. Cold as fish blood. As a cat in a well. Cold as a blade, as a nail. As a whore’s curse.’ Over and over again, till she was near to driving me mad. Other times she would wake me from a deep slumber with a terrible shriek, as if she had seen a haunt.”

“Why was her ladyship so troubled?”

She snorted, and gave me a look filled with contempt at my boundless ignorance. “I reckon half of England were talkin’ about his lordship and the Queen. How he had forgotten that he ever had a wife. When Dudley was here, he stayed away from her ladyship’s bed, like she might be catchin’. Not that I blamed him any. None of us have laid eyes on him since she drove him off a year ago.”

“I heard tell,” I said, “that Lady Amy went to Abingdon to see a cunning man by the name of Howard Ady.”

“Aye. That were no lie. A physician ain’t like to do a body any good if a witch has laid a hex on you. Everybody knows that.”

“Why Ady?”
“For a good cause,” she said. “He’s canny as to all the witches and warlocks hereabouts. And how to cure a curse with a spell. Some of the cunnin’ men in these parts are soothsayers as well, and will help a person learn what’s been lost or stolen. They can tell you who stole it, or put a hex on them. Ady knows all about magic and Satanic tricks.”

“Did she take you with her when she went to see him?”

“Just the once. The first time she went, for I know where he lives.”

“Tell me what you know of Howard Ady.”

She shrugged. “What most about here know. He works as a law man in his house, on the road going into Abingdon. If you are known to him or to a friend of his, he will meet you there, or sometimes in the verger’s cottage by the cemetery. That’s where we went to see him. It were day time, but the shutters was closed and the room lit up with candles. He told Lady Amy to sit across from him and I was left to stand in the corner.”

“What else?”

“She told him of her sufferin’, and he listened with great understandin’. Then he got up and went to open cabinet, and very solemn like brought out a bowl made of brass. And filled it with sweet water from a pitcher. This he set upon a table to look into it, so as to divine the cause of her affliction. Said that she were laboring under a terrible curse put on her by a warlock, a man of frightenin’ powers. That someone wanted her to die, and she was sure to die soon if she did nothing! That frightened her considerable, and she said she would pay him anything to take the curse off of her.”
What a charlatan, I thought, preying on people’s fears to take their money. “He must have wanted a great sum to relieve Lady Amy of this terrible curse.”

“Nay. That’s where thou art wrong. He said that he wouldna take any coin. That she must believe that he could cure her, and that all the gold in the world would do no good if she were to doubt him in the least. Then he went to the wall and drew a blood red cloth off a lookin’ glass, and said she must gaze into it to see the face of the person who wanted her dead. That she must not be afraid, but look without turnin’ away, and think of nothin’ else till the face of the guilty man showed itself. He told her the words of the spell to speak all the while. I could tell she were scared to look, but I knew she were burnin’ with curiosity to learn who it was that wanted to harm her. She stood in front of that glass and began reciting the words he told her to speak. That went on for a bit while I stood in the corner. Then I saw her close her eyes, lookin’ like she might faint. When she opened them, her whole body jerked, and she let out a gasp, as if she had stepped on her own grave. I was nigh unto faintin’ myself.”

She ceased speaking, but I sensed she had more to say. “Well, what did she do next?”

“She was sore amazed. Anyone could see that. And she says, very clear and loud, ‘Tis him and her as well. How could I ever doubt it? My husband’s whore!’”

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That night, I was unable to fall sleep. I lay awake, alert to every nocturnal creak and flutter. Verney had infected my mind with doubt. What if Dudley were behind his wife’s death? And Verney were his agent? What game was Dudley playing by sending me here, making a show of searching out everything I might discover as to how his wife died. Verney had as much
as told me that Amy had been murdered and I had been sent to Cumnor Hall for appearance sake alone—just as her brother would be expected to be content to agree that his sister had died from a fall.

That evening, on my way back to my room, I thought I was being followed. When I stole a glance over my shoulder, I was sure I saw a shadow retreat around the corner. Yet when I retraced my steps, there was no one there. Making matters worse was the dread that descended upon me as soon as I blew out my bedside candle. On the way in, the sight of hag stones hanging from trees on the lane leading up to the abbey had made my skin creep. When cattle died and ewes gave birth to still born lambs, the cotters’ wives would hang the white stones from branches and bushes. My mother used to wear a small one around her neck. She liked to hold it up and tell me in hushed tones that she knew a white witch who could gaze through the hole into other worlds. I fell into a restless sleep and dreamt of a woman wearing a cape of white with a red hood that hid her face. She ran from me, and I pursued her, until she dropped the cloak at my feet and vanished. I bent down to pick it up, but before I could touch it, it burst into flames.
Chapter Twelve: His Enemies

The Journal of Lady Louisa Stuart

Wednesday September 13, 1820

“What greater torment ever could have been, then to enforce the fair to live retired?”

From “The Complaint of Rosamond” (1594) by Samuel Daniel

I am ordering T.C.’s papers as best I can and attempting to make sense of the whole, in the hopes I can more astutely comment upon the story of Lady Amy. After reading the following account written by Theobald Cave, it is safe to say that he alleges in an off-hand way that the queen herself made sure that the jurymen who convened at the inquest would return a verdict of accidental death. And that this was arranged by naming one Richard Smith, who was known to the queen, as the head of the jury. Did the queen know that Lady Amy had been murdered and seek to suppress the truth? Some would find that to be credible, especially if Robert Dudley were behind his wife’s death. Yet I think it likely that she would have wanted the same verdict if Dudley’s enemies had conspired to kill Lady Amy. For Elizabeth would have realized that no good would come of exposing the powerful men who were Dudley’s enemies.

Who were the suspects in this regard? Three men stand out as the Dudley’s most ardent foes and also the men who were behind the decades-long campaign to ruin Dudley by framing him for the murder of his wife. Two of them were the Duke of Norfolk, Thomas Howard, and his father in law, the Earl of Arundel, Henry Fitzalan, who in 1567 attempted to bribe John Appleyard to accuse Dudley of murdering Lady Amy. The third was the man who succeeded in
reviving the dormant scandal in 1584 with the publication of Leicester’s Commonwealth. That man was the shadowy Sir Charles Arundell, a distant cousin of the queen. Many believe him to be the author of Leicester’s Commonwealth. All of this is confirmed by the writings of the mysterious Theobald Cave, who claims he worked as a personal secretary to Sir Charles for two decades, and helped him to write the book that became known as Parson’s Greencoat.

No one has yet inquired of me, Theobald Cave, to tell all I know or have heard touching John Appleyard, the unfortunate half brother of Amy Robsart. That is more than passing strange, since I recall a great deal regarding Appleyard’s later life. Perhaps this absence of curiosity regarding Appleyard is because he has been dealt with by the Queen and also by fate, having died in 1574, languishing in house arrest where he had been consigned by our gracious and forgiving Queen, who ordered the ailing Appleyard moved from the dread prison of Norwich Castle to the more salubrious environs of Norwich House. (Some might be so bold as to propose that the Queen dared not bring Appleyard back to London for a beheading, lest it revive gossip about the death of his sister.)

In his fourth year of imprisonment, he was stricken with a fever, and began a rapid decline whilst serving a life sentence for his part in the failed rebellion in Norwich in the year 1570. And this a mere three years after his release from Fleet prison for making statements regarding great men whom he claimed did seek him out for one reason, that being he was the meetest man to call for a second inquiry into the true cause of his sister’s death, and that among those men were Henry Fitzalan and Thomas Howard, of whom I shall say more anon.
Acting on behalf of Sir Charles, who still yearned to revive the fumes of scandal, I travelled to Norwich to sound Master Appleyard while he lay in Norwich House. A more festered man, body and soul, there was none. Even as he grew ulcerous and infirm of body, he nursed a growing hatred of Dudley. Yet Appleyard hardly dared speak his former patron’s name, except in a whisper, for fear he might be overheard and sent back to Norwich Castle, where twas snappish cold in winter. That may have been what killed him, that and his time of great trouble, when he was shut up in Fleet prison for tales he told of a secret nocturnal meeting on the banks of the Thames at midnight, with a mysterious boatman, who offered him gold and the favor of great men if he would agree to press for a second inquiry into the matter of his sister’s passing.

Yet I run ahead when my intention was to excavate the past. Touching Norwich Castle, this was a place of significance for John Appleyard, who must have known that the corpse of the rebel Robert Kett, his uncle on this mother’s side, had hung by chains from the wall of this same edifice until his rotted flesh parted company with his bones. It does not require a historian to observe that Appleyard made the same mistake as his uncle. That is, both uncle and nephew crossed the paths of the Dudleys, John the elder and Robert the younger, at times when father and son were basking in the light cast by Tudor monarchs, brother and sister, as it fell out, although the sister’s light far out shone that of her younger half-brother.

As to the misfortunes that attach to men of small consequence who cross the paths of great men, mine is not a pronouncement made by one more wise. For I too chose to serve a master who labored long and hard to ruin Robert Dudley. Yet it was Dudley who died in his bed, mourned by the greatest Queen who ever drew breath. (May God preserve Her
Highness, the Virgin Queen, though there are those blasphemers who say otherwise.)

Indeed, the men who conspired against him were ruined, the sole exception being William Cecil. Still, most living at the time would have wagered that Dudley would either be slain by an assassin’s blade or lose his head, the same as his father and grandfather.

Master Appleyard’s full confession renounced all that he previously claimed regarding the secret meeting at midnight. Yet twas no mere tale, but a truthful account of an actual meeting that took place in the spring of 1567, seven years after his sister died at Cumnor Place. All of this Appleyard’s brother William Huggins did reveal to Dudley’s man, one Sir Thomas Blount, a ruffian sent by Dudley to Huggins’ lodging. This agent of Dudley’s, who was known to both men and feared as well, soon upended poor Huggins and emptied him of all he knew as if he were a peddler’s pack of toys. Appleyard was given a cell in Fleet Prison. As things fell out, Appleyard was allowed to read the coroner’s report in its entirety from his prison cell. As I know too well, the empty stomach, with its gurgles and growls, makes a more eloquent argument than any lawyer or even the dictates of one’s conscience. So that when he, Appleyard, had exhausted his meager funds and could no longer buy so much as a piece of stale bread from his jailors, who no doubt took a commission for their trouble, he agreed with the Cecil that no such meeting had taken place, and all had been lies and the worst sort of villainy. This recanting bought him his freedom, but no peace of mind. For he was, out of desperation, forced to lie once again and claim that there was no need to search further into the death of Lady Amy, the wife of Lord Dudley.

To be held hostage by Kett’s rebels and in need of rescue by the Dudleys was not an auspicious introduction to manhood. And Appleyard was a fellow whose fortunes declined, it can be said in retrospect, due in large part to his insistence that his sister was killed, and that
her killers must be found out and punished. This showed remarkably poor judgment on his part, since most believed the murderer of Amy Robsart was none other than her husband, who was Appleyard’s patron and upon whom he relied for both bread and bed. For he, like me, was fated to be one of those small men whose names are inked on the pages of histories because he meddled in the affairs of the powerful. The cause of it was all the more puzzling, for I never heard him profess a great love for his sibling, nor she for him. So I came to believe it was a matter of pride, and his own gnawing resentment of Dudley.

As for Robert Dudley, I know from persons who were close to him that he was greatly agitated during the period of the jury’s inquiry, banished as he was from court to protect the reputation of the Queen. Without her, he was naught but a traitor’s son, an untried leader more at home on the tennis court than the battlefield. He need not have feared, for the Queen was only waiting for the jury’s finding to call her favorite back to court. Suffice it to say, that the jury foreman Richard Smith of Abingdon was known to the Queen, and the verdict of the jury was well in hand and never truly a matter of suspense.
Chapter Thirteen: White Witches

Wednesday morning September 10, 1560

“Out of question they be innumerable which receive help by going to the cunning men.”

_A Dialogue Concerning Witches and Witchcrafts (circa 1580)_ by George Gifford

The morning was chill and cheerless as I rode beneath the mossy archway of Cumnor Hall. The sun had risen above the horizon but lingered behind a veil of clouds. It was less than a mile along the narrow, shaded lane from the grange to the high road. I passed a stand of dead trees, their skeletal limbs colonized by wood louse, and more than one slime-glazed pond, all adding to the general gloom. Both Owen and Forster had neglected the woodlands that the monks had harvested for timber. Deer were surely being poached, and Forster looked the other way when villagers trespassed to scavenge kindling. As I rode to Ady’s house, I pondered why Amy would choose to consult a cunning man. It was not unusual for cotters and even gentry to seek out a white witch if they suspected that a curse had raised boils on their necks. An old crone who called herself a white witch was well thought of in my own village of Tipton, and my mother went to her more than once for tinctures and spells of protection. Many English physicians are also cunning men, and not a few school masters as well.

When I lived in London, I did my share of sinning and carousing with actors and other insolent rascals who made light of the Devil and liked to jest and claim that number of witches holding black masses in the woods multiplied whenever cunning men grew greedy. I laughed along with them, but their jesting made me uneasy. Even when I was deep in my cups, I did not
think it wise to make light of Satan and soothsayers. Yet neither did I believe every hamlet in England was infested by a plague of witches. As a child, I had been terrified by tales of horned creatures with the heads of dogs and hags who frolicked under the full moon and kissed Satan’s fundament. When I went out into the wider world, I learned that these tales were no more true than the stories I had heard of Frenchmen who sprouted fur and howled at the moon. Still and all, I would not willingly walk through a graveyard after dark.

It was not long before I came upon the high road and was relieved to see the sun unveiled and mist rising from meadows sodden with the heavy dew of early morning. In the distance, I spied a rustic wending his way down a path that cut through knee-high haw bit. A small black-and-white dog trotted behind him. That might have been me, if my good mother had not died, if my weak-minded father had not been a drunkard. And if I had not been taken in by the Dudleys, who taught me everything I came to know about a glittering world with the court at its center. How to fight, speak, bow, gamble and also how to deceive. For to live amongst Dudleys was to become accustomed to lying. With the exception of Lady Jane, who was after all, a Guildford, the Dudleys were the surely most persuasive and practiced liars in all of England. As for John Dudley and his sons, they understood that to be a courtier was to traffic in misdirection and disguise. To speak one’s mind was not a virtue, but sheer folly. To lie well is a subtle art that must be wed to an opposing talent, which is to retain the knack of being genuine, since lies are only effective if they dwell alongside goodwill in personal dealings, which was also a feature of the Dudley family character.

When I was a naïve youth, the Dudley boys thought it a fine sport to coax me into believing one thing, when they meant another. They taught me not to trust them, and much
more—that the truth itself was a chimera. It shifted and changed forms. It was, like the law, open to interpretation, subject to revision. If a raw but true tale gave offense, then the truth must be made more palatable. Conversely, if the truth were lackluster, and did not inspire outrage when retribution was demanded, a lurid tale could take its place. As for facts, they could be overlooked or discarded.

After Anne had hung herself, I went before the jury and lied to protect her family and her name. I did my part to throw another shovel full of dirt upon the stench of scandal. Everyone involved knew I was lying and expected it of me. The jury men were placid, indifferent, wondering, no doubt, if they were to be rewarded with copper or silver. For better or for worse, however, I never learned to lie as well as a Dudley. I did, however, become adept at detecting lies and liars. It was not long before I entered into every encounter with another prepared to be deceived. The world, after all, is chock full of clumsy liars. So I was grateful to the Dudleys for all they taught me.

I rode past one ramshackle cottage in need of thatching, then two more, before coming across a sturdy boy and his dog minding some ewes, and asked him where Howard Ady lived. He stared at me while the dog barked, then silently pointed in the direction of Ady’s dwelling, a substantial two-story cottage built from stone and roofed with slate. A hedge of laurel separated the front yard from the road. As I tethered Kerwiden to a post, I noticed a tall man leaving through a gate at the rear of the cottage and walking in a long, loping stride alongside the hedge toward the road. His posture was erect, his chin tucked in, as if deep in thought. His hands were white and clean, not those of a laborer. He wore a soft, wide-brimmed hat pulled down over his brow and was dressed in dark clothing. As he passed, he turned his head, and I
saw that he had a thin beard. The right side of his face was horribly scarred, the skin pink and puckered, the corner of his mouth pulled downward. He returned my gaze, staring back at me with bold contempt, which made me look away.

I used the brass knocker on the front door, and waited for awhile with no response before pounding more loudly. In a few moments, the door was opened by an aging manservant. I told him my business, and he informed me that Master Ady was not in. I showed by my posture I would not be easily dismissed, and said I was expected, and that if Master Ady were not in, I would speak with someone else who could answer for his whereabouts. Furthermore, I knew the house was not vacant, I said, since I had seen another visitor leave by the back way. He appeared most put out, but relented and said I could speak with Ady’s clerk if I liked.

He ushered me into a small yet respectable library full of what I took to be law books, bound with leather, but many others whose bindings were stitched. There, seated on the other side of a large oak table piled with more books, and peering at me from behind a stack of papers, was none other than Theobald Cave. I had bid him farewell the day before, and did not expect to see him again, especially in the home of the cunning man I had come to sift. For his part, Cave was abashed, and not so welcoming as he should have been. He had made himself presentable, and I realized that I had misjudged his age. He was no boy, but a young man, though slight and short of stature, the sort chosen to don a headdress and play a maiden in mystery plays. He stammered out a half-hearted greeting and informed me that Ady was not there, and he did not know when he would return.
I saw in an instant that he was lying. “That is most unfortunate,” I said, “because I have business with him that will not wait. Where has Master Ady gone to?”

“I believe he left quite early on his mule, before sunrise. He may have business in Norwich. I do not know, I am most sorry to say, exactly when he will return.” He swallowed and stared at me.

Small fry that he was, he had been caught, and I did not intend to let him off my hook. “Mayhap I could overtake him if I tried. I warrant my horse is a good deal faster than his mule.” I knew full well that Ady and his mule were not jogging along the highroad to Norwich, but that he was hiding somewhere nearby, avoiding me or anyone who wished to talk about Lady Amy. I listened with growing impatience as Cave hemmed and hawed, which made me want to shake some language out of him. But I thought better of it. It would not do for Dudley’s man to molest villagers while the jury was conducting its inquiry. Far better to draw out whatever I could from Cave, who might be able to add to my store of knowledge.

“I think you owe me a better reckoning than you have so far given, Master Cave,” I said, giving him a stern look, which made him cower. He muttered something in the way of a pathetic apology. So keen was his distress, that I sensed he would flee if he could.

“Steady yourself, Cave. I am not here to abuse you.” I gestured at the scattered papers. “Someone taught you to read and write, I see.” He told me that he had lived for some years at the grange. He spent his youth there, after being taken in as a foundling by the abbot.

“Would that have been Abbot Pentecost?”

“Perhaps they put you to work copying in the scriptorium?”

“I am a law clerk, sir, and no purveyor of popish tracts. Ask anyone who knows Master Ady, and they will tell you that he attends services each Sunday, without fail.”

I checked my impatience. “I am not here to count bodies in pews, Cave. I am here on behalf of his lordship, and intend to speak to Master Ady on a matter of urgent business. I am also, I might add, a person, who like yourself, was dealt a poor hand by fortune, yet made the best of it. There is no shame in that. I was taken in by the Dudleys, after my mother died. I can read and write quite well, although I was not much of a hand at Latin, or figures. As a rule I prefer historical chronicles and the like.”

For the first time, Cave brightened. “I am an avid antiquarian myself, sir.”

With a bit of encouragement, he began chirping like a robin, reciting the history of the abbey, one of the oldest in England, founded by the West Saxon chieftains. It began with twelve monks and flourished for two hundred years before being destroyed by Danes, he said, casting a wary look at me, as if I had just stepped out of a long boat.

“My people on my mother’s side were Danes. But go on, I shan’t take offense.”

According to Cave, the abbey had survived a lightning strike in 1265 and an attack by rioters, tradesmen from Oxford. They set fire to buildings, stole chalices and beat the monks. After the abbey came under the protection of the sheriff and crown, the monks added buildings and collected rents. They also built a manor hall at Cumnor Place. In the early fifteenth century,
he said, the pope authorized the abbot to choose six priests to hear confessions on feast days and to grant absolutions, which brought in more silver. The monks at the abbey oversaw the scriptorium and kept accounts, while the monks at the grange raised poultry and tended gardens.

In 1532, King Henry VIII showed his pleasure by sending twenty pounds of gold in a white leather purse to Abbot Rowling. Yet two years later in 1534, the world turned upside down. And bishops across the width and breadth of England were signing documents of surrender drawn up by Thomas Cromwell. Soon enough the Abbot was battling a lawsuit filed by the King’s steward who claimed the abbey’s accounts were suspect, and that the monks of Abingdon owed a great sum to the King. Master Ady, then a young lawyer, had done his utmost to defend Abbott Rowling and the prior, but he was no match for Cromwell.

In the end, Abbot Rowling, the prior and all twenty-four monks signed papers surrendering the abbey. In return, they were granted annual pensions which included the princely sum of two hundred pounds per year for the abbot, with far more modest sums doled out to the monks, the least of which were granted a pauper’s pension of five pounds, six shillings and eight pence per year for the remainder of their lives. Cave said he knew the exact sum because it was quoted more than once in outraged tones by those who received the least. The abbot had been permitted to live on at the grange until he died. Cave was just a boy at the time, and Abbot Rowling kept him in his care. After the monastery was dissolved, the abbot was fond of saying that Cave was the only one among the foundlings with the wit to become a scholar.

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“I see, young sir, that you have not disappointed him. By the by, if you have any beer or ale, I find that I am rather thirsty. Would you mind asking your man to pour a cup for both of us?”

“I sent him away after you arrived, sir, and there is no one else here. So if you will excuse me, I shall see to it.”

With Cave gone on his errand, I inspected the papers on the desk. I picked up the page on the top and read what appeared to be an account of a witch named Mother Borley who had been hanged after her neighbors denounced her. I glanced at the title. *A Compendium of the Numerous Incidents of Witchcraft in England, How the Evil Designs of Satan’s Servants Were Thwarted by the Most Righteous Cunning Man Howard Ady of Berkshire. As Told by Theobald Cave.* I plucked up another sheet written in what I assumed was Cave’s hand.

“She kept three spirits. One like a cat, which she called Lightfoot. Another like a toad, which she called Lunch, and the third like a weasel, which she called Makeshift. This Lightfoot, she said, was traded to her for an oven cake fifteen years ago by one Mother of Borley, who told her the cat would give her good service. The cat Lightfoot would kill cattle, the weasel would kill horses and the toad would plague men in their bodies.”

I heard Cave’s footsteps and quickly put the paper back on the table. I accepted the ale he offered, and waited for my host to drink, which he did, all but emptying the cup. I rested my cup on the table, for it was time to show a few of my cards.

“I know very well that Lady Amy came here to see Master Ady. Perhaps you were here during one of her visits?”
This line of inquiry made him squirm. “Oh yes, her ladyship!” He spoke as someone recalling a matter of small importance, but he was a poor actor. “Yes, she was here,” he said, brightly. “Some time ago. A very beautiful and noble lady. Most kind, and yet most sad.”

“Were you ever in the room when she spoke with Master Ady, or did he say why she had come?”

“On no, sir! On the contrary, all I know is but second hand. I know nothing, truly, other than the usual tittle tattle. That she was not well, and much neglected by her husband.”

“Yet you say she was troubled. Why did she consult Ady?”

He threw up his hands. “I cannot say, sir, for I am shamelessly repeating mere rumor, and for that I apologize.”

“Yet the day she was found dead, you left your post here, working as a clerk, to take a job as a drudge at an inn. Were you running away from something?”

He quailed. “No, Sir Thomas. I confess that I took a foolish notion to go to London and make my fortune.” Another lie. “I thought to pay my way by working as a menial. I fear I am not stalwart enough to make my way alone in the world, as you witnessed.”

“So you decided to return here?”

“Out of desperation.” He lowered his voice. “I am paid almost nothing, and the fare is meager, even for one such as I.” That much seemed to be true.
“When I arrived,” I said, “I saw a tall man dressed in black who was leaving by the back gate.” This report had a terrible effect on Cave, whose face drained of color. He blinked and curled up like a hedgehog poked with a stick.

“Who is he,” I said, “and why are you struck speechless?” To help him gather his wits, I handed him my cup of ale. He took it, drinking deeply and clutching it with both hands.

“God’s bones, Cave. You’d think the Devil himself had paid a call. Whoever he is, he is only a man, flesh and blood. He surely has a name, and you must tell me what it is.”

“Nokes, is his last name.” His voice was faint. “His given name is Balthazar.”

“What else? And do not feign ignorance. You are a very poor liar.”

“He was a priest at the monastery in Abingdon. He sold absolutions and kept the coin for himself, and named witches for a fee. Abbot Pentecost was in charge back then. He was terribly afraid of him, we all were, and he turned him out.” He paused. “A week later, the abbot was found dead in the garden. Yet only the day before he had been in good health.” He looked at me then as he did the night we met, as toward one who could offer protection.

“I did not lie to you, sir, yet neither have I told you the truth in its entirety. I am afraid that Ady is injured, or dead. I heard him arguing with Father Nokes yesterday, and again this morning, before the sun was up. My room is above the kitchen, you see. Then I thought I heard someone out in the stable. When I went down to look, Ady’s mule was gone.”

“What were they arguing about?”
“I do not know, Sir Thomas. But Ady has been frantic since her ladyship died. I cannot be sure, but I believe that Father Nokes may have had something to do with it.”

I leaned forward. “What else do you know that you are not telling me?”

He cowered. “That is all I know, I swear it! Please, Sir Thomas. Have mercy upon me. Do not bring me before the jury.” He laid his head down in the crook of his arm and began to weep.

“Calm yourself, Cave. I do not intend to tell the jury what you said.” The less they knew of this, the better.

I stood up to leave. “Where do you think Ady went?”

He sniffed and composed himself. “I cannot say. He had a brother in Hertfordshire. Mayhap he went there.” He drug his sleeve across his face. I pitied him, yet I was weary of his vaporish ways.

Riding back to Cumnor Hall, I wondered what else Cave was concealing that was worth uncovering. Perhaps he knew very little of consequence, but was awed by the Dudley name and frightened that he would be tied in some way to Amy’s death. I had seen this sort of thing before. I knew that if I could make one ear as large as a dinner plate and press it against every cottage wall in Abingdon, I would no doubt hear every third husbandman clap on about how they had once seen her ladyship, or spoken to a jury man. No doubt even the meanest cookhouse drudge could allude to some special insight as to the dark dealings that led to Amy Robsart’s death. How her doom was foretold in her face, what awful agents were behind it and
even how the evil deed was done. Some would opine that she must have been shoved down the stairs, that Dudley himself did it, or that she had been set upon in the night by assassins concealed in a secret passage, and so on, until poor Amy had been murdered five different ways, each one more terrible. Yet if I were to confront these purveyors of rumor, I would find them as silent as figures in stained cloth, their stories contrived from air and feathers.

Still, I knew from looking at his papers that Cave’s exertions on Ady’s behalf were not confined to the practice of law. Amy’s presence at Ady’s house would have been much remarked upon. Ady was likely the source of the rosary I found, and also the trove of magical trinkets, since I very much doubted that anyone in Forster’s house was a secret papist or white witch. All were confirmed Protestants known to the Dudleys for many years. Yet here in the village of Abingdon, home for five centuries to a monastery with ties to Rome, there lived a cunning man who practiced both witchery and popery, and who had dealings with a defrocked priest.

If Ady had ridden to Norwich, he would have taken the same highway on which I rode. I was therefore following in the tracks of Ady’s mule, if indeed the lawyer and his mule truly did set out this way. Yet it seemed strange that he would do so alone, unless he were desperate. For there were too many highwaymen lying in wait who would eye a fat lawyer the way a hungry fox eyes a plump coney. Overhead a dark mass of clouds had moved in and hovered atop distant hills, obscuring the horizon. It made me think of Ovid and his account of the beginning of the world, when there was naught but darkness and confusion, until the creator separated earth and sky, and so forged order out of chaos by drawing a line between the two.
I judged it too late for summer torrents that wash sleeping cats from roofs, yet too soon for pelting rains that come after the solstice. More likely, I thought, we were in for a long drizzle, the kind that seeps into loose stitching. If Englishmen could rust, our race of islanders would have died out long ago, leaving behind heaps of corroded bones. The gathering clouds had not put to flight the hardy sheep and cattle men who tend the fields. One of them sat under a tree, and lighted his pipe, waiting for the weather to pass. These Berkshire mutton men are like their sheep, I thought, alert to every twitch in the bushes, every bleat of alarm from their brethren. A freshening wind gusted in from the west and lifted Kerwiden’s mane. My only thought was to return to Cumnor Hall before I was soaked through. I was therefore pleased to come upon the plank bridge that marked the turn off to the grange, thinking that the overhanging branches would shield me from the worst of the weather.

Off to my right, a pair of mutton men were acting strangely. Instead of sheltering under an elm, they were out in the rain, picking their way among large rocks on the bank of the stream, and gesturing one to the other. One held a staff and was using it to push away refuse that had collected around a fallen limb and formed a dam where the watercourse narrows. I watched with growing curiosity as the same man pulled back his staff with a jerk and called out to his companion. Down in the stream, I could see a dark, lumpish form caught up in a tangle of sticks and sodden leaves, and what looked to be a raised hand, quite white and lifeless. Nearby stood a mule, grazing and swishing its tale. I cursed the weather and set my sights on the road to Oxford, where I determined to go sooner rather than later to pay a call upon the good Dr. Bailey—to make sure he was still among the living and to ask a few questions.
Chapter Fourteen: True Tales

The Journal of Lady Louisa Stuart
Thursday September 14, 1820

“There should always be some foundation of fact for the most airy fabric. Pure invention is but the talent of a liar.”

Attributed to Lord Byron from My Recollections of Lord Byron (1869) by Countess Guicciolle

Today I shall receive Messrs. Bird and Cave, and I am quite curious to find out more about these two, especially Samuel Cave, whose ancestor has left behind a very curious cache of papers related to the life and death of Lady Amy. Bird’s interest suggests that he believes Theobald’s writings to be worth something, though I find it hard to imagine why—unless these two suspect that Theobald’s papers pertaining to the notorious case might provide fresh evidence, and if so, look to achieve notoriety by reviving the matter. If they are on a fishing expedition, they will find me most uncooperative. However, I intend to give them the benefit of the doubt and assume that Cave’s quest may be an innocent one inspired by familial pride. As for Bird, I know nothing of his reputation as a dealer in autographs, but am concerned that he may be taking advantage of Sir Henry by attempting to buy these old papers for far less than they are worth.

Watty and I were sitting up late last night, and conversing by candlelight, for he has not yet installed gas lighting. We both were startled by a flash of lightning that briefly illuminated the world beyond the window. We saw, or might have seen, a form that seemed to lurch out of the shadows and then vanish with the return of complete darkness. Watty heard me gasp, and
urged me to admit that I had seen something frightening—though I was sure that my old eyes were playing tricks on me. Then he asked me, rather coyly, if I wished to hear the story of the ghost said to haunt the grounds of Abbotsford. The haunt is reputed to be the spirit of a jealous husband, who fearing his young wife had betrayed him, had strangled her during a storm much like this one, then thrown her body down a well. I told him that I most assuredly wished to hear no such thing. Not unless he wanted to summon his steward, and arrange to have me and my belongings relocated to another room in a less lonesome location.

He admitted that it was at times such as this that he reflected most deeply upon the almost universal belief in the existence of what he called “spirits unencumbered by the incapacities of the body.” He told me a story of a physician he knew, a thorough-going skeptic named Horace, who experienced a dream in which a friend, recently deceased, had come to Horace in his sleep and seized him by the wrist as he tried to in vain to be heard. This friend had sent word that he urgently needed to speak with Horace, but had died while the physician was en route. When Horace awoke from this vivid dream, he found that his wrist was quite cold exactly where the phantom had touched him. It was this story, and many others like them related by sensible persons, that Watty hopes to compile into a collection, and to accompany this with a series of essays devoted to witchcraft and demonology. For he had recently read a book about criminal trials in Scotland that included many accounts of convicted witches. All of his observations, he said, would be based upon these remarkable cases. I asked if his attraction to the uncanny had any influence on his decision to include supernatural happenings in his book, which is after all, a story about love and betrayal by mortal men. He confessed that it did, and blamed his superstitious Scottish forebears.
Perhaps there is something to what he says, for though one is not apt to give credence to the notion that the scholarly mind of the antiquary might also be drawn to tales of witches and magic, W.S. has shown me otherwise. I have found in my archive of antique papers a reference to a lost work written by T.C., who took as his chosen subject both witches and witchcraft, which I think worth including with the other writings by this long dead scribe. Theobald Cave claims he first met Amy Robsart when she came to see a village cunning man to cure her of her afflictions, and that this cunning man was a resident of Abingdon by the name of Howard Ady. He also claims that not only did Dudley hope to murder his wife, but that she was scheming to murder him as well! I have never heard any other historian make such an accusation, which seems baseless on the face of it. Can these wild speculations have anything to do with my visitors’ curiosity regarding Theobald’s papers? I have taken the precaution of removing all of T.C.’s work relating to Lady Amy and storing them in my room. The rest of the papers and a manuscript pertaining to witchcraft I have left in the library for William Bird and Samuel Cave to inspect.

September 7, 1560

I wish Abbot Rowling were still living and I had back my own tidy room at the grange. It was the abbot who decided that I had the makings of a scholar, and his good opinion of me lodged like a seed that sprouted and grew into an ambition to become an antiquary. I have in my possession a collection of four pamphlets on witchcraft that I discovered among the manuscripts in the abbot’s study. Before the contents of his library were scattered, I had managed, by stealth, to rescue all four. The best is a harrowing account entitled The strange torment of Thomas Darling, thirteen years of age, who was
possessed by the Devil with horrible fits and terrible apparitions uttered at Burton on Trent in the County of Stafford, and of his marvelous deliverance.

This pamphlet fell into my hands when I was twelve – or rather I took it from the Abbot’s library. It was not until I read the story of Thomas Darling that I was inspired to become the chronicler I was meant to be, empowered by the knowledge that God had spoken to me through the true story of another boy like myself. And that I, Theobald Cave, would someday write my own true story of witches and witchcraft. I read eagerly of the trials of Thomas Darling while I sat on a stool in a warm kitchen on a cold day, and became convinced I was destined to author my own true tale of sin and redemption. My prayers were answered as I listened with dread and amazement to the wondrous tales of the villagers who came to Howard Ady seeking relief from curses and spells. For most legal matters spring from the intrigues betwixt men of property and even husbands and wives. Feckless husbands and spoiled cream are oft found to be caused by spells cast by witches and their familiars who dwell in every parish.

My wonderful memory, a gift from God to compensate me for my short stature, allowed me to recall every detail that I heard and write it down. That was how I came to record, very faithfully, all that I heard regarding Lady Amy, who came to see Ady and also Father Nokes. It is possible to come and go almost any time of day from the verger’s cottage near the cemetery without attracting notice. It was here that Ady met with Father Nokes, on the occasions when the priest returned to Abingdon and Cumnor Place during his travels to the homes of Catholics who continue to follow the true religion and wish to take sacraments or have their confessions heard, and where Father Nokes met in secret with her ladyship.
As my great work progressed, however, I realized that none of the witches and warlocks who showed themselves in Ady’s looking glass were ever brought before a judge and made to confess. Ady said that his calling was to use white magic to bring relief to those who are bewitched. To accuse a witch and bring her to trial was the work of a witch hunter. Father Nokes was such a man, one who could see evil etched in the wrinkled miens of hags, a holy man who owned a consecrated crystal in which he could peer into the secret places in men’s souls. In it, he saw a black dog with the face of an ape and a whistle hung round its neck and carrying in its mouth a silver knife—the thought of which made me shiver. How might such a magical knife be used? For what evil purpose? To quiet my own fears and stop my hands from trembling, I began to write all I knew concerning the troubles of Lady Amy, who is suffering under a terrible spell that will surely kill her if something is not done. Father Nokes says he can help her if she will consent to receive the sacraments. Lady Amy has told him that Lord Robert is at Windsor Palace with the Queen, and that he will come to see her this Sunday. Father Nokes tells me that Lady Amy will never be safe unless her husband is dead, and I believe he means to kill him.

September 8, 1560

Father Nokes came here to tell Ady that Lady Amy is dead, the news being that she fell down a flight of stairs this afternoon. Yet he insists she has been murdered. He has in his possession some papers that belonged to her, and I cannot help but wonder what they are. Father Nokes says an inquiry will be made, and he told Ady that he must leave town to avoid being questioned by the jurors, or anyone Dudley sends. Master Ady is quite shaken, and also frightened of Father Nokes. I am torn between a desire to destroy everything I have written, or to preserve it at all costs. Perhaps what I know, especially concerning her
ladyship, might be of some importance, or be used to help name her killer, who must surely be her own husband. It is possible to stop a man’s tongue by killing him. Yet once the same man writes down all that he knows, it is as if he has another tongue made of paper. Sadly, paper and men can both be burned. Yet paper is more easily concealed. I am most curious to learn what Father Nokes has taken from Lady Amy’s bed chamber. That should not prove to difficult to learn after Nokes has enough wine in him.
Chapter Fifteen: Secrets

Thursday September 12, 1560

“There seems little doubt that he had Amy murdered to give himself the chance of marrying the Queen.”

_The Ketts of Norfolk_ (1921) by L. M. Kett

John Appleyard was coming at me, face flushed, a pot brought to boil by frustration. He had been asking after me since yesterday, and I had been dodging him. I wanted a bit of time to myself. He halted long enough to fumble for whatever was tucked inside his pouch, then thought better of it. Another letter from Dudley, most likely. All this before I could drink my first cup of beer.

“I must speak with you, sir.” Appleyard hovered over me as I sat on a stool in what had so recently been a quiet outpost of the kitchen. His breath stank.

I lay down a thick slice of barley bread slathered with warm fat, a breakfast that put to shame the bitter acorn bread I had gnawed upon as a child. “If I am not deceived, cousin, we are doing just that.”

“Not here,” he said. “Some other place where we may confer. In private.” I was in no hurry to move. I had not slept well and spent the early morning writing down all my findings thus far, to be included in my letter to Dudley.

I hoisted my cup. “If you have not taken breakfast, perhaps you would care to join me, provided you will deign to pour your own beer. Stay clear of the cook. He is in a foul mood. He
has been charged with feeding the entire jury and swears they eat more than bachelors come to ride quintain.”

This last comment flustered Appleyard, who resented the barb hidden in my comment. He and I had been among the bachelors who took up green staves to charge at a sack of sand at Sheen, ten long years ago when Amy and Dudley wed. I struck the target cleanly and spilled sand, while Appleyard was unhorsed to gales of laughter.

“I have more urgent business than taking beer,” he said, his voice made sharp by annoyance. “Must you always first tend to your belly, Cousin Blount?”

“Aye, I must. Tis my lifelong habit to eat when I have stomach, so that I may better digest a last course of unsavory news. Stay awhile, Sir Sheriff, and tell me all that is being bruited about in Norfolk.” I picked up my bread, took another bite, and chewed lustily.

“You have not heard? The Queen is set to name Margery Norris chief mourner—she who little knew or cared for my sister!” More proof, I thought, that the living are deaf to the cries of the dead, since no wails of outrage had been heard in the night.

I frowned, as if pondering the gravity of this insult. Lady Margery was dear to the Queen, who called her by the pet name, “black crow,” for her dark hair and eyes. “I suppose,” I offered, “the wags at court will say that the Queen shows her true colors by sending a crow clad in mourner’s black to the funeral of her wife’s favorite.”

Appleyard’s round face flushed bright red, as if he had been slapped. “Guard your speech, sir. If ever there were a time to show proper regard for the dead and her kin, that time
is now. For Dudley can surely appoint another base-born knight to do his bidding here, but find another blood brother to Amy he cannot! Not one who is Norfolk’s Sheriff, and who will do his utmost to defend his lordship against the slander that is rising against him like a mighty tide. If you love Dudley, and honored his wife, you will tell me all that you know and that I by rights should be told. Since it is I who must countenance with all who charge that evil has been done, and that someone ought to answer for it!”

Dudley made thee sheriff, I wanted to say, and he will unmake thee, thou ungrateful knave! I bit my tongue, however, and considered the cause of Appleyard’s peppery rebuke. Twas no easy matter to be obliged to a lord who shamed your sister by openly wooing the Queen, with all the world looking on. There was more than a morsel of truth in what he said.

I put down my cup of beer. “Peace, cousin. We find ourselves here upon similar errands. Your loss is grievous. I therefore beg your pardon if I have given offense. You will find me to be open handed in my dealings with you from now on. This is what Dudley would want, and what will best serve all concerned. When your blood has cooled, however,” I added, “I shall expect you to refrain from referring to me as base born.”

This speech had the intended effect of appeasing Appleyard, a quarrelsome man who nonetheless had no stomach to do more than trade words. Before his sister married Dudley, his stepfather’s ties to the Howards allowed him to serve as gentleman usher to Thomas Howard, the third Duke of Norfolk. After the elder Howard died, his son named Appleyard to the bench, but snubbed him after his sister married Dudley, who stepped in and named Appleyard Sheriff.
of Norfolk. Whatever Appleyard thought of Dudley’s headlong pursuit of the Queen, he must 
put a good face on it.

Appleyard was a bit less red in the face, but I could see he had more to say. “What is this 
I hear of Howard Ady? Found drowned?” He says this, I thought, as if Ady had committed some 
blunder. Perhaps he had.

I took a swallow of beer and resigned myself to leaving the rest of my bread on my 
plate. “I saw them fish his corpse out of a stream near the high road. He left home riding south 
yesterday before sunup. Mayhap he was robbed, for no purse was found. He was bound for 
Norwich on business. In any case, that is what I was told by an odd little man who says he is 
Ady’s clerk.”

I did not feel moved to tell him that I had ridden to Oxford in the rain yesterday, only to 
find that Dr. Bailey had flown the coop. He left no word, and his manservant told me that he 
could not say when his master might return. As I left, the sky was clearing and a vagrant as 
ragged as an Irishman came limping toward me with his hand out, showing his begging badge. 
He was lame, but quick witted. When I showed him ten pence, he was eager to talk. Dr. Bailey 
had ridden out early yesterday, he said. He was forthcoming as well regarding Dr. Bailey’s 
visitors. Most were towns people known to him. They also included two strangers, both 
women. The first was dark-haired, and handsomely dressed. She came one morning two 
months ago. The other, who came soon after, was a beautiful young noblewoman, memorable 
for her bright red hair.
“This is all most unfortunate,” said Appleyard, although I had not asked his opinion. “Now another jury will have to be called.” He surveyed the kitchen. A servant was hunched over the hearth, building up the fire. I ignored the boy, who was simple minded.

Appleyard leaned in and lowered his voice, adopting a stage whisper. “People will say that Ady was killed not by robbers, but because he knew too much."

“What would that have been?” I said.

He shrugged. “Who can say? Only that Amy sought his services.” You can say more, but will not.

“Believing she was bewitched?” I offered. “Or that the food and drink she was given were not wholesome?”

Appleyard furrowed his brow and looked grave. “The very air she breathed was tainted. My sister was heavy with melancholy, as all here can attest. Made frantic by rumors of poisoning. A woman set upon by her husband’s henchmen has few defenders, sir, and many who wish her harm."

I thought his words rash. “If you suspect that your sister did not die by a fall, then it is your duty to hold back nothing. I have heard from Dudley, and he insists I show no favor to anyone, one way or the other. That I should seek out the truth with no regard for what persons it might touch—and see them punished if need be. I have the letter that he sent, and would have you read it for yourself.”
This only made Appleyard chuckle. “Go to, Sir Thomas. You speak as one who has never wondered whether those closest to my sister did not have a hand in her death. Think on who among the many who spend their days scheming of ways to please Dudley would not scruple at removing a petty pawn from the chessboard. Do you suffer from a brain fever that causes you to forget whom your master loves? And what he covets? That all know these things, especially those closest to him, and would do what he would not dare speak of, but to which he might consent.”

I did not like his loose talk. Dudley had sent for Appleyard to aid him, not to stir the pot of suspicion. “Marry, cousin,” I said. “I have in my day watched more than one ropewalker prance on a London stage before the actors speak their lines. Yet the rope is always strung so low that no bones will be broken if he falls, nor harm done, save to a man’s pride. Yet here upon this stage, the rope is set so high that any man who fancies himself a ropewalker, dancing upon a bit of twisted twine, could find himself toppled by a strong breeze. Or lose his nerve upon looking down, and fall so swiftly and far, that he might not rise again.”

My words had their intended effect. Appleyard drew back, his face as dark as a thunder cloud. “Do you threaten me, sir?” His voice was hard.

Each of us was done with playing with the other. “Nay, sir, for I only speak as you did, using words to draw figures. Yours of a game of chess, and mine of a merry amusement.” I noticed that Appleyard wore a sword, but he wasn’t much good with it, and we both knew it. I looked for him to attempt to wound me some other way.
The glint in his eyes put me in mind of a boy who had picked up a stick stout enough to knock down a hornet’s nest. “Very well then, Sir Thomas. Perhaps it is best to refrain from pithy posy and use plain speech. Since I came here late yesterday from Kew, all I have heard told is that you are not the meetest among Dudley’s men to stand for him in this matter, here at Cumnor Place, where the Winchells live, and where most recollect your part in the inquest sounding their daughter’s death—and how you did perjure yourself.” This he said with a gleam of satisfaction in his eye.

I smiled a cold smile, to show his words had missed their mark. “Here is where you betray your ignorance, sir, and make me wonder whether Dudley’s trust in you is well founded. For the Winchells have naught to say to condemn me. Nor did any amongst them gainsay my testimony, since I did no more than what had to be done so that Anne would not be shamed. If you seek to compare one thing to the other, look you to the heart of this recent matter, and the calumnies bruited about from here to Oxford. To wit, that your sister, Lady Amy, had an evil toy in her mind, that she forgot her duty to God, and was so consumed by bitterness that she thought to shame her own husband by killing herself.”

Appleyard did not flinch, but squared his small shoulders and thrust out his chin. “My sister was no suicide! Nor dreamt of it. She would never have placed her soul in peril, or subjected her family to the shame suffered by the kin of suicides! No matter what you say to provoke me, I know you also disbelieve that she would have committed such a crime.”

“I do not agree or disagree, for the jury is still at work. And it is their word and not mine that matters. Yet this I do know,” I said, looking straight at him, “that if Lady Amy were a
suicide, not only would Dudley suffer but thee as well, brother. For all that is hers would be
forfeit to the crown. And you, John Appleyard, would no longer be entitled as you now are to
inherit certain properties. Given all that hangs in the balance, one might wonder if you are such
a great friend of the truth, as you seem to claim.”

This infuriated him. He stepped forward the way a man does when he is about to draw
his dagger. Instead, he reached into his pouch and took out the letter. “This has become a very
vexing exchange, sir. Here is what Dudley has written to be delivered into your hands. The seal
is unbroken. He instructed me to tell you not to tarry, but to open and read it as soon you may,
and to show it to no one.” He threw the letter upon the board nearby.

“I have one more thought to share with you, and that is this,” he said, his voice as chilly
as the Thames in winter. “If you think you can account for the Dudleys in regard to the fate of
Anne Winchell, then you are sadly mistaken.” He narrowed his pale blue eyes and glared at me.
“Why don’t you ask Sir Richard Verney what part he played in the seduction of Anne, who was
with child when she died at the end of a rope. If he speaks truthfully, he will tell you that it was
not he who seduced and discarded Anne, but Robert Dudley and no other.”

He saw the dismay on my face and smiled. “Ask him! Ask Verney! He knows.” He was
fairly crowing. “How poor Anne wept and pleaded her belly and good name. All for naught! For
nothing would move Dudley to claim her bastard and admit his sins, lest it would tarnish his
precious reputation. And word of his base nature reach the ears of Princess Elizabeth, who held
him up to be the model of a gentleman! Consider, if you will, sir, how Anne grew desperate,
and threatened to tell all. What harm might have been done? And how easy a trick it was to
stop her tongue by breaking her neck, then tying a rope around it as if she had hung herself.

Then paying a jury of poor tradesmen to swear she died by chance. Think on that! And then tell me, sir, what has changed betwixt then and now?”

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After Appleyard stalked out of the kitchen, I returned to my chamber to stew. During all the years I had known Dudley, fought alongside him and shared his grief at the loss of his father and Guildford, I felt that I had come to know all that was good and bad in him. And all that was generous and petty as well. Could I truly have been so deceived? I considered riding to Kew to confront him, so that he would be forced, for once, to tell the truth about Anne and Amy. And if he would not? What was I prepared to do? To shame it out of him? Or worse? When in point of fact, I realized I still did not know what truly happened to either Anne or Amy. Who was I to believe? Appleyard, a man who had only taken what was given to him, who professed loyalty to Dudley while nursing a bitter resentment? All of that might have led him to concoct a tale of seduction and murder to infuriate me and send me off on a false trail.

I had heard tell of devious rogues who would haunt the porch at Westminster when the courts are in session, fellows who wore straw stuffed in their soles as a sign of their trade. For a fee, they would act as witnesses and give false testimony. For one lie is all that is required to overturn the truth. I sat in my room, Dudley’s unopened letter in my hand, its wax seal waiting to be cracked. How satisfying it would be to burn it, then saddle Kerwiden, and leave Cumnor Hall far behind, with nary a backward glance. Let Dudley find another knight to send on a false errand. I was done with being deceived, with lying for the Dudleys.
If Appleyard aimed to fill me with suspicion, by God’s bones, he had succeeded. For years, I had been tormented by my memory of Anne as she was when I discovered her hanging in the stables. Ever since, I found consolation in one thing only, that I lied to protect her name. Now my lies seemed monstrous. Yet not as monstrous as murdering a young girl and disguising her death as an accident. I strove to remember Dudley as he was at seventeen, when his father was king in all but name. He was the fifth son, at once vain and proud, but also jealous of his older brothers’ standing in the family, in love with a princess whom he could only serve, but never think to wed. Looking back, I could easily imagine Dudley toying with Anne with an eye to coupling with her. How easy it would have been for Dudley, the son of a lord, to turn a serving girl’s head with compliments and trinkets. What fine sport it must have been as well for Dudley to best Verney, who was also smitten with Anne, whether he would admit it or not.

And what hot-blooded young man would not have been taken with her? The moment she had been hired to work as a maid, the entire household of Dudley men had been so distracted by her iridescent beauty that Lady Jane had threatened to send her back to Abingdon. Either Verney or Dudley would have gladly plucked the sweetest peach from the bough for the sake of sheer indulgence, and to deprive a rival of bragging rights. To them, Anne was but a pretty poppet to be played with and cast aside. That I knew, and even, God help me, could forgive. What I could not believe was that Dudley, at seventeen, would have been a party to the murder of a young girl when he could have done what most sons of great men do when a conquest proves inconvenient, which is to call her a whore and turn her out, though not without making himself appear a cad in the eyes of the Princess.
Yet the same voice of reason also suggested to me that the Dudley I knew was much changed. That he had seen his family nearly destroyed, and matured into a man far more cynical and calculating. What would this Dudley do to free himself of the bonds of a cold marriage so that he might sit beside the woman he loved, sleep in her bed by night and by day wear the crown that his father failed to seize? This time, I thought, it will be different. This time, I decided, come what may, I would not lie for the Dudleys. I would learn the truth, whatever it cost me. Or at least expose as many lies as I could. I would cut through the spider web of deceit and trickery to discover whether Amy fell down the stairs, or was set upon and murdered. Not because I loved her, as I had loved Anne. I would do it to learn what sort of man Robert Dudley was and whether he was truly my friend. In the end, I thought, I would do it to learn what sort of man I was, and whether I was capable of living with the truth.

"Tis time," I said aloud, "to call up all the ghosts."

In my last letter, I told Dudley that the jury members had been very secretive and made a point of snubbing me. Nonetheless, I had heard whisperings that none among them could find evidence of evil. And a few were sorry for it, as they heartily disliked Forster and Dudley as well. I also wrote that I had been told by both Forster and Mrs. Pirgo that Amy had gone on her own to Cumnor Place to consult a cunning man named Howard Ady. That in the days before she died, and that morning especially, her humor had changed, and she was bright and almost gay, not like a woman prepared to commit self murder.

I sent another hastily written message yesterday to Kew, telling Dudley that I had gone to the village to speak with Ady. And that I was not able to do so, since he had been found dead
this Wednesday morning. That it appeared he was set upon by robbers not far from town when he left for Norwich on business, but I suspected he had been murdered. That another jury had been named to investigate, and I would advise Dudley of their findings. I heaved a sigh, and bent to pick up the letter from the floor, then sat down on my bed to read it.

_Cousin Blount:_

_Since returning in haste from Windsor, I have been in residence at Kew, and in some distress as to my prospects and what is being bruited about in my absence. Yet I am fortunate to have a few true friends at court who bring me fresh news. They assure me that the Queen greatly mislikes my absence, and is steadfast in her defense of my good name. Which is under attack from so many diverse and ignorant persons, both here and on the mainland, that I am at a loss as to how to defend myself, except to charge the jury with doing their work without interference. And finding solace in my innocence in the eyes of God, which is my greatest consolation._

_Much depends upon the finding of the jury, and so I was greatly relieved to hear that they so far think the death of my wife was the result of mischance and no other cause, and that you think the same. Yet as you know too well, my enemies are numerous and jealous of the favor shown to me, and have made threats in the past, both to my face and behind my back, and would stop at nothing to have their way. It has been my greatest fear that my good lady was killed so as to disgrace me, knowing it would be I who would be blamed and how easy a matter it is to whisper a man to the gallows. For the most vile and scurrilous rumor is the one that will be most readily believed. There can be no doubt that those who oppose me are cunning_
and capable of great evil, so that murdering an innocent woman would be as nothing to them if they judged that it would ruin my reputation.

Look to your own safety as well. For I have been told that spies in league with recusants in the north have at their command at least one man who is most dangerous, a depraved priest who is an assassin. More I cannot say in this letter, except to advise you to be ever on your guard. As you are my friend and one of the few I can truly trust, and on whose loyalty I can rely, I beg you to leave Cumnor Place as soon as you may to go to London to the house of a man whose name will be given to you by the Widow Odingsells. She will also ask that you carry a letter with you and keep it secure, telling you into whose hands it must be given. Listen to all and trust few. Weigh and sift all that you hear. I regret that I cannot be more forthcoming and pray that I have not placed too great a burden upon you. No one else is more meet to see to my affairs. I remain yours in gratitude.

From Kew on September 12, 1560

Robert Dudley

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After reading Dudley’s letter, I left my room to pay a call on the Widow Odingsells, and found her amusing herself with a deck of cards, which she shuffled rather expertly, revealing the blue lining of her slashed sleeves. I cut a graceless figure, standing as if awaiting orders, yet I did not wish to sit, although she had invited me to do so. I preferred to leave sooner rather than later. A stable boy was seeing to my horse. I decided to leave my sturdy mare behind, so
as to keep her well rested, and ride to London on Forster’s best palfrey, six hands tall with a deep chest.

Mrs. Odingsells was nicely turned out, and fit as well the description of the handsome, dark-haired woman the beggar had seen paying a call on Dr. Bailey. Her raven hair was flecked with silver, her eyes dark as rose thorns. She wore her years well, and I counted that a virtue. For I was no longer stirred by virgins who blushed and cast their eyes downward. I preferred a woman who could hold my gaze. If she would but wag a finger at me, I thought, I would do her bidding.

She gave me a frank, appraising look, inspecting me at her leisure. “Do you play cards? Or roll dice?”


“That is not what I hear, Sir Thomas. I hear you play often and well.” She smiled, and I noticed that her lips were soft and full.

I inclined my head. “I never contest with comely women.”

Next to her chamber was the apartment occupied by Mrs. Owen, whose late husband George Owen, physician to the crown, had purchased Cumnor Hall from the crown when King Henry was living. Her son, William, was rather too fond of dice and had leased the manor to Forster, who had agreed to allow the aging widow to stay on in her apartment. I had spoken to her yesterday. She remained distressed at the news of Amy’s death. Her memory, she said, was unreliable, her hearing poor. But her eyesight was still good, she assured me. She recalled only
what they ate – rabbit with parsnips and a custard for dessert – and what Amy wore. Mrs. Owen remarked that she appeared most unhappy, and also distracted. Yet she was so often out of sorts, that one hardly took notice.

The Widow laid down her cards with a flourish. “This pack is overdue to be made into matches. They want replacing, I think. The French wax their cards, you know. I prefer them because they are easy to shuffle, and last longer.” She laid down the deck and gave me her full attention. “Perhaps I spend too much time at cards. Yet there is little else to do here at Cumnor Place.”

“So I hear.”

Her manner was at once playful and knowing. “Are you one of those men who disapprove of women playing games, Sir Thomas? I hope not.” She smiled at me again, and ran her hand across the inlaid Italian tiles of the table. I was, I admit, intrigued by her every gesture. “The Queen is fond of cards,” she said, “and gambles with men, and as boldly as any of her courtiers. That is what they say. Soon it will be all the fashion for the gentry, women as well as men.”

“As you can see from my attire, madam, I must give way to my betters as regards fashion and its dictates. I know only what I may wear and do without suffering embarrassment, and no more.”

“I myself am far from au courant,” she said. “In my time, artifice was the exclusive domain of my sex. Yet these days the gallants at court preen themselves like peacocks and pin more bows to their slippers than the Queen’s gentlewomen. I hear that your master is not one
to be bested when it comes to costly attire. Still and all, a costume cannot make a man taller or his profile more elegant. And in these respects, Dudley has few rivals.”

“Again, madam, I defer to your superior judgment.”

“I must confess, I rather envy your assignment to travel to London,” she said. “Do you enjoy throwing dice now and again, Sir Thomas? I hear tell that all the most interesting persons and the choicest gossip are to be seen and heard at the dice tables.” Her tone was light, her voice as mellow as a viol. She cast another inviting glance my way. “Surely you have stood at Dudley’s side and seen him try his hand at Hazard.”

“I have.”

“Is he lucky?”

“His stars, I am told, show him to be a man destined to rise high in the world. Yet I cannot say that luck always follows him to the dice tables. He fares much better with a fishing pole.” I was pleased to see that this amused her.

“Fishing is a wholesome pastime, and quiets the mind, as well as cultivating patience. And Lord Robert is in need of both these days, no doubt.” She was quiet for a moment and became grave. “It was not very long ago that I sat here, with Lady Amy, and played cards. We used to be close, at one time, may God have mercy upon her soul.”

As a child I had been told that at the very moment the soul leaves the body, a small flame can be seen flickering outside the death house on its way to the churchyard. Mourners must follow exactly the path of the flame when they marched to the cemetery, or the ghost of
the dead woman would return to haunt them. Here I was, I thought, trying my best to follow
Amy’s dancing flame, and failing.

“I am pleased to hear that she spent some pleasant time here with you,” I said. “More
than that I could not and would not venture to say.”

“You are too kind,” she said. I watched as she rose from the deep, rustling center of
circling satin that I judged to be a French gown, laced as it was from the waist up. The skirt
opened in front to reveal a kirtle of dark green that matched the bows on her shoes. She
crossed the room, as stately as a bishop, and stood before a window that looked out upon the
courtyard. Neither of us spoke. Both perhaps thinking of Amy, and how she lay abed in the
room on the other side of the stone wall that joined the two apartments. Or brooded in the
dark, bereft of sleep. I pondered her unhappy life, filled with discord and empty of trust.

“I hope you do not think me callous or unfeeling as regards Lady Amy,” the Widow said,
hers tone confiding. “We were once as sisters to one another. Dudley asked me to keep her
company, and it was my honor to do so. We lodged together at Compton Verney, as you know.
She was miserable there, and insisted we come here, which suited me, since Master Forster is a
most congenial host. I thought it would do her good, and it seemed to for awhile. Then she
grew much worse.” She shook her head. “I did not know from one day to the next whether she
was gravely ill, or simply so distraught at all she heard touching upon Dudley and the Queen.
Her hatred for the Queen was so great, she did not even attempt to disguise it. When I tried to
cautions her, she ceased confiding in me altogether.”
For the reason that you are the Queen’s eyes and ears, I thought, but that is not what I said. "I was told she sent all the servants away on Sunday, and asked you to go as well."

“Yes,” she said. “It was most strange.”

“Do you have any idea why she would want to be alone?”

She shook her head. “None. Other than her ill humor.” I did not believe her.

“I understand that she paid a call on Dr. Bailey, that she trusted him.”

“Yes, I was told that she asked Forster for a cart and driver to take her to Oxford. She did not ask me to go along.”

“Did you ever have the opportunity to speak with Dr. Bailey?”

She tilted her head. “You are very fond of asking questions,” she said. “As to Dr. Bailey, I have not had the pleasure.” Her manner of speaking was light, but I sensed she was lying.

I considered what else I might learn from her and watched as she pulled back a heavy silken drapery and looked down into the courtyard. “There goes Richard Smith,” she said, “and the other jury men. It looks as if they are done for the day. I wonder who the authorities will round up to investigate Ady’s death.”

It was pointless to pretend that what had happened to Ady might not be connected to recent events at Cumnor Hall. “What can you tell me of her ladyship and Howard Ady?”

She took a moment to ponder my question. I admired her composure and the off hand way in which she spoke while choosing her words with care. “There are two like him in every
superstitious country hamlet,” she said. “These cunning men trade cures for firewood and favors. Forster tried to caution her ladyship about being associated with such a man—to no avail.”

“His clerk told me that Ady was a verger.”

She shrugged. “He made a good show of it. Yet all hereabouts say he was a recusant who took sacraments behind closed doors—as do many others.”

“Who might wish to kill Ady, other than a robber after his purse?”

Her demeanor changed again, and she turned to face me full on. “Someone who did not wish him to tell all he knew concerning Lady Amy, perhaps? Is that what you are asking me?”

I smiled. “Certainly. That, and whether Dudley’s wife might have had dealings through Ady with men who are Dudley’s foes.”

“Ady was a mountebank who used bowls of water to beguile the poor and simple minded. A climber who wished to make himself known to powerful men. What better way than to lend his ear to the bitter wife of the Queen’s favorite? That is what I came to suspect, and Forster as well.”

“Did you know that her ladyship owned a rosary? Mayhap it was given to her by her father or someone in her family?”

“Every other recusant thinks his soul will fly to heaven if he converts a Protestant, so that is entirely possible. But I never saw her counting beads, and am heartily glad for it. Yet to say I am amazed to hear of this is another thing. This I can tell you, Sir Thomas. That Lady Amy
did not willingly share Dudley with the Queen, nor her faith. For whatever the Queen loved or set down as law, Amy despised and defied. As for the rosary, Sir John Robsart loved the Pope well enough when King Henry did, then embraced the new religion when his king cast off the yoke of Rome. I doubt that her father would have kept such a relic, or passed it on to his only daughter.” In this regard, I thought, the Widow and I were of one mind. The rosary I found was no family heirloom, but more likely given to her by Ady.

I remembered an Amy who would have held more dear a jewel made from paste than a prayer book. Not so long ago, she thought church was a fine place to parade down the aisle in a new gown, and mouthed her prayers with no more conviction than a parrot. I myself attended church but once a month, if that. Yet if pressed, I would admit I found the teachings of the new religion more agreeable, and misliked all things Romish.

“I’ve been told that Amy’s father bent his knees to pray twice a day, as regular as the sun rising and setting,” I said. “Yet he consulted his prince first and his conscience second as to which church received his tithings. Your own uncle was such a man, and I do not think to disparage him by saying so.”

The Widow seemed pleased to be reminded of her uncle. “Sir William! There was an old fox who must have kept a rosary tucked up his sleeve while reading from the Book of Common Prayer. Think on it, Sir Thomas. Four Tudors my uncle served in his day! When Rome was in fashion one year and out the next.”

She does not mention, I thought, how her uncle burned two Protestant Bishops. Yet the Queen forgave him that, for he treated her well when she was out of favor, feting her at his
country estate, thinking no doubt of his own precious hide should the crown slip from Mary’s head. He had chosen well. Now his family was close to the crown and his niece served the Queen, and was rewarded for acting as her informant. Elizabeth did not have to depend exclusively upon Cecil for intelligence when she employed her own spies.

“I do not envy great men,” I said, “who cannot say they like cider more than beer if the king declares cider to be no better than verjuice. Or say their prayers without thinking on politics and princes.”

She gifted me with another knowing look. “You exempt yourself, Sir Thomas. When even a ewerer cannot carry water without thinking on how thirsty be his master.”

Just as you carry water for Bess, and I for Robert, I thought, which brought us round to the matter at hand. “It is my charge, as you know, Madam Odingsells, to carry your letter to London. More than that I have not been told.”

“Please stay a moment more.” She left and returned with a letter, folded and sealed, and handed it to me. “Keep it close, sir, and always on you. Go to the house of John Day in Aldgate. He will let you lodge there for the night before you make an appearance at court on Friday. One of the Queen’s gentlewomen will come to you and ask for it, using my name.” I bowed my farewell and turned to leave, bound for London on a fast horse.
Chapter Sixteen: In Print

Friday September 13, 1560

“In this glass you will behold
The starry sky and the earth so wide
The seas also with winds so cold
Yea and thyself all these to guide.”

*The Cosmological Glesse* (1559) compiled by William Cunningham, Doctor in Physic, commissioned by Robert Dudley and printed by John Day

John Day would not be still, but flitted about his place of work, fiddling with this and that, as busy as a sparrow in spring. He was, I decided, not only ill suited to quietude, but a natural foe of the sort of languor to which a man might succumb if his domicile did not sit atop a print shop. I congratulated myself on having already eaten as I watched my host inspect a metal letter no bigger than a child’s fingernail.

Satisfied, he put it back in its nest in a large wooden tray and turned to address me. “I tell you, Sir Thomas,” he said, his eyes alight with enthusiasm, “tis better to please ten thousand unlettered men than ten learned clerks. Look you here. Nary a word of all the great works printed by me is rendered in Latin. Here it is all English, blunt and rude!”

I found this declaration amusing, for only guttural Dutch was spoken by the men who worked the three presses. I had never heard such slubbering contraptions, or seen such a bustling enterprise under one roof—all in Aldgate where I landed last night after bribing a guard to permit me to enter the city after dark. I was spent and saddle weary, able to remain
upright only long enough to see my horse properly stabled before stumbling up canting stairs to the second floor, trailing after a servant with a sputtering candle. Once there, I found a stool and tugged off my muddy boots, cursing the stiff leather, before collapsing onto a narrow bed. When I opened my eyes the next morning, a small boy was staring at me. In his hand he held a wooden stock attached to a leather ball stuffed with wool. Before I could croak, the boy was yanked off his feet by a pretty hand and made to vanish in a swirl of skirts, leaving behind the scent of rosewater.

The object was an ink ball used for cleaning type, or so I was told by my host, a slender man of middling height with a black beard reaching to his chest, and thereby defying fashion that would have the beard worn short. He pranced when he walked, as if leading a troop of Morris dancers. His voice was as light as fipple flute, his words the lyrics to a composition extolling the virtues of literacy.

He swept his arm before him, as if unveiling a marvel. “This, Sir Thomas, is how we shall reach and reform the ignorant! And take back in profit the considerable sum that I have invested, and his lordship, as well.” I stood by in respectful silence as he removed his lenses and huffed on the glass with his beery breath before unfolding a piece of muslin tucked in his jerkin. He wiped his spectacles clean and restored them to their perch on his small nose. “Follow me,” he said, and marched off without looking to see if I had obeyed.

I trooped behind as he left the noisy print shop and passed through a narrow door and into a long hallway with a low ceiling. We soon came into a room full of long tables and lined with shelves. Of the many lessons life has taught me, chief among them is the necessity of
listening with due deference while my host discourses on his favorite pastime. If a gentleman is inordinately fond of silver, then a good guest is obliged to appreciate his collection of candle snuffers. Here, I thought, I must submit to a lecture on the ongoing war for the hearts and minds of Englishmen.

“Look you, sir,” said Day. “Here is the book that will bring the new religion to the common man. This volume,” he said, “and these two as well. For all three of them, Sir Thomas, I hold a seven-year patent from our Queen, may she live long and prosper. All made possible through the offices of your generous employer, who has the ear of Her Majesty.” I scanned the titles to which Day alluded. The ABC, and also The Metrical Psalms and of course, The Catechism. All were in Dudley’s library. His lordship was proud to be a benefactor and pressed me to read them, which I did, and found them to be as described—simple lessons for the moral instruction of Christian readers, in short, quite tiresome.

“Allow me to share with you this wondrous volume, which, I might add, has sold well enough to warrant a second printing,” said Day. “I have always been of the opinion that it is possible to write perfectly in our English tongue. Let it not be reviled because it stands by monosyllables. If the reader finds fault, I hope that it is for keeping the old English words rather than borrowing foreign adjectives that smell of the inkhorn!”

He strode past me to a table where a great book was laid open. “What you see before you is only the first of four volumes. This one, for instance, sets out the mathematical principles of Euclid, and this one the mysteries of navigation.”
The very name of the venerable Greek made my temples throb. As a boy, I was taxed to my limits to learn arithmetic. Dudley and Ambrose thought me a dunce when I could not keep pace with them in the study of geometry. I was more than relieved to be driven out of the classroom with many a scornful insult thrown at my back. Day plucked up a pair of white gloves and slipped them on his ink-stained hands. He hovered over the great book, *The Cosmological Glasse*, and sent his fingers walking over the pages, lifting each one and laying it down with unconcealed pleasure.

I had never met Day before that morning, yet I had oft heard Dudley speak of him—a sturdy Protestant, arrested by Mary and thrown in the Tower, only to emerge months later a free man. He did not flee London, but went back to work printing Catholic cant in this same shop in Aldgate. Those were dark days when the new thinkers either sailed to the mainland or bent their heads to some hateful task, serving Mary and Rome, waiting for the day when rebellion or some God-sent catastrophe would liberate them from spiritual bondage. Those who survived were men who called truce and made friends of foes, who lent money for favors. They dined on carp and called it salmon. Day was one of those who had learned to imitate the moon, thin then fat then thin again, new and old. They melted into the crowd of hangbys at court one year and stepped forward to kiss the king’s ring the next.

He fixed me with a look of gleeful anticipation. “Behold the title page. This from a wood cut made by one of my best Flemish carvers. The Queen is most pleased, I am told. She has granted me lifetime rights to publish, and for this I have Dudley to thank.” I was so absorbed in the mysteries of the *Cosmological Glasse* that I almost missed hearing the light footfalls made by feet clad in buskins as soft as the back of a woman’s knee.
Day spied the newcomer and greeted him warmly. “Ah, Sir Richard! Welcome! This day, as you see, marks the inaugural visit by your old friend to my place of business. I have imposed upon him, but to a greater purpose. That being the inspection of this marvelous manuscript.” A diamond earring on Verney’s left lobe winked as he looked over my shoulder. Just once, I thought, I would like to be the one to take Sir Richard by surprise.

“I have no doubt that Sir Thomas would much prefer your erudite company, Master Day,” said Verney. “Unlike the denizens of Whitehall, he is no lover of show. Moreover, he is among the fortunate few who have looked upon our Queen from both near and far, and so is not likely to be struck dumb upon beholding Her Majesty, who, as we speak, is still at prayer.”

“Would that I could see her,” said Day, sounding wistful, “and give thanks for all the manifold blessings God has bestowed upon our once wretched nation. I hear she is most subtle in her speech, and fluent in Greek as well as Latin, though here we champion the cause of our plain native tongue.”

“One more blessing,” I said, “for one such as I, for whom instruction in Latin proved soporific. When I cannot sleep, I need only call forth the ghost of our dead tutor to usher me through the door of dreams.”

“Veni, vidi, dormivi,” said Verney, “was young Blount’s motto.” Even I could translate that. I came, I saw I slept.

Master Day clapped his small hands. “Enough! I shall leave you to it.” He rushed off, calling over his shoulder. “I hope it suits you to sup with me and my good wife this evening. Our table is not sumptuous, but no one leaves wanting more.”
He vanished, leaving Verney and me alone, keeping our uneasy truce. “Welcome to the London, Sir Thomas. A man has been sent to your room with fresh raiment, so you may make yourself presentable, or passably so.”

I could not recall the Latin, yet I knew well the proverb, “Where God has a church, the Devil will have his chapel.” Seeing Verney reminded me of everything Appleyard had told me. Why did Dudley keep him on, except to act as his stalking horse?

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“They say she is the image of her father.” This from behind me. We had been waiting for two hours.

“What else?” replied his companion. “For who would dare compare the Queen to her mother?” Was this remark accompanied by a smirk, I wondered? Or perhaps it carried a note of caution, for the Queen was much like old Henry, and therefore inspired both awe and fear in equal measure.

All were weary of standing shoulder to shoulder, but still eager to catch a glimpse of Queen Bess. Feet shuffled and men and women chatted to pass the time. The murmuring all about me and heat from a hundred warm bodies made me yawn. I blinked to stay awake, and was revived by a great honking of trumpets that announced the arrival of the first dignitaries. All grumbling ceased and tresses were smoothed in haste as the royal retinue moved grandly into the hall. A solemn procession of Barons, Earls and sundry gentlemen came stepping forward, all richly attired and bareheaded, followed by the Chancellor bearing the seals of state in a red silk purse.
I wondered who among these knights could still wield a battle axe, if any ever had. All eyes looked past this spangled phalanx to be the first to see Her Majesty, who did not disappoint. She was then as she would always be—the source of all air and light filling the gilded Presence Chamber. Bodies bustled and bumped into me as the crowd pressed forward, the better to look upon Elizabeth herself, protected by her Yeoman of the Guard, clothed in scarlet, a rose stitched in golden thread upon each broad back.

I was a head taller than all about me and commanded an unobstructed view of the young Queen. Her bosom was uncovered, for the Queen at twenty-seven remained a maid. I studied her as if seeing her for the first time, the better to decide whether she was truly lovely or simply done up to dazzling perfection. Her nose I judged to be a bit hooked but noble, her forehead high, and her complexion unblemished and pale. Her mouth was small yet perfect. Her red hair was arranged in a delicate frizzle about her face. Upon her head sat a small silver crown. That day she was resplendent in black silk bordered with pearls the size of beans. Over that she wore a handsome black mantle shot through with silver threads. Her long train was born by a Marchioness. The effect was one of magnificence. Wherever she turned, men went down on their knees before her, and she paused and spoke mildly and with courtesy. Her gentlewomen followed, also dressed in black, for the court was in mourning for Lady Amy.

No one was deceived by this ceremonial display of sorrow. “All that dolor! And not a whit of it for poor Lady Amy,” I heard one gallant harrumph. “Tis Dudley’s absence that causes her to grieve.”
“Her Master of the Horse has been stabled at Kew, where he paws at the dirt like an unsplayed stallion,” another wag chirped.

“Twere better for all if she had him gelded,” said the first. “The Duke and the rest cannot put up with him being named king.” The Duke, of course, was Dudley’s arch rival, Thomas Howard, the Fourth Duke of Norfolk, grandson of the Queen’s great uncle, who despised Dudley’s father. That is how it is with powerful men. They confer titles, lands and also grudges.

I could not help but marvel at Dudley’s temerity. The wolves at court were circling and howling for his blood. Only the threat of the Queen’s wrath prevented them from savaging him. Norfolk and his pack were waiting for the moment when Dudley would be abandoned and defenseless. The best sport to be had at Whitehall those days was making jests at Dudley’s expense, knocking his name about as if it were a tennis ball. I let them. My task was not to make a show of bravado. My purpose was to be noticed by one person only, one of Elizabeth’s gentlewomen.

Like all common men, I too silently judged the Queen. At that moment, I was amazed to find myself full of admiration. For the rumor mongers all declared her to be in thrall to pleasure seeking, and claimed that her dalliance with a married man had made her an object of scorn, heedless to the rumors swirling about her like bats at dusk. Her detractors predicted that she would wait only a short while before marrying a murderer, which was sure to prove her undoing. Her reign, they declared, would be brief. She was destined to spend her last days in the Tower, occupying the same apartment as her mother, the adulterer.
Yet the Queen I saw appeared undaunted and entitled to command. My cynicism vanished at the first sight of her and I was stirred by her dignity and regal composure. Even then, I would have followed her into battle more readily than many a cocksure Duke. I knew why Dudley had risked all to stand in her charmed inner circle, surrounded though it was by darkness and ruthless foes.

Hovering nearby, as sharp-eyed as a kestrel, was William Cecil, one of the old flock from Hatfield. He has done well for the son of a sheriff, I thought. He and his numerous kin had sprung up from the Welsh Cecils of Hertfordshire, border land stamped with Norman castles and blooded by raiders. I studied his wide, white forehead, his pale hair and long, bony nose with its sharp ridge. There was a man, I thought who would pile up vast stone ramparts and would not scruple to spill blood to defend the crown. I was sure I detected in his upright carriage the posture of a man whom fortune had favored.

Dame Fortune is ever fickle, beckoning with a wink and a soft glance, then spitting in a man’s face when he reaches out to take what she offers. The Queen summoned Cecil to her side with a look. He approached, full of deference. Elizabeth, the figure of Dame Fortune herself, demanded obeisance sweetened with compliments. It was her due. Cecil bent his head, his manner solicitous and grave. He was the embodiment of the sage advisor, loyal to the Queen and no one else. Yet that was a lie. For no man is loyal only to his mistress. With the right hand, he serves, with the left, he snatches crumbs from the cake for himself. On this day at least, Cecil was pleased. With Dudley banished, none dared to stand betwixt him and Elizabeth.
Another worthy approached, flanked by gentlemen retainers, who fell back and let the young Duke emerge from their ranks. All gilded and shiny was Tom Howard—his yellow-red hair and beard a shade darker than the twin chains of gold looped across his satin waistcoat. His fair, narrow head sat upon a white ruff that made his ears appear a bit large. Still, I thought, he is all Howard and handsome. He took long strides, head titled forward, chin tucked in as if charging, his shoulders made broad by padding and hides. Even from a distance, I caught his scent, which was feral and sharp, like the sweat that comes off men going into battle, but disguised by unguents of clove combed into his beard, and the pungent odor of Italian dyes and musky furs.

Instinctively, I found that I did not wish him to triumph over Dudley at the very moment when his lordship was at his weakest. There is seldom, nay almost never, such as thing as a fight that is fair. Still, I was pricked by indignation for Dudley. Why should golden Tom charge about on an empty jousting field while Dudley, banished to Kew, must drink deep from the cup of disgrace? The Queen is the prize in this contest, I thought. She must marry. All agree, but to whom? To an Englishman of high birth or a foreign prince? Whoever was to be her husband must first woo her. He must send gifts, envoys and letters. All of her suitors brought gold and pedigrees. Yet who among them could rival Dudley the man? I had learned something of the art of wooing by watching my master. Dudley made fools of his rivals with his tireless yet careless pursuit. He never ran when he could saunter, or brayed like an ass when he could lower his voice, inviting his lovely listener to lean in to catch each word.

I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, though both were sore, and wondered how much longer I must wait like a sentry on duty. The crowd began moving, recasting itself as
some fell back and others found their place in the line that was forming to petition the Queen, when I noticed that the space next to me was taken up by a silken someone. I glanced down into the upturned face and clever eyes of Blanche Parry. I might have known. Who better? I smiled, genuinely pleased to see her. I would rather rest my eyes upon her gentle countenance than upon a brace of pretty young ladies. She did not extend her hand to be kissed, a sign that discretion was more important than formalities.

She continued to look straight ahead. “Would you be so kind, Sir Thomas, as to join me in the Privy Chamber gardens? Near the sundial.” The one that tells time thirty ways. How fitting, I thought. “You will find that the gate is unlatched,” she added. “I believe you know the way.”

I did, having stood nearby on more than one occasion, discretely out of ear shot, while Dudley and the Queen sat and talked, their voices blending into the tweets of recorders and woodwinds drifting down from a nearby balcony, the air scented with incense and the sea-salty breath of the Thames below.

“Do not be dismayed if you do not see me at first,” she prompted. “Tarry a bit, and I shall join you. Do not think of leaving until we speak, and speak with no other.”

“Gladly will I wait for thee, Mistress Blanche, to the end of time, if need be.”

“Go to, sir!” she said, favoring me with a small smile. “And mind your back. Whitehall is home to a multitude of lurkers and blackguards disguised as gentlemen, many of whom bear your master ill will.”
“Wise I may not be, Mistress Blanche, but no fool either. I carry no sword, but have not come to court entirely naked.” I drew back my cloak, revealing the hilt of a dagger tucked in my belt. I did not show her the large kitchen knife I had slipped inside the sleeve of my boot before leaving Day’s house.

“Do not follow fast on my heels, but linger,” she said. “The last glimpse you have of me will be your signal to find your way to our rendezvous from the opposite point on the compass.”

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I set out as she instructed, taking a way unfamiliar to me. It was not long before I was hopelessly lost and cursing my stupidity. I had been away much too long from this labyrinth of damp corridors and stairs that seemed to lead nowhere. I have always loathed the stone monstrosity that is Whitehall. Each step seemed to take me farther into the grim heart of that treacherous maize and further from my quest to learn how Amy died.

Once again, I felt reduced to the role of errand boy at the very court where Amy was forbidden to show her face, for it was too lovely a face by far. When I thought on it, I marveled at how Dudley’s rightful wife spent more time in that gloomy Norman fortress visiting her husband the prisoner than ever she did dining in high style with the resurrected Sir Robert at Kew. I doubted anew that I would ever learn how she died. For her entire life was a cypher to me. However, I could not abandon my quest. More than ever, I pitied her and her terrible luck to have married a man who fancied the Queen.
I rounded another corner, hoping to meet a servant who had stolen away to tipple and who could set me aright. Instead, a most unwelcome spectacle greeted me—a trio of villains blocked my path. Their leader was a cocky knave, dressed as a gentlemen and flanked by two ruffians, one tall and the other stout, both armed with dueling swords. I knew these two, not by name but by type, posturing rogues keen to cudgel an unarmed man, spoiling for a fight if the odds were in their favor. I fell back, and picked up a heavy stone from a pile of rubble, hoping to deceive them into thinking I was unarmed. At a pinch, a stone can stop a sword or splinter a bone. I have cracked more than one French skull with a rock when no other weapon was at hand.

“Perhaps you have lost your way?” said the knave, affecting nonchalance and stroking his short black beard. “For you look to be out of compass. You shall be out of heart shortly, and luck as well.”

Everything about this fellow irked me, and I was in no mood to be trifled with. “Not a whit, sirrah,” I said, “whoever thou are. I have heart aplenty.”

“Yet we have steel, which you lack,” he said, expecting to see me quail. “More than one adventurer has lost his way herein, never to be discovered. A careless man might be killed and planted in these dim passages, or tossed into the Thames for fish bait, with no one the wiser.”

I was unimpressed by his posturing and felt it only fair to warn him. “By the body of Christ, sir, thou are over bold. Do not think to interfere with me. I advise you to step aside, so I may go on my way.” Both of the swordsmen were young, and likely untried. They wore fixed sneers, but I sensed their hesitation. If I could wound one, the other would lose his nerve.
“I hear tell that you are a man who deals in weighty matters, as am I,” said the knave.

“You have on your person something that we would see.”

I glowered at him. “You shall soon be gazing at the back of your eyelids if you think to molest me, sir.” Nothing they had done inspired any fear in me, for most of the rogues who brandish swords at court are mere posers.

“I see that you mistake us for common cutthroats,” said the knave, affecting the airy ways of a man of good breeding. “I am defamed, sir, for we come in good faith. For your one piece of parchment, we shall pay you well. Our business transacted, you may go on your merry way with nary a hair of your beard out of place. I dare say that your master will not pay you as much in a year.”

True, I thought. Still, I would not be bought. “I would rather be a bankrupt in Ludgate than trade with rogues who shed their conscience as vipers do their skin.”

He sighed, feigning remorse. “What a tedious fellow you are, sir—a rustic upon a hobby horse who fancies himself a knight. I have done my best to persuade you, but you will not be taught, I see, except at sword point.”

This was the cue for his roisters to come at me, but I had already made my move, retreating round a corner and slipping into a dark alley to my right that I passed just moments before. There I waited, my back pressed against a stone wall, one hand gripping the large kitchen knife, its handle still warm from its resting place between my leg and the sleeve of my boot. The two swordsmen gave chase as I knew they would, eager and panting, then came to a halt, surprised to survey an empty passageway. I watched while the pair of them cast about like
hounds confused by a broken scent trail, until the tall one glanced to his right and spied me. Not troubling his brain too much about what I might be up to, he rushed forward, heedless and unprepared to dodge a blade thrown at close range.

Before I left, I had sharpened the stolen kitchen knife, and it pierced both his jerkin and flesh, lodging in his ribcage near his heart. The swordsman halted, a look of surprise on his face, and let fall his weapon, which struck the stone floor with a clatter. I had seen other men die this way, disbelieving, their blood spilling out on the ground. The knave and the other swordsman were expecting to see me skewered, and this setback left them gawking. Timing is everything, I thought, as I retrieved the dying man’s sword and took up an offensive pose. The rapier felt light in my hands. It wasn’t much of a weapon.

Still, it is not the sword but the man who holds it that matters. “Come at me again,” I said, “and I shall run you through. Or you can go tup a whore and rot your brains in a tavern, pleasures of which your friend here will no longer partake.” The knave with the black beard stepped forward, pushing past the stout swordsman.

He frowned and used the toe of his shoe to prod the dying man, who made no noise. “Pity,” he said, “but have no fear. We’ve ten more who are better with a blade. You have bought yourself a bit of time, Sir Thomas, no more. If we find you again, things won’t go so well for you.” The stout swordsman said nothing, but spat at the ground. I returned the favor and bit my thumb.

I stared at their retreating backs until they rounded a corner in the distance. Then I examined the dead man’s weapon. A Spanish rapier, by the look of it—the blade imported and
then hilted in England. Well made, but too light, meant for dancing and thrusting. I prefer a blade that is wider and much heavier, for knocking a man off his horse. I decided to keep the rapier, however, at least until I found my way back to more populous precincts. I peered into the gloom, uncertain as to which direction to take and listened for any sound that might tell me how near I was to the river. I felt the sucking pull of fresh air moving past me from a nearby passageway and decided to trust my nose. I slipped my hand underneath my cloak and laid it upon the letter, which was of no value to me or the dead man.

“What an ass you are,” I said, “to die for a piece of paper.”

“Why don’t you read it?” I started and raised my blade, for the question was clear but the speaker invisible. A sly laugh made me grimace when I recognized the voice.

To my left, the taunting face of Verney emerged from the shadows. “Well done, Sir Thomas. I thought for a moment I might have to intercede on your behalf. But you were never truly in danger. I dare say the three of them could not best you in a fair fight.”

“It is always a mistake to surprise a man when he has a weapon in his hand, Verney.” I lowered my sword. “You were following me!”

“Most certainly, for your own good, at Dudley’s behest, lest you think to rebuke me.” He paused to study the corpse. “One of Howard’s boys, I should think. Seeking to impress and failing. I expect they’ll be back for him. In the meantime, it’s best to tidy up a bit.” He bent and pulled my blade from the body, and wiped it on the dead man’s breeches before holding it up for inspection. His meddling with the corpse meant nothing to me then. Yet too often we see in retrospect the darker meaning of a little thing we dismissed as it went by.
His eyes widened with amusement. “A kitchen knife? To kill a man? Were you thinking of roasting and carving him as well? When you set out to kill me, I insist you use a proper dag, as befits a knight.”

“I shall do my best to oblige,” I said, and meant it.

“As I recall, you used to carry a fine dag, blooded in France. It had a vicious point on it.”

“I have it with me still,” I said. “Day and night.” I could kill him now, I thought. Yet neither of us was quite finished with the other.

Verney tossed the knife on the ground at my feet. “The cutler you robbed may miss it.” I hesitated, then bent to retrieve the crude blade, and tucked it in my boot, keeping my eyes on Verney and saying a silent prayer for the soul of the dead man, so his ghost would not visit my dreams. Verney too had a dag on him, I was quite sure, a Venetian stiletto, thin and deadly, for finding the seams in a knight’s breastplate.

“Sadly for you,” he said, “the Queen does not permit courtiers to carry broadswords at court. Now sir, if you will but follow me, we can put some distance between ourselves and all this. The air improves a bit as well nearer the river, which is not so foul this time of year.” I said nothing, but followed behind, since he had chosen the passageway that smelled of the Thames.

“The Queen disdains the odor of over-full jakes,” said Verney, glancing back at me. “She has placed at her command a small army of porters who do nothing but dig pits and empty piss pots. Davie diker could go far at this court, though doomed like Sisyphus to toil endlessly, albeit shoveling turds instead of rolling stones uphill.”
“He would be the rare honest man employed here,” I said. “For all the rest are spies and intriguers who corrupt the air with their stink.” I made no effort to disguise my disgust. Verney stopped and turned, and I could see he was about to hold forth. He loved the sound of his own voice. All his spoken sentences were merely the sums of endless calculation, yet he sometimes gave himself away.

“Come now, Sir Thomas. Who are you to disdain the schemers who trade in secrets and petty sorceries? If they be spies instead of malt men, tis no fault of theirs. An honest man, after all is said and done, is born a dunce and dies a dupe, destined to shovel shit for his betters. As you well know, sir, fraud has been mankind’s lot since Lucifer deceived Eve. Look high and low, and you’ll not find a collier who does not weight his sack with dust, nor a vintner who mixes no water with his wine.”

He paused as if intent on searching for the choicest words to make his point. “The error you make, Thomas, is to think yourself a knight, when you are but an actor in a comedy whose script has been penned by an unseen hand. The only way to put an end to this farce is for you to crack the seal and read the letter. You could easily claim that it was broken when you were set upon by cutthroats.”

“So you know of the letter,” I said, testing him. “And to whom it will be delivered as well?”

“Indeed. Written by the comely widow, spy for the Queen, to be delivered to Mistress Blanche, the hand that rocked the royal cradle. Official receiver of gifts, keeper of the Queen’s jewels and secrets, which she keeps tucked up her sleeve or concealed between her bodice and
stays. As I recall, you have more luck with older women. With a bit of persuasion on your part, she may let you have a peek.”

I ignored his insolence. “Do you know what it concerns?”

He turned and resumed walking. “I do.”

“But not what it says,” I replied, talking to his back. “And you know better than to try to take it from me.”

He held up one hand, as if testing the wind. “I have my own ideas, sir. As you have yours. Have I underestimated your resolve? You are of a sudden incurious as to who murdered Lady Amy?” He turned to address me directly. “For this letter, I am sure, holds a vital clue, perhaps even the names of the killers, and therefore touches upon his lordship’s guilt or innocence. For on these things hang the fate of our unwed Queen and her crown.”

I kept my distance, and eyed him, lest he thought to test me. “I have of late,” I said, “been more preoccupied with the past. To put a finer point on it, since you look to set me aright, I would have you first be straight with me.”

He assumed a bored expression and blinked, as one forced to humor a dull companion who insists upon telling a tedious story. “Regarding?”

“Anne Winchell, Dudley and yourself.”

“Ah yes, the fair Anne, moldering in her grave lo these many years. What is it you wish to know, or have begun, somewhat dimly, to suspect?”
I checked my temper, making my voice cold as well water. “Whether you were her seducer, Verney, or someone else.”

“You have, I take it, struck your name from the list, since you were not her prick.” Let him play his games, I thought. I shall pin him down, by force, if need be.

I bristled. “I was not, as you well know.”

“Though you ardently desired to be, no doubt dreamt of confessing your devotion and winning her affection. Yet alas, twas not meant to be! Constrained as you were by foolish notions of gallantry, hobbled by your own high-minded reticence. If you had only known, as did the rest of us, that your simpering virgin was a secret wonton—a maid best described as unchaste. Or rather, she had been chased and caught. Pinched by the heels! Not by a school boy such as you, who would have gone down before her, cap in hand, to profess true love. But by a man who had but to beckon to bed her.”

Once this sort of talk would have maddened me. No longer. I was prepared for it and determined to rob Verney of the satisfaction of seeing me writhe. “Your jibes are all dribbled shot, and do not touch me. I will not be goaded, but I will hear you admit that it was you, and all that you know of what took place after.”

I was more than surprised when he brightened, as if he had been waiting for this moment. “This much I shall tell you, Thomas, fully and freely. The festering grudge against me that you have all these years held inviolate was not only ill founded, but undeserved. In short, it was not I who ruined Anne. As to what happened afterward, you know more of that than do I.”
My grip tightened upon the dead man’s sword. “I do not believe you, Verney,” I said, “or credit a word that leaves your lips. Not only because you are an inveterate deceiver, but also because you have remained silent all these years. If it was not you,” I said, stepping forward, “why did you never seek to dissuade me as to your guilt?”

He laughed, but took care to keep his distance. “Believe me? Belief has naught to do with it. I do not need to exert myself to persuade you, Thomas. Look to your own veiled memory. You have finally come to the truth, or it to you, after all these years. You knew it was not me before you asked! You have known all along. You simply never wanted to open your eyes and see it! To know whom it is you serve and what sort of man Dudley truly is.” He paused, savoring the sight of me wallowing in confusion. I felt my resolve melting like wax in the sun.

“Surely you remember that day,” he said, “and the letter? How angry Warwick was when he read it and found out it was Robert who seduced Anne?” A dim memory of an enraged Warwick shouting behind the closed door of his study came to my mind, along with whispered rumors about a letter written by Anne.

Verney stepped back to see the effect of his words, regarding me with contempt, his face suffused with satisfaction. “As to why I did not try to dissuade you, that is yet another mystery within your power to solve without sifting me.”

I was stunned. Could Verney be telling the truth for once? If Dudley had seduced Anne, Warwick might have made Verney take the blame. If that were the case, it would also explain
why Dudley had kept Verney in his employ all these years. I tried to protest, but I was as stupefied as a dog with a bone stuck in his throat.

“At a loss for words, I see,” said Verney. “Alas! I have so enjoyed our little chat about old times. Yet it is here we must part company. Keep to your right, Thomas, and you shall soon find the garden and Mistress Blanche.”

I stood as one transfixed and watched Verney walk away, before he hesitated, and performed a graceful about face.

“Ah! I should mention,” he said. “When you speak with the Queen’s aged nursemaid, she will insist that Elizabeth cannot be tied to the messy matter of the dead Lady Amy. If you were to hand her a Bible, she would not hesitate to take an oath in defense of her royal mistress. Do not be misled, Thomas,” he said, wagging his finger. “The Queen is in this more deeply than Dudley, so deep that she is sunk in guilt past her pretty ankles. But wait, I misspeak!” He assumed a thoughtful expression. “I have painted the wrong picture entirely. Upon further reflection, I see the Queen as one amused by the sight of a spider weaving its silken web in her garden, when a passing butterfly chances to light upon one silvery strand. The web quivers, and the web maker comes scuttling, while she who watches from her window looks on and does not blink as the spider does its dirty work.”

I stole into the sunlit garden like a ghost, keeping to the shade provided by lengthening shadows. Rounding a corner, I saw Mistress Blanche, her back to me, sitting upon a bench, her small shoulders squared. Not a loose stitch to be seen, nor hair out of place. She might be
mistaken for a much younger woman, I thought. Yet I knew her to be in her fifth decade, unwed and childless, an aging maid. Anyone who underestimated her did so at his peril.

Before I could speak, I was taken aback by the sight of a small pointed face that peeped out from beneath the heavy hem of Mistress Blanche’s skirt, under which it vanished. A creature black and white, with a nose like a weasel and ears like a mouse. It was the Queen’s musk cat, tethered by a leather lead fastened to a necklace of silver rings that jingled as the little brute made another appearance, his snout set between tiny paws as he peered over Mistress Blanche’s right shoulder. Alerted by the creature’s antics, she turned and smiled warmly.

I bowed. “Good day, my lady. I regret having kept you in suspense. I was delayed through no fault of my own.”

She let me approach and kiss her hand before scolding me. “Spare me your reverences and excuses, sir. I have aged a year waiting for you.”

“So now you are age five and twenty, old enough to wed.”

She gave me a sly look. “Do you make a proposal?”

“I would, assuredly, but for fear of rejection. Lest I cast out my heart only to see it flung back at me like offal.”

“Come, sir,” she said. “Sit you down beside me, and we shall see whether you suit me. I promise there shall be no abuse of tender organs.”
I looked at her askance. “Sit? And risk being bitten by your tame weasel if I draw too near!” I found a place on the bench and dropped down more heavily than I intended. The sun had warmed the seat of the marble bench, streaked with swirls of pinkish-grey and white. All was regal perfection here in the Queen’s garden. No floppy gilly flowers or winsome daises nodded their heads. Instead, my eyes were amazed at every turn by blood-red roses, hedges trimmed into fantastic shapes, and gilded columns adorned with the carved heads of grotesque beasts. Colorful flower knots divided broad paths set in geometric order. I tried to shrug off the mantle of gloom I wore like a patched cloak, but failed. The musk cat sniffed my sleeve, and I pulled my arm away.

“Tis the Queen’s pet,” she said. “And no threat to thee, thou overgrown bullock of a man. I thought you more brave! But never mind. I see in your face some small woe. Perhaps you would care to unwrap your sorrows.”

I grunted, and smiled wanly. “You see before you a scarecrow, stuffed with straw and set in a field to frighten off crows.”

I felt a flickering movement near my breast and looked down in time to see the musk cat vanish beneath my cloak. “By the blood of Christ! Your infernal varmint thinks to make a nest in my best doublet. And you are too busy chortling to rescue me!”

“Be still and cease your grumbling.” Mistress Blanche tugged gently on the lead until the little brute’s head popped out and the rest of him slithered after, silver necklace tinkling as she set him down upon her rose-colored lap, dappled with shadows in the shape of leaves.
“Never mind him,” she cooed. “What a silly man! Afraid of a little cat.” Mistress Blanche’s eyes shone with pleasure. “He was only taking a peek to see if you carry a letter for his mistress.”

“He stinks of musk,” I said, pulling back my cloak to extract the letter. “As for this, I am delighted to be rid of it. It has caused me a good deal of trouble.”

“Another complaint!” She eyed me with mock disapproval, then softened. “Yet it is true that not all burdens that we carry can be weighed with a brass bell.”

I watched her fold the letter in half and slip it beneath her wrist band and into her stuffed sleeve. “By my troth, you have bombast enough in that sleeve for a library if all the rest of it be parchment.”

“Never you mind what I keep up my sleeve, Sir Thomas. That is my affair.”

“You did not first inspect the seal?”

“To see if it had been broken? No need for that,” she replied. “You and I understand one another. We are not spies, but servants. We love to serve, and serve those whom we love.”

“Truly, my lady? Is it that simple?” My tone suggested I did not find it so.

“Simple? Never! If your hair were not already pale as a whale’s tooth, it would be white by now, given all you’ve seen. If you ever desire a glimpse of your future, you need not consult an astrologer, but merely gaze upon this aged brow etched by worry and perpetual care.”

“You have done well for yourself, madam. Far better than most.”
“Do not change the subject. We were speaking of you. It would be a dull sort of fellow who carries messages hither and yon and does not trouble himself about the matter at hand. I know you well enough. You are no airling. Your words are light but your thoughts are heavy.”

She had found me at a low point, and I saw no harm in admitting my failings. “The more I learn, the less I know what to think, or to do. How is it that you are so serene when all about cry scandal and conjecture woe for the Queen?”

“I have learned,” she said with conviction, “to shut my ears and trust my heart.”

“And what does your heart tell thee, madam?”

“That the Queen will endure. That her conscience is clear, her soul unsullied.”

I was not consoled, and felt myself sinking further into gloom, if that were possible. For I wished I could say the same of Dudley. At the same time, Verney’s mocking voice intruded into my thoughts. *She will make out that the Queen cannot be tied to this affair.* I turned my attention back to Mistress Blanche, who was no longer looking at me, but straight ahead, as if addressing an invisible jury.

“The Queen is blameless in this matter, of that I am sure,” she said, her voice clear and her expression untroubled. “Unless she is to be indicted for her poor taste in men and loyalty to those whom she loves. Do not fear, Thomas. Her Majesty will never permit the wicked engine of scandal to break to pieces her kingdom, nor shake the crown from her head. Neither will she abandon Dudley—if only because it would be what his enemies most wish.”
I admired her fortitude, a quality I lacked. “Your resolve should give me heart, Mistress Blanche. Yet your stirring defense of your mistress does not include my master.”

She sniffed. “I will not pretend that I would not have chosen someone else for the Queen. I have said as much, time and again, and learned to save my breath. I pray every day that the Queen will marry and give us a prince. All those who foretell her downfall predict she will choose your master. But I fear she is loathe to share her crown with any man. The day may come when all of England, myself included, may wish she had married anyone at all, even Robert Dudley.”

“You touch on every topic except the one that matters most.” I was in deadly earnest, but she only chortled and patted my hand. Her palm was as dry as a leaf. “Oh my dear, what am I do with you?”

“I have said something to amuse you?”

“Do you think it matters, Sir Thomas, how Lady Amy died? Or by whose hand?”

I was dismayed. “I confess that I do! As do the men of the jury, the Court of Assizes and most of England.”

“Only one thing matters,” she said, her chin held high, “and that is what the Queen wants. Lord Burghley knows what is required and has done his part as well.” Mistress Parry came from Welsh stock and was a first cousin to Cecil. Most likely the two of them often put their heads together to decide what was best for the Queen.
She looked at me rather sternly, as if correcting a wayward child. “I have told you that she will not renounce Dudley, though many wish she would, with Lord Burghley chief among them. But since she will not, it follows, ipso facto, that Lady Amy must have died by misfortune, and no other cause. That she suffered a dizzy spell and tumbled down a pair of stairs. And will be buried with great ceremony and mourned by few. And that,” she said, “is not sad at all. For Lady Amy was not as innocent as most have made her out to be.”

I was not sure what to make of this last statement, since she was implying that Amy was to blame for what had happened to her. “Dudley believes his wife was slain by his enemies to destroy his reputation and his chances of marrying well.”

“Is that what he tells you?” She cut her eyes my way. “Perhaps he is right. Yet where is the proof? More to the point, the very men Dudley blames are peers beyond reproach. You know that as well as I. Unless of course, the Queen chooses to move against them, and that she will not do! Why should she? What has she to gain? All would cry out that she is persecuting the innocent to protect the guilty.” She shook her head. “Nay, sir. She will not be so easily lured into a trap or frightened into fanning the flames of scandal. She will thwart these schemers, however. If they aim to force her hand, to cause her to flee from Dudley as from the plague, they will not succeed.”

She rearranged her skirt, smoothing out creases that were not there. “Besides,” she said, “the Queen must reckon with a host of threats far more deadly, vicious assassins who lurk in the shadows, waiting to strike. As we speak, one of these vermin has been run to ground and
finds himself resting his head upon a stone pillow in the Tower. I think you may have met him, or at least heard of him.” She glanced at me, as if suggesting she might say more if pressed.

“Do you know how he was found out? Or better yet, his name?”

“To that I must first say, no, I do not. But also, yes. Since he is called Nokes.” She looked as pleased as a cat dropping a dead mouse at its master’s feet. Father Nokes! The same man that Cave feared, and who likely killed Ady as well, no doubt to silence him.

“I do know of him,” I said. “I saw him once, lurking about in Abingdon.”

“Mark my words, Sir Thomas,” she said, her voice commanding my full attention. “Are you aware that he conspired with Lady Amy to kill Dudley? And that is why she sent her servants away on Sunday, and did her best to banish Mrs. Odingsells as well?” Her accusation was astonishing, yet it made sense, and explained everything that took place that day, except why Amy had been killed instead of Dudley.

“Do you have proof?”

“A confession,” she said, “is very good proof.”

The implication was clear. Nokes had been roughly handled and confessed to scheming with Amy to murder her husband. Yet Dudley was alive and his wife lay dead.

“If Dudley was the target, then why was Lady Amy murdered?” Yet as soon as the words were out of my mouth, I realized that Nokes must have deceived Amy. She thought she had the backing of Dudley’s enemies, but she had been betrayed.
Mistress Blanche produced a silk handkerchief and touched it to her cheek, as if the air were too warm. This was only a performance, for she was as calm as a deep lake on a windless day. “Nokes has admitted he never intended to kill Dudley,” she said. “That was a merely a ruse to get at Lady Amy. The foolish girl opened the door to her own assassin.”

Dudley had been right all along! Who else but his enemies would have conspired to kill his wife and let him take the blame? Mistress Blanche’s message to me was clear. The Queen would not pursue this, other than to punish the murderer in secret. Amy’s death would be ruled a mishap and all that led up to it kept quiet. The Queen would not take on the most powerful men in her kingdom to avenge a wife whose treachery brought on her own destruction.

All these thoughts and more assailed me. Mistress Blanche was so far ahead of me, I felt as if I were panting as I ran to catch up. “Then this letter reveals the names of the men who hired Nokes?”

“I would not care to speculate,” she said, laying down her handkerchief. At that moment, I would not have been amazed to see her make it vanish, for the woman was more clever than a magician.

“Does Dudley know of this?”

“The Queen will never tell him,” she said, “and neither should you.” We both let this statement hang in the air a bit, for we knew that Dudley would only cause trouble if his suspicions were confirmed. And to what end? If Dudley were told now, it would set off an explosion that would rival the most colorful Italian fireworks. Far better to let a bit of time pass.
The Queen would talk some sense into him. He would be aggrieved, as was his due, but would keep the peace.

Mistress Blanche seemed to be reading my thoughts. “Still,” she said, “he is no fool, your Dudley. I wager he will manage to fit all of the pieces together. But by that time, the Queen will have persuaded him that it is in his best interests to agree with the jury’s finding of death by misfortune.”

I had one more question. “How much does Sir Richard Verney know?”

“That scoundrel?” She raised her eyebrows. “A great deal, I should think. He might even have had a hand in it. Without a doubt he has been telling everything he learns to Lord Burghley, hoping to impose upon his good graces if Dudley falls out of favor.” It was just as I suspected. Verney was no true friend to Dudley. He may have helped set the trap for Amy. At the very least, he was spying on Dudley for Cecil. It was all a game to him, and he was gambling that Dudley would lose.

I thanked Mistress Blanche most sincerely, and reassured her of my loyalty to the Queen.

She smiled and tucked her handkerchief into an embroidered purse tied to her waist. “Get thee gone, then. But not before you exert yourself and help me to stand, for I fear I have been sitting far too long on this hard bench, and am not as nimble as once I was. Take care, sir, not to tread upon my little friend.”

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After leaving Mistress Blanche’s company, I had time to think, and at first felt a great sense of relief to know who had killed Amy, and that it was not Dudley. He was deeply flawed, but he had not stooped so low as to murder his ailing wife. I had come to the end of it all, and nothing else remained to be done. The Queen had conducted her own investigation, with help from both the Widow Odingsells and Mistress Blanche. They had tracked down and arrested a treacherous assassin and chosen not to reveal the names of the powerful men who set the conspiracy in motion. Who were the conspirators, I wondered, since the list of Dudley’s enemies was not a short one. Most likely Tom Howard was involved, but who else? Mayhap the so-called allies of the Queen who wished to make her distance herself from Dudley. Cecil was among those who wanted Dudley out of the way, or at least humbled. The plot to lure Amy into a lethal trap stank of endless intrigue, the sort that might have involved Catholic agents loyal to Mary Queen of Scots. Verney was right. I had been used. All I had done was for the sake of appearance alone. At least Mistress Blanche had been kind enough to enlighten me without abusing my pride.

Yet I was soon beset by misgivings. If Nokes had murdered Amy, why did he wait until the end of the day when her servants were returning from the fair? How had he killed her, since no one heard her cry out? I was troubled as well by the thought that Verney had been involved, perhaps on Cecil’s behalf. Mistress Blanche had provided me with a solution that was also a way out. I should have been grateful, but I felt only resentment and discontent. Fresh suspicions came scuttling forward like mice, gnawing away at the peace of mind that had proven short lived. The day was not quite done, I thought. As long as I was in London, I might as well pursue a fresh line of inquiry using my own crude methods. I soon found a kitchen boy who
for six shillings would fetch some wine and bread. I knew that the quickest way to the Tower was by wherry, and soon found a waterman willing to row me downriver on the rising tide to the Tower wharf. Years ago, I had befriended a chief deputy who served under the Constable, and it was he who gave me an escort to the Salt Tower on the southeast corner of the Inner Ward where Balthazar Nokes was being held prisoner.

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Even in the dim, mottled light, there was no doubt. The slouched figure huddled in a wretched nest of soiled hay was the stranger I had passed outside of Ady’s cottage. Nokes’s eyes were closed, his scarred face as still as a death mask, his hair matted. He gave no sign that he had heard me and I could not help but stare. The left side of his face was angular and hard, yet quite ordinary, whereas the right half seemed to belong to another man, one who had been dipped in fire. The skin of his forehead and cheeks resembled melted wax. His left eyebrow was thin and arched, while the right had been burned away, leaving a crooked scar.

He stirred and opened his eyes. He appeared wary, yet unsurprised, as if he had sensed my presence. I was reminded of a time years ago that I came upon a prowling wolf at dusk in a pine forest in France. The beast was fearless, and his unflinching gaze made the hair on my arms stand up. I dared not move until the enormous creature turned and vanished into the forest without a backward glance. Looking into the priest’s glittering yellow-brown eyes, I would not have been amazed to hear him snarl.

His gaze was bold and curious. “She told me about you,” he said. “That you look like a brute, but that you are subtle.” His voice was low, and deep, his tone insinuating. My eyes had
become accustomed to the lack of light, and I saw that he was shackled to a bolt in the floor by a chain fastened to a manacle on his ankle.

He stirred. “What is it that you have there?” He roused himself and sat upright, but remained on guard. “Perhaps you have been sent by the Devil, to tempt me as he did Saint Anthony.”

By way of answer, I bent down and pulled from my sack a goatskin flagon filled with wine. “This,” I said. “And bread.” The food and drink that I had brought to use as bribes had the intended effect. Nokes ceased looking at me and gave all his attention to the wine, which he eyed greedily. His feet were wrapped in filthy rags and his hands resembled claws, the fingers swollen and bent. He had been hung by the wrists and his fingers broken.

I thought it time to begin my interview and made a show of pulling the cork from the flagon, but came no closer. “I will hold it. Do not try to drain it, or you will have no more. One drink now and more anon, when I say so.”

“When you say so!” He croaked, sounding a bit mad. “Anon and on and on. Misery without end. Amen.” I stepped forward and let him grip the flagon with both mangled hands. He pressed it to his cracked lips and drank deeply, gulping down the cheap, sweet wine like a drowning man gasping for air. I whisked away the goatskin pouch and studied him as he leaned back against the wall.

His chest heaved as he took a deep breath and wiped a trickle of red wine from his chin with the back of his swollen hand that resembled a paw pulled from a trap. “She told me,” he said, “that if she were murdered, you would come sniffing around.”
I folded my arms. “Am I to assume that Lady Amy took you into her confidence before you broke her neck? And threw her down the stairs? That would not have been so hard to do after you bludgeoned her. Perhaps while she knelt to pray?”

He grimaced. “You abuse me, stupidly, and for the all wrong reasons.” He turned his head, as if overcome by disgust, and stared into a dark corner where some vermin were stirring among the rushes. “The largest among them tried to make a meal of me the first night I was here, but I caught him and snapped his neck,” he said, “and let his hungry brothers have him.” He chortled, then fell into a coughing fit. I let him have another drink of wine, doing my best to keep my hand from touching his face.

“Strange isn’t it?” he said, gazing at me with his strange yellow-brown eyes.

“What, pray tell?”

“That you believe you have come to take my confession. But you see, I have nothing to confess.”

I considered the priest’s predicament, and my mission. The day was growing late. A narrow shaft of light from a slit high in the stone wall interrupted the darkness that lay between us. “If you have a tale to tell, sir, you had best tell it.” He knew as well as I that he had only a day or two longer to live before he was hanged, if he were lucky. More likely, he would be drawn and quartered.

He smiled with half of his mouth. “So,” he said, “I presume you came here to learn the truth?”
I said nothing, and this provoked him. “Here is the thing then, Sir Thomas,” he said, raising his voice, which was surprisingly strong. “They will tell you that I killed her, that I have made my confession, but I have not!”

“Oh no?” I said. “How’s that?”

“I admit,” he said, “that it was I who went to them, and gave them what they wanted.”

“I need names, priest.”

He drew back into the shadows, so that I could no longer see his face. “Why not?” he said, as if speaking to himself, and then more loudly. “Their leader is Sir Charles Arundell of South Petherton, a friend of great men.” I had seen Sir Charles once or twice at court. He was a tall droopy figure, the Queen’s second cousin, a clever and charming man. He despised Dudley and made no secret of it.

I decided to do my best to keep Nokes talking. “And what was it he wanted, priest?”

“What every good Englishman wants, you dolt. A chance to kill Robert Dudley and the right man to do the job.”

I found his bravado laughable. The ruined man I saw before me was no match for Dudley. “Why should I believe you, priest? Why would Sir Charles think a weakling such as you could kill Robert Dudley?”

He did not look away, but only smiled with half his mouth. “The sword is for slaughter, Sir Thomas. Murdering a man is easy when his back is turned.” He seemed tired again, and
leaned back. “You are lucky to be alive. I have been watching you all along, at the grange. I could have killed you in your sleep, but I was hoping you might make yourself useful.”

I thought of all the times I had felt a pair of eyes on me since I arrived at Cumnor Hall. Nokes must have been there more than once after Amy was murdered. If what Cave told me was true, Nokes knew his way around the grange and all of its entrances and exits.

He eyed the sack at my feet and leaned forward, squinting up at me. “Lady Amy said that you seldom go to church, but that you are a Christian.” He abandoned his pride and became humble. “I have not eaten for some time.” I pulled the loaf from the sack, tearing off a chunk of it and tossing it in his lap. He fell upon the bread and devoured it. I gave him another swallow of wine, which seemed to revive him, then stoppered the flagon and looked around me. Nokes’ cell was on the ground floor, and did not receive any direct light after the sun had passed its zenith. No breeze stirred. The room was damp and stank of piss that mingled unpleasantly with the fruity scent of wine.

“What of Lady Amy?” I said. “What did she want from you?”

He sighed as if out of patience. “Has it never occurred to you that the best way to prevent someone from murdering you is to kill them first?”

I was reminded of what Mistress Blanche told me, that Amy was plotting with Dudley’s enemies to have him ambushed. I considered what had gone wrong that Sunday.
“And yet,” I said, “it is Lady Amy that lies dead, while Dudley is alive and well. If you know why, or how, then you had best tell me if you expect me to believe that it was not you who killed her.”

“Give me some more wine, sir, and I shall tell you everything.”

I did not like his terms. “Tell me first, then you shall have all of it.”

He was silent for a long while, then took a deep breath. “Sir Charles is a clever man, you see. He knew that if Lady Amy were murdered, everyone would blame her husband, and some would blame the Queen as well. Do you follow me so far?”

“How did you plan to do it?”

“I was to go to her apartment, while she was alone, waiting for Dudley. If he came, he would surely be blamed when he found her dead. And if he never came...” He shrugged. “What would it matter? He would still be condemned.”

I did not attempt to hide the disgust I felt for him. “Now I see why Sir Charles thought you better suited for shoving a woman down a flight of stairs.”

If you have ever seen a coiled snake strike, you will have no trouble imagining how quickly Nokes leapt to his feet, lunging at me as if he would throttle me with his useless hands, but he was stopped short by his chain. “Listen to me, you weak-minded lout,” he hissed. “The day she was murdered, I could not have killed a cat. I was up all night, if you must know, putting on the drunkard’s cloak. That Sunday, I slept most of the day. When I came to my senses I went to Cumnor Hall, to tell her everything, but I was too late.”
So, I thought, the priest had not simply lost his nerve. He had fallen under Amy’s spell and grown too fond of her. So much so that he could not do his dirty work. I could think of nothing to say to ease his torment. I looked away to conceal my disgust as he withdrew into himself once more, his shoulders hunched and head bent—the posture of the woebegone. He was both pitiable and loathsome.

I considered what else I might learn from him before I left. “If you found her dead before the others came back, as you say, then tell me where you found the body.” He gave no sign he had heard me, so I took out the flagon of wine and held it out to him, but he ignored it.

“Go away,” he mumbled. “Leave me in peace.”

“Not until you tell me where you found her.”

“On the stairs, below the landing.”

“Now I suppose you will claim that you did not see who killed her.”

“Nor did I,” he said, rounding on me again. “Yet who else could it have been but Verney? Or one of his henchmen? If I had not been caught, he would be dead by now.”

I thought back to the day I had seen Nokes in Abingdon. “It was you who killed Ady, wasn’t it, thinking he might betray you?”

“Howard Ady was a pig,” he spat, “and a coward. I merely saw fit to baptize him in his own watering trough.”

“Why didn’t you do the same to Cave?”
He glared at me. “Why do you think? Because you appeared, and interrupted me,” he snapped. “But it doesn’t matter. Someone else will lay their hands on that little thief, and he will wish I had found him first. He has stolen something from me that everyone wants, and they will kill him to get it.” This made no sense to me and I decided I had heard enough. I tossed the flagon and sack at his feet, then turned to leave.

I heard him shuffling after me, dragging his chain. “Wait! Before you go.” His arrogance was gone, his tone plaintive. I felt a twinge of pity, and halted. “There is something more,” he said. I turned to see him standing unsteadily in the single shaft of light between us, wincing from the effort of putting weight on his feet.

“I’m waiting,” I said, and gave him my attention, aware more than ever of the pervasive gloom in that awful place and the impossibility of escape once the creaking doors had been bolted and the iron gates closed for the night. Tomorrow he would likely be put to torture while I ate my breakfast.

“Did you never wonder,” he said, his voice low and confiding, “why Lady Amy was always writing letters, then burning them? I thought at first that she was mad. Then I understood that there were things she must have known that no one else did, and that she told no one, because there was no one she could trust.” That much I knew to be true.

He paused, as if considering whether to continue. “When I saw what had happened—what they had done to her—I thought there was a chance that whoever had killed her didn’t know where she kept her papers. So I went upstairs to her apartment, and I found it—the last letter she wrote.”
“I’m listening,” I said, wanting to hear the rest of the story, though I doubted Amy’s private ramblings were important. Still, I could not be sure she didn’t know something vital, and had a secret plan to blackmail Dudley, or even the Queen. “What did you do with this letter?”

His awful face was contorted by an odd half smile. “I hid it in a safe place, before they found me, and I am going to tell you where.” Behind us a guard rapped on the door with the butt of his halberd, the signal that my time was up.

This alarmed him and he shuffled forward, coming as close to me as his chain allowed. “Heed me well, Sir Thomas, so you will know I have not lied. As soon as I took the letter from her room, I regretted it, as God is my witness! I vowed that Sir Charles would never read it, nor Cave, that I must give it back to her.”

“What do you mean?” I said, thinking to humor him, but also curious.

“That night, when that slattern of a maid left the room, I went to Lady Amy’s apartment, to pray for her forgiveness and to hide the letter in her shroud, so it would be buried along with her.”

I thought he was half mad, and I drew back, unsettled by the thought of the disfigured holy man bending over Amy’s dead body and loosening her shroud. “Why do such a thing, priest?”

He stared at me with his wolf eyes, holding my gaze, then shifted his weight, so that the light from above shone on the disfigured half of his face. His scarred visage was grim and
impossible to read. Then he shifted his stance again, and the light shone once more on the left
side of his face.

“We weren’t so different, she and I. We lived each day as if it were our last. I know that
she did not love me, but neither did she revile me. She made her confession to me, and I gave
her absolution for her sins. But now,” he said, his voice quavering, “I see she only wished to
flatter me, and make me want to murder Dudley for her sake. I failed her, you see. I was drunk
when they set on her and killed her. I had no right to take anything from her, especially her
secrets. In the end, they were all she had.”

“Why tell me this now?”

“For this reason. That someone must know that it was Dudley who had her killed! Who
else could it have been?”

Before I could reply, the door was pushed open, which made me start and sent Nokes
stumbling backward. A sputtering torch reeking of burnt fat threw back the darkness, and I saw
Nokes fall to his knees. I turned my back on him, glad to go, and ducked my head to clear the
low doorway as the priest’s voice drifted through the still air. To my surprise, I found I
understood the Latin.

“Intro tua vulnera, absconde me.” Within thy wounds, hide me. “Ne permittas me
separari a te. Suffer me not to be separated from thee. Ab hoste maligno defende me.” From
the malignant enemy, defend me.
Chapter Seventeen: The Crypt

Saturday morning September 14, 1560

“For if no search or inquiry be made and known, the displeasure of God, the dishonor of the Queen and the danger of the whole realm is to be feared.”

Protestant preacher Thomas Lever writing to William Cecil in September of 1560 regarding the inquiry into the death of Amy Robsart

After riding from London and almost laming Forster’s horse, my body felt as heavy as a sack of oats. As I left Aldgate, rain engorged clouds were congregating like a pack of poor relations about the moon, so that I might as well have been riding blindfolded. Halfway back, a drenching rain forced me to dismount and lead the big gelding across a dozen rushing streams. My hat, which looked as shapeless as an oyster, I had discarded, and my sodden, clinging cloak. After stabling Forster’s horse, I found the entrance to the passageway to the crypt and began my descent into hades.

The passageway was dank but dry, yet I was soaked through and felt little better for being out of the weather. Why is it, I wondered, that no matter how spent the flesh, a man’s imagination will never rest? I would rather have faced a phalanx of pike men than venture into the dormitory for the dead that lay ahead of me. My lantern shielded the candle flame from stray drafts, and I held it high to light my way. The monks had laid a stone floor along the length of the tunnel, which is situated at the north end of Cumnor Hall. It commences at the bottom of a short flight of steps, then slants gradually downward. Two centuries of freezing and thawing had caused the ground to heave and paving stones to shatter, making the going treacherous.
I would have counted Nokes’ claims of no more worth than a brass farthing, but that I knew Amy to spend many hours writing in her closet, something of which Dudley often complained, since he said that her habit of writing by candlelight would ruin her eyes. This was a pose on his part, for he did not trust his wife, and had her correspondence intercepted and read. Most of her letters were sent to her stepbrothers and cousins, and of course, a great many to Dudley. I myself had witnessed her, head bowed, writing in a state of agitation, only to see her crumple the page and throw it upon the hearth to burn. As she grew more secretive, I had on more than one occasion been certain that her writing table had been cleared in haste before I was admitted.

I cursed myself for not bringing along one of Forster’s buck hounds, for a dog can find his way in the dark and will not mistake a flesh and blood man for a wight. Among the servants it was a poorly kept secret that none would willingly go alone into either the crypt or the root cellars below the kitchen at the south end of the grange. The entire subterranean region was infested by spiders, beetles and blind worms. While the upper apartments and hallways were occasionally warmed by the sun, here the air was heavy with a profound chill no cloak could repel. Every sound echoed and seemed too loud, profaning the silence. Forster had ignored the very existence of the crypt until the troubling question arose as to where to keep Amy’s corpse. No better solution could be found than to make use of the monk’s mausoleum. He had complained about the difficulty of finding eight yeomen willing to carry the coffin and two more to light the way with torches. Apparently the monk’s burial chamber turned grown men into frightened children.
I was no robber of graves, and consoled myself with the knowledge that Amy had not yet been laid to rest. That thought made what I was about to do seem less odious. I seldom pray, for I have found that God, as a rule, is disinclined to intercede in the affairs of man, no matter how dire the circumstances. Nonetheless, whenever I am deeply troubled, I sometimes cross myself. For though most Anglicans decry the practice as popery, I knew that King Henry declared there is a difference between being blessed by a priest and marking the cross upon one’s own body. I uttered a short prayer, seeking forgiveness for any transgression I might commit, and crossed myself with my free hand, both to calm my nerves and to appease any spirits I might offend.

As I drew near the bend in the passageway, my nostrils flared and my skin grew goose bumps. Though nothing could be seen or heard, I felt most keenly that I was not alone. I was quite sure no one had followed me, having firmly shut the heavy door at the top of the passageway. Perhaps, I supposed, someone had gone before me and was lurking below. If so, I was determined to rely upon stealth to discover who it might be. Fearing the light of my lantern might betray me, I hung back, and waited where the passageway curved to the left. I stood still as a tree trunk, and pricked my ears, yet heard naught but my own heart knocking in my chest. I did my utmost to banish the vision of some long dead monk risen up to meet me, his boney hand reaching out to seize my wrist in a vice-like grip, while his outraged brethren marched behind, rattling their ribs and shouting, “Thief, desecrator!”

Then I heard it. Not the clatter of brittle bones, but a little laugh floating out of the blackness. It struck me as disquieting, to say the least, but very human, and rather womanish. It came from somewhere down below, where no living soul ought to be. Who else, I wondered,
would be exploring this desolate domain, and for what cause? My experience had taught me to be suspicious as regards matters of timing. When two strange events occur at once, seemingly without correspondence, it is only because no one has found the thread ties them together.

Whoever was prowling about below was likely there for the same reason as I, searching for the same thing. If I wished to learn who, I could play the stealthy pursuer, and follow my prey as he left by the only other way out—the door connecting the crypt below to the passageway leading to the cellars beneath the kitchen. Or do my utmost to capture whoever it was, which would be most easily accomplished if the stranger passed me on his way back up the passage.

The sound of a garment rustling not so far away made my decision for me. I drew back, the better to conceal myself, when I realized that my own light would surely give me away. Unless I stifled the flame – the thought of which made me shudder – though I had brought steel and flint along to tease a dead wick back to life if need be. I hesitated but a moment, loathe to extinguish my lone defense against the dark, then lifted the lantern cover and pinched the burning wick. So swiftly did blackness o’er take me that all about vanished before the smoke from the dead wick rose up to string my nostrils. In the same instant, I was robbed of both sight and resolve. For I could no longer see my hands or the floor at my feet. With each passing moment, I felt the crushing weight of the darkness that had descended upon me like a curse. I stared wide eyed at nothing, casting about for a trace of light, to no avail. Never had I known a world in which not even a glimmer of star light could be seen. Perhaps, I thought, this is what hell is, a lightless eternity in which the soul drifts, despairing and alone. A powerful urge to flee took hold of me, to turn and stumble blindly upward. I fought to calm myself and shut my eyes, not unlike a frightened child that drags a blanket over his head to ward off nocturnal
horrors, until dawn arrives, and with it salvation from evil things that cannot bear the light of day.

My terror somewhat mastered, I waited, eyes squeezed shut, alert to the tread of footsteps. And then I heard someone approaching, as if on slippered feet, as soft as those of a maiden. I opened my eyes to a blessed vision, a wavering yellow aura on the opposite wall. The world took shape around this divine circle of light, and I could once again mark the shape of my body, as if restored to me, along with my wits. The glow of the yellow light grew ever brighter as the hand that held the lantern drew near. I watched as the shadow of the stranger showed itself as a hooded figure draped in a long cloak. I held my breath as the shadow paused, and wavered a few moments, a dumb show of suspicion, before it turned, and fled downward in a rush, back toward the crypt.

I did not so much run as fall forward, cursing as I plunged down a flight of wide stone steps, as clumsy as an irate poultry keeper chasing a marauding fox into a forest that the wily beast knows far better than his pursuer. Ahead of me, taunting, illusive, was the bouncing shadow of my quarry and his wildly swaying lantern. Both vanished through the archway into the crypt, where I had never been, and would not go now, but for fear that I would lose not simply my prey, but the light of the lantern. In one bound I was through the archway, only to trip and fall heavily on my hands and knees, cutting my palms and tearing my hose. I did not linger, but sprang upwards with a snarl that gave fair warning of my intentions should I succeed in laying hands upon the fleeing trespasser.
As I stood and looked about me, my fury gave way to astonishment at the eerie dream world into which I had stumbled—one illuminated as if by magic with a spectral, greenish glow that blossomed here and there along the walls and on the edges of more than a dozen broad stone slabs. These being the beds of several dozens corpses that lay in solemn array on both sides of me and beyond, filling the vaulted space that was the ancient crypt of the monks. I had seen such a glow before at night, in the haunted bogs of northern Ireland. Its source was a moss that some call foxfire and others corpse light. I had come across it as well in cemeteries in England, glowing faintly upon rotting wooden crosses. But here it appeared in fantastic abundance, as if the monks had cultivated it.

Close enough to touch was an antique corpse occupying a slab raised up on a pedestal, so that the dead man’s skull was at my elbow. Beyond him were his silent brethren, laid out in a grim array. I could not move or speak, for I felt surrounded. They lay all about me, stern and disapproving, posed in the distinctive posture of the dead—feet together, arms crossed upon concave chests, with rosaries clasped in desiccated finger bones bearing rings of tarnished metal. Their moldering woolen tunics had faded to a greyish brown, except for the gold-edged trim on the scapula of a few who must have been abbots. The one next to me was such a man. The skin of his skull was dried so that it resembled parchment. A beaver pelt trim on his cowl was rotted and infested with small greenish black beetles that crawled in and around the clumps of fur.

As I stood, transfixed and staring, a single white moth flew from the abbot’s empty eye socket toward my face. I yelped in terror and leapt backward, my arms flailing. From somewhere ahead of me, at the far side of the great crypt, I heard a tittering laugh. It sounded
not at all merry to my ears, but instead seemed to take delight at my cowardly antics. This both infuriated and sobered me, commanding all my attention anew. Yet when I cast about to find the lantern bearer, I saw before me, from one end of the vaulted chamber to the other, only the same subtle glow of foxfire lighting the way between the upraised slabs, and climbing upward along the walls in wavering columns alongside the shelves cut into the walls where reclined the forlorn remains of dozens of monks, tier upon tier in an orderly arrangement that was more disquieting to me than the carnage I had seen on battlefields.

I ran toward where I thought I had heard the remote, mocking laughter, revolted by the abundant cobwebs that caught on my face and beard, and the scent of damp decay that filled my lungs. Then I spied, in a far corner, the yellow glow of the lantern carried by the only other living soul in this dismal cavern, a fool who had unwisely sequestered himself in a spot from which there was no escape. I prepared to pounce, relishing the prospect of punishing my cornered foe, when I swept aside a sticky curtain of cobwebs and saw before me no living person, but only a lantern set upon the ground and left there to deceive me while its owner fled.

Snatching up the lantern, yet not so roughly as to extinguish the flame, I hurried toward a nearby archway that appeared to connect the crypt with another passage that led to the root cellars at the south end of the grange, and hence to the stairs ascending to the kitchen. I found my way with no difficulty, and bounded forward along a wide corridor that ran straight and true. As soon as I saw it looming before me, I knew I had been defeated. The ancient door that separated the crypt from adjoining cellars stood shut, barring my way. Even before I set down
the lantern and tugged at the iron handle with both hands, I guessed that whoever had gone before had taken pains to bolt the door from the other side.

I swore and yanked at the old door, my chest heaving, and made the hinges chatter, but to no avail. I stooped to catch my breath, resting my bloodied palms upon my thighs. Inches from my nose, a yellow-and-black spider, alerted by the shaking of its web, dashed out to inspect its trap, and finding no fresh thing to kill, had jealously seized what looked to be yesterday’s dinner, some dead thing bundled in white, and vanished. The spider’s vigilance reminded me of my putative prize, perhaps concealed somewhere behind me, in the coffin of Lady Amy. Fearful that the candle would give out before I could retrace my steps, I did not tarry but rushed back to the crypt, cursing under my breath.

I cast about and saw no sign of Amy’s coffin in the well-ordered vault. Yet I had heard that the monk’s mausoleum contained a small chapel, and this encouraged me to continue my search. Having come this far and ruined a pair of hose, I was unwilling to concede defeat. I followed the wall to my left until I came across another passageway that opened up unto a small room that was indeed a long-neglected place of worship. I had set foot in more than one antique Romish chapel here and in France, most of them stinking of incense and lit by reechy candles burning at the feet of sad-eyed wooden saints. Only a simple cross remained on the wall above a narrow altar set in an apse lined with limestone. The chancel itself was occupied by two trestles on which rested the coffin that held Lady Amy’s body.

I was in haste to be done, for the tallow stub in my lantern was melting fast. I stepped forward to take a closer look and laid my bloodied palm upon the gabled lid and ran my hand
over the polished surface. Both the lid and box were made of elm, favored for coffins. I saw at once that the top had been fitted with an iron hasp and staple, and these secured with a ring, so that only a blacksmith could open it. If the intruder who gave me the slip had come looking for the letter, he too had been disappointed, and I was glad for that, and relieved as well that I would not be required to investigate further. I scarcely remember retracing my steps through the crypt and up the passageway. As I opened the groaning door and stepped into the courtyard, the light of dawn did little to relieve my gloom. Still, I was glad to be above ground and breathing wholesome air. No other person was stirring. Weary as I was, and discouraged, I had but one thought, which was to retreat to my chamber on the second floor, shut and bar the door, and lie down on my narrow pallet in any position except flat upon my back.
Chapter Eighteen: A Letter

Sunday September 15, 1560

“Real history of any kind, with its indispensable alloy of the prosaic and its incompleteness and comparative shapelessness, will always show to a disadvantage in many respects beside its brilliant rival the novel.”

*The Romance of the Peerage Curiosities (1848)* by George Lillie Craik

Anyone who does not travel with a body servant and who has been a guest at a great house will tell you what a nuisance it is to be waited on by domestics. After intruding at awkward moments, they linger, waiting for you to forfeit a penny. So that one is obliged to go about with an abundance of copper for doling out vails as freely as a Baron. For your trouble, you will be given only reproachful looks. The recipient is sure to sniff unless the vail be so lavish that even a wool merchant would soon be bankrupted. Almost none of these same domestics are humble, but are instead discontent with their lot in life. The pot boy only wants to be a cook and the stable groom a steward. As for servants recruited from the families of cotters, most have no more notion of what constitutes fine manners than a goat, and confuse arrogance with good breeding. A coxcomb such as Verney was therefore highly thought of, and the more he abused his inferiors, the more they fawned.

I therefore think I should not be harshly judged for what I did the following morning when the Widow Odingsells sent a man to knock on my door. When I did not stir, and the same oaf commenced pounding, I seized my water pitcher and sent it flying, so that it shattered against the door, which gave answer for me. I went back to sleep and lay unmolested but a
short while before I was disturbed once more by a second messenger, this one a girl with a quavering voice, also dispatched by the Widow Odingsells, who reasoned that I would be less ferocious in response to the pleas of a timid maid. She promised to provide a cup of beer and a slice of cheat, all brought to my door, if I would deign to unbolt it. This I did, after stepping around the broken crockery, making water in a pot, and dressing myself. I ate my breakfast alone in my room after banishing a kitchen boy who arrived with my food on a tray that he nearly dropped, so eager was he to flee after delivering the message that I was wanted by Madam Odingsells, as soon as I was able.

Pirgo opened the door to the widow’s apartment, her face pinched and eyes full of suspicion. The Widow herself was sanguine, and nicely turned out in a gown of black velvet. We traded good morrows, though the sun had passed its zenith, and my hostess dismissed Pirgo, after instructing her to leave two cups and a bottle of sack. Outside the sky was as blue-black as a fresh bruise. A light but steady rain was falling. A small fire burned in the hearth. We were quite alone.

The Widow greeted me warmly but formally, then folded her arms, studying me a moment. “The letter?”

“Where it should be.”

“Ah! That is good to hear.” I said nothing, but let the silence between us linger. A burning log broke in half, throwing off red-hot embers that vanished in a powdery bed of ash.

“You scowl, sir.”
“How would you have me, Madam? I am no jester. If my mien displeases you, I will leave.” So I said. Yet I did not mean it. I preferred to remain in her company.

Her eyebrows were like swallows that swooped upward when she thought to provoke me. “To sleep again? To lay your head down and dream. Of what, Sir Knight? Mysterious Levantine women with skin the color of mahogany and wrists bound with bracelets of beaten copper?”

“You mock me, madam, since I know nothing of Moorish women, nor have I sailed as far as the Levant. Only across the sea to France, where the women are not so fair as our own milk and water maids.”

“Yet more pliant? More given to pleasure?”

“And not so in love with debate, which is the enemy of ardor,” I retorted. If she wished to joust with me, I was not so weary that I could not indulge the whims of a charming woman, albeit one whom I did not entirely trust.

“I see, Sir Thomas, that you are no different than all other Englishmen, who count obedience a sovereign virtue in a mistress, but most especially in a wife.”

“Unless the Englishman, like my master, aspires to wed a sovereign who cannot be ruled,” I said. “As for myself, I have not been so fortunate as to have found a bride. I am now as I have always been, without a wife. And so my opinion counts for little as regards the marital state.”
She smiled in an absent minded way and drifted away from me, the hem of her dress sweeping the stone floor. I kept my peace and watched as she took a seat on a bench near the fire and gathered her skirts to make room for me next to her. “Please join me, Sir Thomas. We have so few interesting visitors here at Cumnor Hall.” I bowed and sat. She let go the heavy fabric of her dress, which filled the space between us, the velvet folds pressing against my leg. I am always pleased to be entertained by clever women. Indeed, I am an easy mark in that regard. Sitting near Mrs. Odingsells, I felt myself respond to her gentle attentions. The sack and cups stood upon a nearby table, and she poured one cup full and handed it to me. The fruity flavors remind me of other sweet wines made from grapes ripened on the rocky hills of Malaga. The heat from the fire made me drowsy.

“May I ask,” she said, “why you find yourself a perpetual bachelor? Perhaps you have no stomach for marriage? For surely you have not gone these many years without meeting a woman wise enough to see you would make a fine husband?” I studied her to see if she were taunting me, but decided she was sincere.

I felt no impulse to censor my speech regarding my history, which is of interest to few very. “As you know, a base born knight such as I serves at the pleasure of his lord. Unlike Sir Richard Verney, I have no family or estate. I can make a claim to my honor, an excellent steed, and a purse sufficient to pay my way, but little else.”

She sipped from her cup, and I was again aware of how much pleasure it gave me to look at her. “Perhaps Dudley will one day reward you for your long and steadfast service to him and his family.”
“I remain in debt to his mother, Lady Jane, who succored me when I was a boy. As for your hopeful prognostications, one day lies always in the future and depends upon more than one tomorrow. In all the years I have served the Dudleys, their fortunes have risen and fallen, not once but twice. And may yet rise again! So that nothing is promised but uncertainty.” I spoke lightly, but chose my words with care. For I admit that while I felt a yearning to know the fair widow as more than a rival, I also understood that whatever I said touching upon Dudley might find its way to the Queen.

“And what will you do, pray tell, when your work here is at an end?” Her manner had become more serious. “For I hear the jury foreman has written to Dudley to report that he will declare Lady Amy to have died by misfortune, and no other cause.”

I was not especially pleased to hear this latest intelligence from her, and not from Dudley himself. Since I was ignorant regarding any correspondence between Dudley and Smith, and Dudley had sworn to allow the jury do their work free of interference. To conceal my consternation, I picked up my cup and rose to walk toward the window, where I saw that the weather had not improved, and rainwater was pooling in the courtyard. One puddle had grown to a small gray-brown pond stippled by rain drops. I kept my back turned and my speech mild. “This is the first I have heard of the official finding.”

“You are surprised?”

I turned to face her. “No, by my troth! Still, it is one thing to satisfy the court, and another to answer all the questions that linger. Such a verdict, as you know, will please almost no one.”
“And what of yourself? How do things stand with you? For you have gone to great lengths to plumb this affair to its near fathomless bottom.”

I felt it best to be frank, or perhaps I no longer cared to censor my speech. “I shall tell you the truth, madam. That my mind remains heaped with suspicions. And I still do not know how Lady Amy died, or why.”

“And yet I do believe, sir, that you know more than you have said.” She rose and walked briskly to a writing desk on the opposite side of the room. “I hope to put your mind at rest, at least somewhat. For I have in my possession something that you should read, a letter written by Lady Amy, not so long before she died.” She opened a drawer and took out what appeared to be several sheets of folded velum, and held them up for me to see. “Is this what you were searching for?”

I did my best to avoid gaping like a simpleton as confusion invaded my tired brain. How did she come by the letter? And where did she find it? Was she inviting me to read it, or simply letting me know that she had succeeded where I had failed? I was angry, but said nothing.

“Shall I take your silence for assent?”

Her composure irked me. “How should I reply, since you have me at a disadvantage?”

“Please,” she said, “do not take offense. I only wanted—” she broke off and began again. “It has been my intention all along to share this with you before it is carried to the Queen.” Of course, I was curious, but cautious as well.
“And what,” I said, “do you expect from me in return?” The room itself was warm, but my mood was chilly.

“That you tell no one what you learn, not even Dudley. That you will let the court have its way.”

“Again, I am uncertain whether I can agree, not knowing what I shall learn.”

“Verney is correct in one thing, that you are a man who stands on his honor, and that is your weakness. Yet it is also why I trust you.” I was not at all sure I could say the same of her.

“This much I can tell you,” she said, holding out the letter, “that once you read this, you shall know how Anne Winchell died. As to what might have happened to Lady Amy, this letter sheds some light on that as well.”

I wondered for only a moment how she came to know about Anne and me, then reminded myself that most here at Cumnor Hall have little to do besides gossip. “I am familiar with Lady Amy’s handwriting, so I will not be deceived by a forgery.”

“I assure you, this is no counterfeit.”

“How did you come by this letter?”

She laid it down, leaving it where we could both see it. “I do not think I owe you an explanation. Yet I feel moved to tell you.” She sighed. “I judge you to be one of the very few persons entangled in this affair who wants to learn the truth for its own sake.”

“And you?”
“Oh yes, I want to know the truth also,” she answered, a bit too readily. “To safeguard the Queen, whom my family has served, sometimes at great risk. But also because our fortunes rise and fall with hers. If the Queen is compromised, or worse, then all shall suffer, but especially those who are loyal to her. But I do not need to tell you this.”

“Go on, madam,” I said. “I want to hear all you have to say. Omit nothing.” When a man finds himself in waters too deep to stand, I thought, he must swim, whether the current be with or against him.

“Very well, I shall do my best. Unlike you, Sir Thomas, I seldom sleep soundly. The first night you were here, after Lady Amy’s corpse had been dressed, I sat up quite late. Since my rooms are next to hers, I heard Pirgo leave. I had already collected her ladyship’s jewels, as Dudley asked, and searched through her belongings for reasons of my own. Since I could not rest, I thought to look one more time. I was hopeful that I might find something which would reveal more of how she died—as were you when you did the same.” So, I thought, at least we are done pretending that she is merely a guest here and not a spy.

I remembered what Nokes had told me, and how he had stolen into Cumnor Hall after dark and spied on its occupants. “You may have placed yourself in danger.”

“Possibly,” she said. “But I could have raised an alarm if I chose, and then you would surely have come. I looked again in the closet where she spent a great deal of her time.” She paused, as if reluctant to go on. “To touch the things she touched was most strange. She was very jealous of her privacy, as you know. The first time I went to her apartment after she died, I felt as if she had simply walked out the door and might come back at any time. But that night, I
was alone in the dark with her corpse laid out upon the bed, and I felt very uneasy.” In this regard, at least, I knew her to be telling the truth.

“Were you aware,” I said, “that the priest who met in secret with Lady Amy was here, at Cumnor Hall, the night that Amy was laid out on her bed?” I was reminded of Verney’s comment. “Spies spying upon spies.”

“I know that now,” she answered, “but not then.” She crossed her arms as if she felt a draft, and looked away, as if composing herself. I wondered if her gestures were genuine, or a performance meant to stir my sympathy. “This is not easy for me, Sir Thomas. So I shall brief. That night, before I could leave Lady Amy’s apartment, someone else arrived.”

“Nokes!”

“How did you know?”

“We have spoken. But pray, continue.”

“He was wearing a hood, so he could have been anyone. I saw only a tall figure bent over the body, and I was not sure, but I thought he might have been praying, or even weeping. Next he did something extraordinary. He reached under his cloak, and took out a sheaf of papers, and tucked them inside her shroud. Then he left as quickly as he came.”

“So you went to find what he had left, and took it.” I did not intend to accuse her, but I saw her cheeks color.
“I felt like a thief, but yes, I did. That was merely a prelude to my astonishment when I came back here and discovered that I had in my hands a letter written by Lady Amy and addressed to the Queen.”

It was my turn to be amazed. “The Queen?” The Widow Odingsells was a fine actress indeed if she expected me to believe that Amy had written to Elizabeth, the woman most responsible for her miserable existence.

“I am aware how unlikely that seems,” she said. “Before I read a word of it, I was certain that Amy must have been planning to blackmail the Queen, or threaten her in some way. Yet that is not what this letter concerns.”

“So you read it?”

“Yes, I won’t pretend I haven’t.” I saw that she was determined to explain why, but I was not at all certain that I wanted to hear it. “I told the Queen everything. Yet I will not tell her what I am going to do next, which is to put it in your hands to read. For the reason that it touches on persons very dear to you, and explains a great deal about the fate of Anne Winchell, something that I expect has been troubling you for many years.”

I did not particularly care for her new found interest in Anne’s death and remained on my guard. I was confused as well as to how the Widow came to know about my misgivings regarding everything that had happened at Ely House. Perhaps sensing my discomfort, she came closer and laid her hand upon my sleeve. I flinched, but did not pull back.
She did not remove her hand, which made my arm grow warm where she touched it, but instead looked up at me, as if she wished to take me into her confidence. “Before Amy ceased speaking to me, she told me about you and Anne. Of course, she did not tell me everything. I knew she wanted me to think that Dudley seduced Anne, to make him out to be a villain, hoping, no doubt, to speak to the Queen through me. I never believed her, though. She was too fond of lying. But when I read this letter, I felt for the first time in a long time that she was telling the truth.”

As she spoke, I felt her fingers drift down my arm and rest upon the back of my hand. I did not need to look at her to tell that she was encouraging me to trust her. In my mind, I counted off the steps between the door and where I stood. I considered brushing her hand away and leaving for good. I did none of those things, however.

Instead, I placed my free hand upon hers and looked down into her upturned face so that our eyes met. Her gaze touched something in me that I had for years kept locked away. “It happened a very long time ago,” I said. “But yes, I confess that I would like to learn the truth, especially as regards what took place between Dudley and Anne.”

“Then you must read the letter,” she said. “I will leave you alone with it for as long as you like.”

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I am the sort of man who prefers to account for himself alone. That I have been assigned by Dudley to tidy up the affairs of the dead has forced me to do my utmost to account for others. Who knows what forces have shaped the character of his fellow man and led him to
defy not only the rule of law, but nature and his own conscience? Such a mysteries are only
depended when pondering the ways of women. As for Lady Amy, I came to believe that she was
diseased in both body and spirit, though I cannot say when the worm of corruption began its
work within her. The Widow Odingsells claims that the seat of it was surely her womb, which
once blighted, is the cause of hysteria. Despite John Appleyard’s protests that his sister was a
pious woman, her letter convinced me that she was an agent of harm, if not evil. For she
confessed to a terrible deed that brought about the death of Anne Winchell, who hung herself
out of shame and sorrow. Anne was brought to shame not by Dudley, but by his father, and to
sorrow by none other than Amy herself.
Chapter Nineteen: His Lechery

The Journal of Lady Louisa Stuart
Saturday September 16, 1820

“And now behold the thing that thou, erewhile, saw only in thought and what thou now shalt hear.”

The Mirror for Magistrates (1563) by Thomas Sackville, Earl of Dorset

As I write this, I am at the height of a violent cold, and my head is so heavy and stupid it threatens to fall upon the paper. I will make this entry brief, and allow this last strange document to speak for itself. Although it is written in the form of a letter, T.C. admits that the original is lost, and that this is a copy in his own hand, and that made in haste, since he claimed to have borrowed the letter from a priest to whom it was entrusted by Amy Robsart herself. This letter is most peculiar in that it is addressed to the none other than Queen Elizabeth, and was allegedly written not long before Lady Amy died. I regard it as a work of pure fiction, yet I include it here also, since so little is known of Lady Amy, as to both her life and personality, that she exists only as a character. The version of Lady Amy that T.C. has bequeathed via this letter, purported to have been penned by her, does not at all resemble the Lady Amy imagined by Watty. I am inclined to declare T.C.’s version has as much merit as the one that will be enshrined in Kenilworth. As to Elizabeth and whether she was Robert Dudley’s lover, an excellent argument can be made that will satisfy everyone but the few whose interests run to the prurient—which is that the question of Elizabeth’s virginity is moot. For she truly was and remains the Virgin Queen whose image she so carefully fashioned and preserved. Here I include
T.C’s very questionable copy of a letter addressed to Queen Elizabeth and allegedly written by Amy Robsart shortly before her death.

The state to which I have been reduced and the predicament in which I now find myself moves me to write to you, though there is no love between us. I make no claim upon your pity, despite the dangers that threaten me at every turn. I beg of you not to put aside this letter, but read on, since I may have little time to live, and by dying make my husband a happy widower. It is therefore my hope, however, slender, that you will not discard this missive out of disdain for its author, but hear me out. If you are reading still, I think you might not disagree when I say that you know something of what it means to be deprived of liberty and made to live as a prisoner, far from the amusements of London and the company of friends whose society could enliven a dull day. And to live as well in constant peril, lodged in the country estate of a man who is the ally of those who wish you harm. You know what it is, as well, to have your every movement watched, letters read, and to regard with a jaundiced eye each new person who is sent to offer aid, especially any physician who urges you to take what may be poison disguised as physic. I wager you have not altogether lost the capacity to sympathize with one such as I, a woman who has many enemies and few true friends, though your days of peril are far behind you. All of London is at your feet, and a kingdom given to you to rule, and most preciously, your ability to rule yourself without interference from others, most especially a husband. Yet your time of ascendency has been for me a time of desolation and deepening woe.
Perhaps you know enough of the lies told about a wife who has lost the favor of a powerful husband to think that no one who is wise should believe all they hear about me. If your own mother could have left a letter for you to read, to tell you what sort of wife she truly was, and what sort of husband the king was to her, I wager you would find that not all the fault for the utter destruction of their marriage lay with your mother alone. Perhaps you have wondered if your mother ever loved your father. Mayhap she was no more than a chit traded by her father, who knew how badly the smitten king wanted a son from a young bride. My story is just as strange, and may end as badly for me as it did for your own mother. For although I was wed to a man desired by many other maidens of good name, I have never loved Robert Dudley. Though I bear a good deal of the blame for everything that has happened before and since we wed that day in June, I have not been kindly used by the Dudleys.

I first met Robert Dudley when I was a girl and serving as a companion to the four Troutbeck children, whose parents were friends of the Dudleys, and who spent time in London society and especially at Ely House, where John Dudley kept his family while he performed his duties as Lord Protector. The Troutbeck’s Guardian, and hence mine as well, was their aunt, Lady Alice Troutbeck, who hoped a match could be made between one of John Dudley’s sons and her two nieces, Joan and Francis. During the long winter months I spent at Ely House, when I was sixteen, and ripe as a plum, John Dudley found excuses to be alone with me, and called me to his rooms when he was retired, or visited me when I rose of a morning before I was properly dressed, and tickled me as if I were still a child.
I think you too may know something of what it is to be young, and to be admired and petted by an older, handsome man. He told Lady Alice that he required a youthful companion to distract him from weighty matters of state, someone to read to him and accompany him on walks. As for John Dudley, he was at all times courteous to his wife, Lady Jane, and displayed in all he said and did that he was not only devoted to her, but also heeded her advice. When I first met her, Lady Jane had nearly died giving birth to her last child, so that her physician warned that John Dudley must stay out of her bed. Which he did, although no one expected him to live the life of a celibate. He showed a preference for virgins over a mistress who would try to rule him. I was flattered at the attention and gifts of jewelry I received from him. Yet most of all I was captivated by the gentle care he lavished upon me. I soon felt that I was only truly alive when I was in his presence. All my old diversions became as nothing and fell away and I thought of only of pleasing him.

Before I had known only the clumsy affection and teasing of boys, whereas John Dudley was not only a great lord, who inspired both fear and respect in all he met, but also a man whose charm and powers of seduction were infinitely subtle and impossible to resist. I was entranced, not only with him, but also by the world in which the Dudleys moved with such ease, turning heads and inciting everyone to look on them with envy, casting gifts and invitations at their feet wherever they went, so that one felt as if flowers blossomed to scent the air they breathed. Lady Alice saw everything for what it was, and took me aside to make clear to me that my family would be much favored if John Dudley continued to prefer my company. She
counselling me to follow his lead, and put aside any misgivings I had, and do all in my power to encourage his affection for me. In time, she said, if my womb quickened, a husband would be chosen for me, and it would be a good match. A great man such as the Earl of Warwick, who was king in all but name, could have many children by more than one woman, and his bastards brought up in the best houses. I said nothing at the time, but only wondered if she would let me have some of the cinnamon toothpicks she kept in a silver box on her dresser, and thought that she should use more mint in her mouthwash.

There was at Ely House a serving girl by the name of Anne Winchell, who was uncommonly lovely. It was not so much her hair and skin, the color of honey, or her large brown eyes, but the shape of her head and the openness of her face, which was a perfect oval. Her forehead was high and broad, which lent her an angelic appearance. It was her mouth that gave her away, though, being wide and generous, like that of a born whore. Whenever she was addressed, she was so timid that she would start and stare back at the speaker, and all but piss herself. All the young men of the household were smitten with her and followed after her as if she were a bitch in season. So much so that Lady Jane threatened to send her back to her family of destitute cotters who lived near Abingdon, and who were glad to be rid of her. John Dudley took pity on Anne, and said she could stay on, and be instructed in proper manners, and perhaps taught to read, so a position could be found for her in a good house.

I was furious when he took me aside and told me I would be the one to bring her along. Looking back, I am sure he thought to humble me. I felt myself ill-treated.
and began to despise this pretty upstart. She was an earnest but empty-headed girl and very slow. At first I slapped her when she would not learn, and made her weep. Then I thought to simplify my task, and impress his lordship by making Anne copy letters and words from a hornbook, so she might at least learn a good hand, which she did, although she could not tell one word from another. No one paid us any mind, other than Richard Verney, who took an interest in the doings of the household, and all in it, high and low. He liked to make light of my exertions, saying that I would have an easier time of it teaching a goose to talk.

Thus I remained in John Dudley’s good graces, and as winter turned to spring, I was sure that he preferred me to Anne. I cared no more for Anne than a cat does for a mouse, but made a show of being her friend, and giving her good counsel, since she had no protectors at Ely House, except Thomas Blount, a Dudley ward, who was entranced with her. Someone such as I had considerable liberty. When I was not called to sit at table for supper or attend to Joan and Francis, I liked to roam the grounds of Ely House. Whether she had followed me or had some errand to run, I do not know, but some time later Anne came to me one afternoon, while no one else was near, and told me in a very plaintive, tearful way that she was to have a baby, and that it was by John Dudley, and that she was miserable, as she was being kept from him. And would I write to him for her, since he was a kind master, and she believed he would help her. I promised her I would, and told her she could copy the note in her own hand, and sign it, and I would take it to John Dudley on her behalf. Only those who have never known the pangs of jealousy will fail to grasp my motive for what I did next, which was to write a letter that was in
no way humble or beseeching, but bold and greedy. In it, Anne demanded to be
given money to buy a potion of burdock root to rid herself of the baby, and also be
given a large sum for her silence, otherwise she would denounce him to Lady Jane,
and expose his lechery. I bade Anne copy and sign the letter, which I sealed and
delivered to his lordship, with an air of innocence.

All that happened next took place quickly. John Dudley fell into a fury and
denounced Anne as a wanton, and demanded that she be sent back the next day to
her family at Abingdon. I was most pleased, and no one but Thomas Blount seemed
troubled by Anne’s tears and protestations. That evening, she hung herself from a
rafter in the stables, and was found there by young Blount, who took her body
down. An inquest was held, and it was ruled that Anne had broken her neck in a
fall, and did not commit self murder. This was arranged so that Anne’s family
would not be disgraced, and her body could be given a Christian burial. There was
talk among the servants that Anne had committed self murder, that she was with
child, and her family should be grateful for what the Dudleys had done for her.
Lady Alice deemed it a good time to leave Ely House, and return to the Troutbeck’s
home in Lancashire. While I was packing for Francis and Joan, I was visited by
Richard Verney, who called out a jovial, “How now?” and gave me sly look, as one
who recognizes a kindred spirit, which offended me. I threw a shoe at him, which
only made him laugh, and shut the door in his face. Outside I remember I could
hear the sounds of the London streets that I might never again visit, and the call of
the vendors, shouting out, “What do you lack?” And I sat down and wept as one
inconsolable. For I felt as if were being cast out of the Garden of Eden.
Lady Alice decided I should spend more time with my good father and mother at Stanfield Hall, and I arrived home in a state of misery and despair. I kept to my room, emerging only to go to church and to take meals in the great hall, where I found even the best eel pies unappetizing, and the company of my family tedious, their manners boorish and all they did common and low. I was oppressed by the midges that arrived in June, and peeved by my maid, who suffered from a catarrh, and was continually wiping her nose with the back of her hand, until I could bear it no more and sent her away. Thus every day was unrelentingly dull and oppressive. All that changed by the middle of summer when Robert Kett, an uncle on my mother’s side, rode at the head of a riot of peasants waving pitchforks in the streets of Norwich and took as prisoners many of the gentry, including my own stepbrothers. Yet I gave no thought to their well being at all, and felt instead that I had been brought back to life and hope when I learned that John Dudley and his sons, Robert and Ambrose, would come to Stanfield Hall with a force of armed men to put down the rebels.

The day they arrived, I stood at my window overlooking the sweeping meadows that lie beyond the stone walls of Stanfield Hall, and saw the usually placid scene transformed. It was the first and last time I witnessed such a spectacle. Ten thousand men bore down upon us, wave upon wave of soldiers on foot and on horseback, clad in leather and carrying pikes and banners colored blue, white and green, and bearing the Dudley’s insignia of the bear and ragged staff. At the very front of this valorous tumult was none other than the Earl of Warwick himself, mounted on a black charger, and clad in a suit of silver armor. As he drew near, I
thought I saw him glance upward, and I all but threw myself out the window, waving a green silk scarf he had given me, and which before I had made damp with my tears.

I soon learned how great men find time before and after a battle to sit at table to eat and talk, and look at maps, not only to plan an attack, but also to study property lines and what land can be divided amongst the victors. All appetites must be satisfied, and alliances crafted. And this is how even the maiden who will never hold a weapon plays a role in warfare. For a wedding can make firm allies of families who each have something to barter, whether it be a title or silver. My father saw fit to turn his back and did not inquire where I went or with whom when the Dudleys were in residence at Stanfield. When my uncle’s corpse was hung in chains on the battlements of Norwich Castle, I celebrated. For I was certain I would be allowed to return to London, this time to stay at the home of the Scotts, good friends of my family, and that this sojourn would involve frequent visits to Ely House. It was thought by one and all that I was being measured for a wedding gown to be a wife to one of Dudley sons. For the sake of appearances, whenever I visited Ely House, I spent time with both Guildford and Robert. I found Guildford to be very sweet, although too weak minded, and Robert to be as virile and skillful with women as his father. Yet he was so disdainful of my company, since I was only the daughter of a grazer, albeit a wealthy one, that I soon became resentful and cold.

One evening, Lord Robert spent the night with his friends, and returned quite drunk, and came into my room. There he stood over my bed and told me that if we were to marry, that he would first see if I were worth bedding. His speech was
slurred, and his gait unsteady. He swayed a bit then sank down on the bed and ordered me to remove his shoes and pants. I shook my head and pulled my covers up to my neck, which he found amusing. He was laughing when he lay down fully dressed and did his best to reach under the covers to caress me, but found his lust thwarted by my heavy nightdress. He commanded me to take it off, which I pretended to do, pulling back from him and fumbling with the strings of my garment. In a short while, he shut his eyes and began snoring as he lay next to me. I turned my back and slept as best I could, although angry and uneasy, and did not stir when I heard him wake and leave. By spring time, I was with child. John Dudley was pleased, and decided that he liked me so well that he would keep me at Ely House as his daughter-in-law. He knew very well that Robert would not be pleased by any woman he chose for him, unless it were you, but that was nonsense.

Robert soon learned he was to be wed to a maid whose family would lend its weight and purse to his father’s cause in the north. Yet he thought himself poorly treated to be chosen to marry the daughter of a Norfolk wool man, though my father was also a powerful landowner and highly regarded by his peers. John Dudley was unyielding, however, and plans were laid to marry the two of us in June, the day after son John was to wed Anne Seymour, which infuriated Robert. I heard Lady Jane contesting with her husband behind closed doors, since Robert would be humiliated to have King Edward and Princess Elizabeth attend his wedding, held the day after that of his older brother. John Dudley was much more close with his money and less extravagant than his son, as I was soon to find out, and said that Robert must be content with a simple affair, and curb his pride. I knew as well that
Lady Jane had been told that I was with child, and that it was Robert’s baby.

Whether Robert knew the child was his father’s or thought it might be his, after spending the night in my bed, I did not know.

You attended our wedding at Sheen Palace, so I do not need to recount to you how much inferior it was to the festivities of the previous day. Or how Robert flaunted his disdain for me, and demonstrated to you by his manner and words that I meant nothing to him, that he cared only for you and came to this marriage as one taken hostage. Perhaps that has been his one proof of constancy, that he has never wavered in his devotion to you, yet that only rankled me. The night of our nuptials, we were taken to Ely House where all was made ready for us. Robert was drunk, and fell on the bed fully dressed, taking up all the room, and made me so miserable that I pulled out the trundle bed and slept there the entire night, with my hand on my belly where I was keeping safe the infant I prayed would be a son.

This arrangement we continued, unless of course my young husband spent the night with his friends visiting his favorite brothels. That our marriage was unhappy and the worst sort of fraud was a secret to no one. Robert was indifferent to me and showed me his talent for cruelty. One day he walked in upon me as my maid was helping me into my kirtle, and he cast a curious look at my belly. Then approached and laid his hand on the swelling, as his father had sometimes done when we were alone, which was less and less. I thought for moment how alike the two Dudley men, father and son, were in looks, how they moved with the same unstudied grace. Our faces were quite close, for he was leaning over me. He spoke to me softly, so that my maid could not hear, and told me he would never love me or
my baby, if it lived. His voice was as sharp as a knife when he said he doubted it would, because I was better suited to be a whore than a mother. I recoiled from him as from a snake, and was so frightened that I held my tongue.

I complained bitterly to John, to no avail. And I soon learned that no man wants a tedious mistress who whimpers and nags. Two months later, my womb failed. I could not keep my precious bastard in me, and he bled out so quickly that I scarcely knew what had happened. An old crone wrapped him in linen, and turned her back on me to take him away. But I cried and struggled, and would not be quiet until I looked at him. I was given a damp bundle stained by my own blood, and it was this I unwrapped to see my son. His fists were shut tight and knees drawn up against his chest, that would never draw a breath. His mouth was turned down in a frown, as if he refused to forgive me. I felt a pang in my womb, which had been cursed—by my husband’s words and also by the guilt that was mine alone.

I fell into a state of profound melancholia that lasted for weeks, during which time I prayed a great deal and ate very little. The doctors feared I would die, and bled me until I was white. During this same time, John Dudley lost all interest in me, for he feared greatly for the failing health of the young king. I decided to live in order to spite my husband, who seemed quite hopeful when he was told I might die. Robert and I were sent away to Somerset House, where you named him keeper, and we lived very well there for awhile, keeping out of each other’s way. Yet as you know, there have always been three persons in this marriage, with me being the third unwelcome party. I did not resent you until the day I heard the rumor that John Dudley planned to divorce Lady Jane and marry you, and through you he
would aspire to the crown. When I went to him, weeping and raging, he only laughed. And that is how I learned of the plan to have Edward declare both you and Mary to be barred from succession, by reason of the shame attached to both of your births, and to name Lady Jane Gray to succeed your sickly little brother when he died, as all knew he would.

I wonder when it was that you first became jealous of me? Surely not while you were kept in the Tower, and wrote poems and little notes to amuse yourself and my husband. Though I was allowed to visit Robert, and we shared a bed together as man and wife. John Dudley saw me in his cell only once, to say farewell and beg me to go to Robert in good faith, and play the loving wife. So that if his son went to the block, he might leave behind an heir. During my visits to my husband, I did my best to consummate our marriage. Yet he was so enamored of you, and so hostile to me, that I soon ceased to hide my true feelings. We made a pact, and agreed that I would no longer come to the visit him. We both felt at peace, as if we had been released. Yet fate had decreed that Robert Dudley would survive, as well as our blighted marriage, and that you and I would trade places. Now you are at liberty, while I am a prisoner. I have few consolations, except the knowledge that by living I can deny my husband what he wants most. If I die and thereby fail, then you will be given a choice I did not have.

For my intention is to urge you to hold fast to your resolve to remain unwed, which I believe you will, having already bedded Robert. Perhaps you think he is the only man you can marry, since you are no longer a maid, and Robert is your husband in all but name. I have no doubt that you will not be moved to act against
your will by anyone, least of all me, especially as regards such a weighty matter. I freely admit that my first desire is to stymy my husband’s ambitions and deny him happiness. Now that you have read all that I have to say, disguising nothing, you may judge for yourself what sort of wife I have been to him, and what sort of husband he has been to me, and the great misfortune that has befallen me for having loved one Dudley and married another when I might have lived well, and kept my money and my health, if I had remained a maid.
Chapter Twenty: Full of Dishonor

Monday September 16, 1820

“A servant of the Spanish ambassador revealed to Cecil that his master had alleged that ‘the Queen was secretly married to Lord Robert,’ with full details of their relationship composed in a sonnet, ‘full of dishonor to the Queen and Lord Robert.’”

From Elizabeth I’s Calendar of State Papers, quoted in Death and the Virgin by Chris Skidmore

I woke to a rude commotion from below, and cursed all early risers. A man can think as well lying down as standing, and so I lay abed pondering all that had transpired yesterday. After reading the letter written by Amy, I was deeply unsettled. Still, the Widow had done my conscience a great service. For I knew at last how Anne had died. And I was able, once and for all, to cast off my suspicions that Dudley had a hand in it. Yet I remained unconsolled as to my recent failures in the matter of the Amy’s murder—no matter that she helped bring about her own death. The knowledge that Amy was partly to blame for Anne’s destruction should have extinguished any flame that still burned within me to learn who murdered her—that and Mistress Blanche’s assurances that Nokes was guilty. Yet it had not. For I was still unsatisfied as to the identity of those involved. Mistress Blanche said that Amy had been slain by Father Nokes. Yet Nokes insisted that Amy was already dead when he arrived that Sunday.

Everything I had learned since then led me toward the unhappy conclusion that Nokes had been hired to murder Amy, but was moved by his own strange passions to spare her. This left me wondering who it was that had succeeded where he had failed and what part Verney
might have played in such an under-handed scheme, and whether it could be tied to either Cecil or the Queen herself. I was therefore vexed and uncertain as to what to do next, other than to await orders from Dudley. I expected to be told this day that my services were no longer required. All of Dudley’s passion to learn how his wife had died seemed to have been replaced by new found wisdom that such revelations would not serve him or Elizabeth. All doubts that could not be buried along with Amy must be dismissed. All dissenting voices would be ignored or silenced. Woe to him who would not concede that her death was a mishap, the result of sad misfortune.

As for Mrs. Odingsells, she saw that I remained troubled, and sought to ease my distress. She spoke kind words, and encouraged me to stay awhile, and rest in her bed, which she assured me was far more comfortable than my hard pallet, and where I would not be disturbed. I accepted her offer, although I did not go to bed alone, or take sleep for my tonic. I was much consoled by her gentle caresses. We shared a supper together that evening in her apartment, and spoke of trivial, pleasant matters. All of her trunks were packed. She told me that she planned to leave early the next day, taking Pirgo with her, and return to her family home in Braintree. It was there, we agreed, that we would meet again, as soon as I was able to come to her.

She gave me another sealed letter that she asked me to deliver to Blanche Parry, who was no longer in London, but had returned to Windsor, which is where would I find her. I kissed her face and hand, and bid her farewell that evening, as we both agreed was wise. Then returned to my own room where I spent the night alone, although I found my solitary pallet to be more lonely than it had been before. I was cheered by the hope that I would soon see the
Widow again, for she had encouraged me to pay a call on her. Before we parted company, she had brushed back my hair, and told me that her middle name was Margery, and I must call her that, since it was the name favored by her friends. I found I liked the sound of it.

I rose feeling much restored. A mellow light filled my sleeping room, and I judged the day to be fair and the sky clear after yesterday’s rainfall. A fresh round of cursing below disturbed my reverie, and I threw open one shutter far enough to look down and see the tip of a pointed red cap worn by a little man who was the owner of a voice as loud as Tom of Lincoln.

“Keep those mules still, ye nodgcombs! Or the whole chest entire will be on the ground. Then we’re done for.” The lead-lined chest in question, immense and heavy, had come off the end of a cart, one end in the mud and the other tilting upward and to one side. A wheel on the left side of the sagging cart had struck a rock and come to grief. Four yeoman stood off to one side, each striking various poses of men who were vexed and all but spent.

“Od rat it, Toby!” said the biggest of the three. “I’ll not be made a cripple for lifting a burial box.”

“And me the same,” said another.

This admission of defeat incited the man in the red cap. “Fie on all of ye, an’ the day ye was begat.” He turned toward the driver of the cart, who was holding the reigns of two mules.

“If I told thee once, Ned, I told thee three times to put a chain across the back o’ the cart.”

“An’ I told thee that a chain is no good, Tobias, for it will scratch the wood! The carpenter were most particular about that!”
“If thou know so much, then what be thy prescription for getting this here chest offa the ground?”

The man named Ned rubbed his chin. “I don’t rightly know, Tobias. Gimme a moment or two to ponder.”

At this juncture, I decided to interject, and leaned out the window. I had seen the stage hands at Blackfriars host scenery almost as heavy using ropes and pulleys. “Why don’t you tie a heavy rope around the box, then throw the other end over this branch here, and hoist it up that way? A pulley would help if you have one.” The little man looked up and squinted first at me, then at the branch. The other four did the same.

“We could get five or six men on the rope, Toby,” said the one called Ned. “It might work, if we can find a rope that’s stout enough, so’s it don’t break. Two ropes might be better.”

The man Tobias spat on the ground. “Right then! Quit standing about. Go find a rope, the thicker the better. And ask after a pulley.”

I closed the shutter and sat down on my pallet. After wishing nothing more than to be free of Cumnor Hall and its occupants, I found myself reluctant to be sent away, knowing I had failed to learn who had killed Amy. Perhaps I was not sufficiently astute, or my foes so much more so that they had beaten me. I felt as if I had been told to follow the footprints along a path, only to find the path swept clean by some unknown hand. When I was a small boy and failed to master some task, my mother often came to my rescue. It is one thing to be clever, she said, and another to be diligent. For diligence is its own reward, and is also the best safeguard against surrender and defeat. It was then the idea came to me to study one more time the pair
of stairs where Amy had fallen. I washed myself in haste, and ate my breakfast in the same manner.

My mind had cleared along with the heavens, and I resolved that Cumnor Hall would at last give up its secrets. I felt a certain heady freedom as well in the knowledge that I was acting on my own. I decided to first examine the passageway on the ground floor that lead to an exterior door, the only door from which one could gain entrance to the inside of the grange without passing through the main gate. It was this door that Amy must have left unlatched on Sunday to admit Nokes. I was glad to see that there was no one about, so that I could think undisturbed, and consider what Amy might have felt and done that Sunday.

By late that afternoon, it must have become apparent that her scheme to kill Dudley had failed, that he had once again broken his word, and that Nokes had either abandoned her or been captured. She would have had no way of knowing that Dudley never intended to meet with her and that Nokes was sleeping off a drunk. Perhaps she was frantic, fearful that Nokes had been found out by Dudley or the Widow Odingsells, and was wondering who had betrayed her. She may have felt a rush of panic, now that she was alone, and fearful that she was in danger. It was possible that she thought to secure the unlatched door, to prevent anyone sent by Dudley from stealing in and attacking her. Yet it was more likely, I thought, that she was afraid to venture down the dark hallway by herself, lest someone were lying in wait. I stood at the bottom of the stairs and looked to my right, in the direction of the corridor. If an assassin were lurking in the shadows, Amy would not have seen him without entering the hallway.
Next I decided to retrace Amy’s steps from her apartment on the second floor and went quickly back up the dog-leg staircase, and stood at the top. How many times did she stand in this spot that Sunday, watching and listening for Dudley to arrive? Would she have been so distracted that she had not heard someone approach her from behind? Very possibly. But her body had been found at the bottom of the staircase. Why would her assassin bother to move it and set the bloody hood back on her head? Especially if he wanted her death to appear to be an accident? Also, Nokes had said that he found her body lying on the stairs, while the servants all swore that her corpse lay on the floor at the bottom of the second set of stairs.

I walked slowly down the eight steps from the head of the stairs to the landing, stopping at each stair and kneeling to search out anything that might have gone unnoticed. A scrap of torn fabric, or a few drops of dried blood that might tell me what had taken place that day. Was it possible she had let fall anything she carried with her? Some piece of jewelry or a note? I found nothing but persisted. While it was impossible to see from the top of the stairs who might be waiting below, the landing was another matter. It was also closer to where her body had been found, after all, and where the stairs became more steep and jogged sharply to the right. From that vantage point, I thought, she might better see and hear anyone who arrived from outside. She could also retreat without being seen. Perhaps it was where she had been attacked, and struck on the head, or pushed.

I stopped and let the stones of the old grange speak to me. If Amy had been weary or ill, there was nothing here to support her. She might have leaned against the wall. Here, I thought, on this side, where she could not be seen from below while she waited and rested a few moments and fought to calm herself. I leaned against the wall, as she might have done, closing
my eyes, and felt a chill draft from below. I listened as well for any sound that would have reached this remote stairwell, and heard only pigeons cooing and a dog barking in the courtyard. I opened my eyes, and gazed down a moment at my own feet, one of which all but covered a deep crack between the landing and the wall. I noticed how the floor of the landing sloped toward the crack. Something that looked to be a piece of glass caught my eye, and I bent down to retrieve perhaps the last thing that Amy had held – a small, brown vial. I recognized it at once, for it was the same as all the other vials of mithridate that I had found in her room. I held it up to the light and saw at once that the wax seal had been broken and the small cork stopper was missing. A few drops of liquid remained inside. I sniffed it, taking care not to breathe too deeply, and thought it smelled bitter, but more than that I could not say. For even the most lethal bane can be scentless, or its scent disguised by other herbs.

This was one of Amy’s vials of mithridate, prescribed to her by Dr. Bailey! She must have dropped it as she stood here on the landing, where it fell and rolled into the crack. There it had remained since her death. I knew that she prized each vial, and carried one with her wherever she went. She drank from it whenever she felt the need and had come to depend upon its salutary effects. This bottle had not been here long. If it fell from her hand as she fainted, that would explain why she did not recover it. If the contents had been tainted with poison, she might very well have been sickened before she broke her neck, which would account for no one having heard her cry out, and also why she did not use her hands to break her fall.

If Amy had been poisoned, then the poisoner must have tampered with the vial before it was sealed, which pointed to Dr. Bailey. There was another possibility. Mayhap someone had traded one of the sealed bottles of mithridate for one exactly like it, but contaminated with
some lethal herb. I had spent enough time at court to hear reports of how Italian poisoners laced wine with serums made from infusions of deadly nightshade and hemlock. Or mixed the same poisons into perfumes and oils to be dabbed upon the skin. And what of the good Dr. Bailey? He was no fool, for he had refused outright to prescribe to Amy when Sir Richard had sent for him at Compton Verney. Why would a physician who was jealous of his reputation and fearful of being accused of peddling poison be converted to such a risky scheme? It seemed much more likely that Verney or someone else had directed Pirgo to secretly substitute one vial for another. Pirgo would have believed any lie that Verney whispered in her ear. And she might gladly have taken a handful of silver to do it, after being told that Amy was setting a trap for Dudley—for it was plain that she was fond of her master but loathed her mistress.

Whoever had planned to poison Amy no doubt expected her death to appear natural. The poisoners must have been caught off guard and therefore dismayed to hear that she had died from a broken neck—arousing suspicions and setting off an unwanted investigation. For it was purely a matter of chance that Amy had selected the poisoned vial from her drawer on the same day she had sent her servants away and hoped to carry out her own scheme to have Dudley ambushed and killed. Perhaps Dudley or Verney or both were responsible for tampering with Amy’s mithridate. It would certainly explain why Dudley was shocked to hear his wife had died from a fall.

I could not dismiss what the beggar had told me about the dark-haired gentlewoman who had paid a call on Bailey not long before Lady Amy had come to see him in Oxford. Was it possible that the Widow Odingsells had convinced Bailey that Amy was a threat to the Queen, and that he, a staunch Protestant, and fearful of being accused of shirking his duty to his
sovereign, had agreed to give Lady Amy her usual vials of mithridate, with one among them filled with poison? Or perhaps she had tried to convince him and failed. Shortly after Amy had been found dead, Bailey had fled Oxford and left no word as to where he was going. No doubt he feared being summoned by the jury. Still, I could not see why the Queen would order Mrs. Odingsells to poison Amy, since Elizabeth would realize that her death, if deemed suspicious, might ruin Dudley. Unless, of course, she wanted to rid herself of Dudley and had found a way to do it. It seemed more likely that someone close to the Queen saw Amy as a threat or wished to blacken Dudley’s name. If allies of the Queen had arranged to poison Amy, they would have known they were taking a risk that the Queen might eventually marry Dudley. The killers may have deemed Amy an even greater threat than the risk posed by making Dudley a widower. Despite everything that Amy had said in her letter to the Queen, I suspected it disguised an unspoken hatred for Elizabeth. Perhaps others thought so as well.

What caused me more pain than I wished to admit was the notion that the Widow Odingsells might be a party to such treachery. It would be the rare man indeed who found his ardor quickened to discover his bedmate was a poisoner. I felt shame and a sense of betrayal as well when I considered the possibility that the Widow had helped to carry out Amy’s murder, then feigned innocence as she reeled me in like a perch on a hook. Every kindness she had shown me, every tender glance was now suspect. What a fool I had been to be so easily taken in by her beauty and gracious ways. Had I seen her, not as she truly was, but as I wanted her to be? If Mrs. Odingsells had solicited Dr. Bailey, I doubted that she had done so without consulting Mistress Blanche, and the letter with which I had been entrusted was the introduction I required to gain another audience with that formidable dame.
First, however, I decided I must attend to another pressing matter that had weighed upon my mind. Abingdon lay to the south on my way to Windsor Castle. It would be no trouble to stop and pay a call on young Master Cave. I thought he had more to tell me. Of all the people I had met of late, he was the only one, other than Nokes, who knew the grange well enough to venture into the crypt after dark. I suspected that he was the hooded stranger who had eluded me in the dark. I did not call for a stable boy, but saddled Kerwiden myself, and galloped down the lane leading to the high road to Abingdon. As I neared the village, the scent of wood smoke drew me on until I saw Ady’s house. It was only a short wait before I spied a likely looking lad walking down the road. I issued a summons in the form of a half crown held aloft. He saw it glint, and ran forward with an eager good morrow. We soon struck a bargain. If he would watch my horse, and guard it well, I would reward him with another half crown upon my return.

I wore my best sword, which had been recently sharpened and oiled. For a man who travels alone must show his steel. I confess I was spoiling to use it. I am no ruffian, yet there is something to be said for making a point with a blade as superior to mere rhetoric. I did not expect to meet with any resistance from Cave. However, the last time I had carried a letter to Mistress Blanche, I had been followed and molested. This time, I would not be without my weapon. I approached Ady’s cottage with caution. Cave was as skittish as a hare and I feared I might already be too late. If he had lingered in Abingdon for any reason, I would lay my hands on him, ungently, and demand to know what he was doing in the crypt the night before last.

I did not bang on the front door like a bawker peddling pins. Instead, I stole up on Ady’s cottage from the rear, and was aided by the dense shrubbery thereabouts. I came across a handsome Taproot mare tethered to a tree. I was sure she belonged to Verney. No smoke rose
from either of the two chimneys. I took my time, listening and watching for any signs of activity in the stable or the yard in back of the house. Ady did not keep any geese to raise an alarm, for which I was glad. A half dozen lean hogs snuffled about in their pen. I drew near and disturbed a napping cat that flattened its ears and slunk away. I stood below a window and listened. From above, I heard a voice, faint and shrill, no doubt Cave. And then a thud, as of something being thrown or dropped. I slipped in through the back door, taking care to be silent, and passed through the kitchen to a hallway that led to a narrow stairway connecting the first floor with the second story. There I halted, all my senses on edge, and heard Cave’s wheedling voice. His words were indistinct, his tone pleading. This was followed by a rebuke from another speaker, whom I knew at once to be Verney.

“Where were you planning to go?” Silence.

“Beachy Head or Seaford, I suppose, to set sail on some leaky shallop?” I could hear Verney pacing on the floorboards above me.

“What is this?” I strained my ears but could only hear Cave mumble something by way of a reply, which I could not make out.

“And this? Speak up! And cease whimpering like a Spanish dog.” I advanced a few more steps.

“Hmmm. A Compendium of the Numerous Incidents of Witchcraft in England, How the Evil Designs of Satan’s Servants Were Thwarted by the Most Righteous Cunning Man Howard Ady of Berkshire. As Told by Theobald Cave.”
This was followed by a scornful laugh. “What do you intend to do with this miscellaneous hodge-podge?” While Verney interrogated Cave, I continued my slow progress up the stairs, taking care to avoid being given way by a creaking tread.

“Let us see, Sir Spaniel. Ady is dead and Nokes is being anatomized in the Tower. That leaves you.” I heard Cave stifle a sob.

“Stop mewling, you vile wretch!” I drew my sword. This time, I thought, it will be Verney who will be surprised.

“You are a fool, and do you know why? Because you do not realize that I will kill you. It will be no trouble at all. An accident would be best. What if I were to set fire to your papers and the house with you in it?”

“It’s not here,” Cave squeaked. I heard Verney lunge, followed by the strangled gasp of a man with a dagger pressed to his throat.

“That is better, Sir Spaniel, but not good enough. Now tell me where you hid it. Or I shall slit your throat, and leave you to bleed out in the pig sty where the swine will strip the flesh from your bones.”

I thought it a good time to interrupt. My plan was simple, to subdue Verney and take Cave with me. Verney’s back was to the door, and I could easily have run him through with my sword. I am no assassin, however, and I also hoped to make him talk. Unfortunately, as soon as Cave saw me, his gaping maw gave me away, and Verney spun about to confront me. His
dagger was no match for my sword, and I slashed his right arm and made him drop his blade. Alarm was written upon his face, and also confusion, which pleased me.

I stepped forward, forcing him up against the wall, my sword point piercing his silken doublet below his ribs. “What do you have to say for yourself now, cousin?” All about us were scattered papers. Cave was breathing heavily, and sitting with his back against the wall, holding his hand to his throat to stop it from bleeding. Verney glared at me, but said nothing.

“No one has yet cut out your tongue, sir. Speak!” Verney was not one to put his life on the line for a cause, and I waited to see what fresh lies he would try out on me.

“I have a proposal,” he said, “which will be to our mutual advantage.” He lifted one eyebrow. “It will be better for both of us if we strike a bargain.”

“What you mean to say is that it will be better for you.” His forehead was damp with sweat, which I found most gratifying.

Nonetheless, he managed to appear offended. “Why don’t you tell me what you really want, Blount? Your little lap dog is not worth rescuing.”

“I am taking Cave with me,” I answered. “But first I will hear you admit that you are a traitor who has been spying for Cecil.”

He did not even blink. “What of it?”

“And that it was you who put the dint in Amy’s head to make it appear she had been attacked.”
He curled his lip. “You know very well you cannot prove it, and no one wants you to.” I drew my sword upward, ripping open his doublet and pressing the tip into the soft spot beneath his chin, which made him flinch.

“You knew,” I said, “that Sir Charles hired the priest to kill her, and did nothing to prevent it. You wanted Amy to die. Either way, you would have won because you had two horses in the race. And you were betting Dudley would lose.”

If his hands were free, I was sure he would have applauded. “Well done, sir.”

“I’ll wager it must have been you who bribed Pirgo to put the vial of poison in with Amy’s medicine. How much did it cost you?”

“Not a penny, Thomas. It wasn’t me. Just as it wasn’t me who seduced Anne. As to everything that took place on Sunday, it is too deep a matter for you to plumb. You’ll never get to the bottom of it.”

“Mayhap,” I said. “Yet there is the more pressing matter of the papers that Nokes removed from Lady Amy’s apartment, and what Cave stole from Nokes, which is why you are here now.”

A sly look stole across his face. “You still do not know what it is, do you?”

“That,” I countered, “is what Cave is about to tell me. And when I lay my hands upon this ridiculous piece of paper, I will do with it as I please. I may simply choose to burn it!”

This sobered him. “That would be most foolish,” he said. “Just because you are cursed with a conscience is no reason to add stupidity to your short comings. Besides,” he said, “this
piece of paper, as you call it, may explain a great deal about why Amy was murdered.

Something you have so far failed to grasp.”

Even though I had him pinned against the wall, Verney had once again succeeded in unsettling me. Still, my strategy had not changed. I was in control and would decide what to do with him once I had Cave in hand. To my right I heard a scuttling sound, and glanced away to see Cave on his hands and knees, crab walking his way toward the door and freedom, and scooping up scattered papers as he went.

I was distracted for a moment only, but it was long enough for Verney to use one gloved hand to knock away the blade at his throat. He spun to one side and drew his rapier, which I had neglected to take from him—a foolish oversight on my part, since Verney had studied with an Italian fencing master who taught him how to take the buttons off of a man’s shirt with the flick of a blade. He quickly reminded me that his footwork was far superior to mine, and forced me to parry and block a series of slashing cuts. The more room he had in which to maneuver, the greater the hazard to me. I managed to beat him back with a crude but brutal short attack. We crossed swords several times in the cramped space before I blocked his lighter blade and sent it flying. He was never as strong as I, but he was as slippery as quicksilver. He sprang to one side with catlike grace and bent to retrieve his sword. This time I could see what he was about, and kicked it away before he could lay his hands on his weapon, then clubbed him rather viciously on the side of his head with the hilt of my blade. He fell to the ground, hitting hard, and I knew he would not come to his senses any time soon.
Fearful that Cave would make good his escape, I pounded down the stairs after him. If he had not stopped in the yard to collect a few scattered sheets, I might not have caught up with him. I twisted one arm behind his back and seized the bundle of papers he had pressed to his chest. He struggled and kicked until I tightened my grip and made him yelp.

“Don’t be an idiot,” I said. “I shall help you if you cease thrashing! But first we must do something with Sir Richard.”

I stuffed Cave’s papers inside my jerkin, and he whimpered and went limp. As long as I held hostage his precious manuscript, he was mine to command. I ordered him to fetch some twine, and follow me upstairs. After securing Verney’s hands and feet, I threw him over my shoulder and hauled him down the steps. Once out of doors, I dumped him on the dirt floor of the woodshed. He moaned but did not open his eyes. I emptied his purse and found a generous handful of crowns, several silver angels, a dozen shillings and copper. Next I shut the woodshed door and secured it with a piece of wire. When Verney came to, he would have some trouble breaking free, then be forced to walk, because I intended to take his mare. I left his sword by his side.

I turned to Cave. “You’re coming with me.” He was petulant but compliant and I let him return to his room to gather his meager belongings. I explained that we would be riding south, and he could take Verney’s mare as far as Windsor. From there he could buy a seat on a carriage to London, where he could find passage to the continent or vanish into the city’s maize of tenements. As proof of my goodwill, I gave him all the coin I took from Verney, save a half crown I kept to pay the boy who was watching Kerwiden. Cave brightened, and was effusive in
his gratitude, since I had given him more than enough to pay his way for several months if he did not spend it too freely. We walked together down the high road, leading Verney’s mare, and found my mount under the tree where I had left her, with the boy standing watch. He sauntered off with Verney’s half crown in his fist as Cave and I set out at a brisk pace.

Though Cave pleaded poor horsemanship, as I knew he would, I reckoned the ride to be no more than four hours south, and assured him that he could last that long. He seemed to rally as he put a few miles between himself and Abingdon. I pointed out that I had rescued him a second time, and he declared himself to be once more in my debt, and my servant, and other such obsequious cant. So that I wished only for silence, and snarled at him, calling him Sir Spaniel.

He shot a wounded look my way. “I would be most grateful, sir, if you would not address me as such.” I was content to let him sulk, since his peevishness was preferable to his prattling.

We rode on for several miles in silence before he spoke again, as I knew he would. “Do you think, Sir Thomas, that Sir Richard would have killed me?”

I took my time before answering. “That would depend, I suppose, upon what you know, which he would have gotten out of you, and then what further use would he have had for you?”

He was very pale, and his neck was slow to stop bleeding from the cut made by Verney’s dagger. “I very much fear he will find me.”
“He may not,” I said, “but only if you vanish, and stay absolutely quiet. Then you may cease to matter to him and the rest of the world.”

As soon as I said this, he appeared crest fallen, which provoked me. “Only a popinjay desires to be noticed by powerful persons, Master Cave. There is no greater curse.”

I was disgusted to see that he took offense. “It is not myself,” he said, “but my words which I wish to be known, or rather read.”

I snorted. “Then why do you not write of saints, as did Rudborne?”

“The stories of saints have all been told,” he said. “I wanted to write true tales of witches to enlighten the ignorant.”

I slowed the gait on my horse, the better to skewer him with accusations. “I know it was you,” I said, “who went down to the crypt the other night, Cave. And why you were there, prowling about in the dark—which was to hide whatever Nokes took from Lady Amy, and which you stole from him. You were sure that the crypt was the safest hiding place in the Berkshires. But you changed your mind when you saw me there. Didn’t you, Sir Spaniel?”

“Please do not call me that!”

“By now you have either found another hiding place or decided to take it all with you. And I am betting it is the latter.” I saw panic on his face and brought my horse up alongside his and took the reigns, in case he thought to flee. “You may as well tell me, Cave, since I am the only one who will let you live after you surrender what you have stolen.”

“I have stolen nothing! I merely came by it.”
“Ah! You came by it. As honestly as a pirate comes by treasure.” He sank in his saddle and I saw I had hit my mark. “Nokes told me that you stole something valuable from him, and he came to Ady’s house to get it back.”

The mention of Nokes name brought him back, and he became even more distressed and indignant. “Nokes is a villain and a drunkard! If I had not stepped in, no one would know the truth about the Queen.”

At last, I thought, we come to the heart of the matter. “And what pray tell is that, Master Cave?”

He thrust out his chin, as if daring me to refute him. “What most of England suspects but will not dare say—that the Queen may wear her hair long and leave her bosom bare for all the world to see, but she is a maid in name only.”

I could not conceal my astonishment at his temerity. “Have you not heard of Mother Dowe of Brentwood? Sent to prison this past June for slandering the Queen, saying she will have a baby by Dudley?”

“Tis not mere idle talk. The Queen will not agree to wed a prince for a good reason. Dudley is the only man she may marry, for it was he who took her maidenhead. Lady Amy said as much.”

I could scarcely believe my ears. “You are not only a witless fool, Cave, but a brazen liar. Lady Amy did not know you, nor ever deign to speak to you, let alone seek you out as a confidant.”
“She knew Nokes,” he said, still defiant. “And I knew him better than most. Whenever he had two cups of wine in him, he babbled like a fountain, then woke the next day remembering nothing. I, on the other hand, have a flawless memory.”

His smugness irritated me. “Yet no judgement, for Nokes is as mad as a moon calf. He thinks every toothless gammer is Satan’s anointed hag. Moreover, he loathes the Queen, and you have been infected by his lies.”

He gave me a look filled with reproach. “I do not lie!” he spat back at me. “I have proof in writing. A love letter, in the Queen’s own hand, written to Dudley when he was a prisoner, then taken from him by his wife.” Cave himself was laughable, but I could not dismiss his claim outright, since I knew that Amy had visited Dudley in his cell. Was it possible that she had stolen such a letter and intended to use it to blackmail the Queen?

Still, I would not give Cave the satisfaction of thinking he had something of value. “Have you considered that this letter of which you speak might be a worthless forgery?”

“I am quite certain it is not. For many reasons that I choose not to divulge.”

This last remark provoked me. “Let me be clear. You claim you have a letter that is genuine, in the Queen’s own hand, which reveals her youthful affair with Dudley. And it is this you hope to barter for money or some favor, provided you manage to stay alive long enough to deliver it. To whom? Sir Charles? Who ordered Nokes to murder Lady Amy? How do you think he would reward you, a trifling nobody, if you came to him with such a thing?”

He hung his head. “I don’t know what to do, Sir Thomas. I am terribly afraid.”
“You should be afraid, you witless marmoset!” I thundered. “For you will be put in manacles with worse to follow when the Queen’s agents get wind of this, if they have not already.”

His eyes began to leak water, which only provoked me. “A sea of lady tears will not save you now!” I let go the reins of his mare in disgust.

He did not look at me, but found his voice. “What would you do, Sir Thomas, if you were me?”

I snorted. “Pray do not insult me by asking me to entertain the preposterous. But give me some time, and I will think on it. But first,” I said, “you must agree to abandon this mad quest. Even the most diabolical intriguer such as Sir Richard might fail to profit from such a risky scheme. To be a recorder of history, which is what you desire, is entirely different from making it! To go down this road is not only traitorous, but doomed to end in disaster for a hundred reasons that are too subtle for you to grasp. What do you care whom the Queen beds or weds? Leave that to the physicians and bishops! It is none of your affair, Cave, and hardly worth dying for, since your name will be buried along with your mangled corpse. No one will ever know or care what part Theobald Cave played in all of this.”

He hung his head. “I suppose you are right.”

“Of course I am right, you ninny. Now be quiet and let me think.”

We travelled for several more miles before I arrived at a solution. I put forth both my proposal and the terms, and Cave and I came to an agreement. If he would surrender the letter,
I would take charge of it, and give it to someone who would return it to the Queen. I gave him my word as a knight that I would tell no one that it came from him. As for Verney, I assured Cave that he would have no interest in looking for him once he knew I had the letter.

“Then I shall give it to you,” he said, and showed me where he had hidden it inside one of the pages of his manuscript, which was made from a heavy, coarse vellum that he had slit open to create a pouch. I let him retrieve the single sheet.

He hesitated before handing it to me, however. “There is something else you should know about the paper on which the letter is written. Lady Amy said that it was from a blank book made for Elizabeth—that she would recognize it as genuine.”

I took the letter, which was indeed written upon very fine paper made of linen. I glanced at the salutation at the top and the signature at the bottom before placing it the same pouch as the letter for Mistress Blanche. It was written in an elegant hand and addressed to ‘My Dearest Robin.’ It bore a simple signature: ‘Elizabeth.’

Cave became unhappy again as soon as he saw it vanish. He began to sigh and fidget, and I could tell he had something else he wished to say. I set my eyes on the road ahead. “Shut up, Cave! I won’t want to hear another word from you until we reach Windsor.”
Chapter Twenty-one: Two Villains

The Journal of Lady Louisa Stuart

Friday September 15, 1820

“For true it is that men themselves have by use observed that it must be a hard winter when one wolf eateth another.”

Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit (1578) by John Lyly

My visitors arrived sometime after one o’clock in the afternoon yesterday, having ridden here in a rented trap. As they disembarked, I had my first look at them through the window of the library, which commands an excellent view of the circular drive. I saw two men, one of average height and stout, and the other slender and very short. They both wore new leather riding breeches and boots, no doubt purchased for the journey from London to Edinburgh. I could see that they were somewhat the worse for wear. I had arranged for them to be shown to their room so that they might refresh themselves after their long journey and change into evening clothes before joining me for dinner.

They were greeted by Watty’s butler, old Duncan, a rustic whose only concession to his domestic role was a worn frock coat that dates back to the reign of George II. He led the two men to a guest room on the first floor, with the cook’s boy trailing behind and dragging two small trunks. The choice of the room directly below mine occasioned some grumbling on Duncan’s part, because the space is only just done being renovated and required dusting and tidying up. A new carpet has been laid and water damage to a wall repaired over the summer. Like my room, it contains a large four-poster bed with a truckle bed beneath. I prefer the
second-floor bedroom I now occupy because it overlooks a small formal garden in back, and because I enjoy a cheerful fire on a chilly night. The room beneath me is also large and has its own fireplace. Since the two rooms share a chimney, anyone in my room who stands near the mantel can hear conversations taking place below. Every scrape of a chair leg and each spoken word floats upward through the common flue—something made clear to me while the wallpaper hangers were at work. I decided that it was there that Bird and Cave would spend the night.

I do not blush to admit what I did after my guests were shown to their room, which was to go directly to my own room and stand in front of the mantle—the better to eavesdrop on Bird and Cave. I am not in the habit of listening in on private conversations. In fact, I have a positive horror of cluttering my mind with other people’s small talk and domestic contretemps. However, in this instance, I suspected that my two visitors came to Abbotsford with an agenda that might involve taking advantage of Sir Henry and me as well. I am not by nature suspicious. Nonetheless, occasions sometimes arise when it is wise to err on the side of caution, and this was one of them.

At first, most of what I heard from below involved the usual idle chatter about the deplorable state of the roads, followed by remarks about Abbotsford itself—immense and pretentious—and the inevitable bickering over which of them ought to sleep in the truckle bed. Cave agreed to take the lower berth after complaining about being forced to share a room when so many others stood empty. The two men’s voices were quite easy to distinguish one from the other. Cave’s is pleasant and his enunciation crisp, while Bird is a surly mumbler. Cave
is light on his feet and Bird’s footfall is as heavy as a mule. It wasn’t long before prosaic topics were exhausted and the conversation became more interesting.

“It had better be here,” Bird grumped. “My buyer is getting impatient.”

“We’ve discussed all of that,” Cave said. “Please don’t bring it up again.”

I heard Bird mumble something about how much it cost to rent the trap and the little money they had left.

“Stop whingeing,” Cave snapped. “You’ll get your share when all is said and done. Besides, I’m sure she has it.” I knew that the ‘she’ being discussed was me, but the matter of the ‘it’ in question was entirely mysterious and therefore concerning. Bird muttered something else unintelligible, which provoked Cave and me as well.

“I can’t make out a thing you’re saying,” he said. “If you’re asking about the copy—for the tenth time, I have it!” I thought I heard Cave’s lighter footsteps moving in the direction of the window, which is covered by a heavy drapery that rustled when he pushed it back.

“What are you looking at?” It was Bird, who sounded very much on edge.

“I think someone has been following us since we left London. What if whoever it is means to rob us?”

This seemed to set Bird off. I heard him stomp across the room toward Cave. “Of what?” he said, sounding most belligerent. “Listen to me, you wind-sucking little fop. I’ve bet everything I have on this autograph you claim will make us both rich. I don’t care how you get
it, just get it. I’m not leaving here without it.” I was stunned to hear the ugly turn this exchange had taken, and surprised when Cave held his own against the bigger man.

“You had best lower your voice, sir,” he countered, “and change your tone. That is, if you don’t want to make a mingle mangle of our joint enterprise by behaving like some cheap pothouse ruffian. I told you I would manage this part of it, and so I shall.”

I heard Bird swearing under his breath, which was followed by a good ten minutes during which nothing was said. That gave me a bit of time to consider the mysterious autograph at issue and why Cave would bother to make a copy. Unless he wished to pass it off as genuine, all of which suggested that he intended to steal the original document and leave a forgery in its place. The most important question, to my way of thinking, was whose signature might be so valuable as to justify such an elaborate scheme?

It was Bird who broke the silence. “Luckily for you, I brought along some laudanum.”

Cave huffed. “I’d rather you hadn’t,” he said, sounding exasperated. “If Lady Louisa notices you fumbling with something in your pocket and hovering over her sherry, she’s bound to get suspicious. That’s the last thing we need.”

This elicited a snort and more stomping on Bird’s part. “What exactly are you going to say? How will you interrogate the old bat without giving us away?”

“I won’t, of course,” snapped Cave. “Unlike you, I can converse on topics beyond the deplorable state of the crown.” I heard a trunk lid being closed and a latch snapped shut. “Lady Louisa may be ancient,” Cave continued, “but she’s known for her quick wit. I am told she can
be aloof, but is nonetheless quite charming. Her French is very good, naturally.” I was taken
aback at being called ancient and wondered who had been gossiping about me, but that was
another matter.

“Don’t you think you’re a bit over dressed?” This from Bird.

“Not at all,” Cave said. “Your cravat—it has a stain on it.” Bird noised on a bit more, but I
couldn’t decipher any of it.

“Just let me handle her,” Cave said, which made me bristle, since I’ve never been
amenable to being handled by anyone. I was growing tired of standing when Cave announced
that he was stepping out to smoke. “Don’t speak to anyone or go anywhere until I get back.”

I was thoroughly incensed by what I heard. I thought of turning them out. However, that
would have given the servants something to gossip about. I decided to handle this quietly. As
regards Cave’s coy plan to coax information out of me, that was a game at which two could
play. By six o’clock, I was dressed and prepared to receive my guests in the library. After
exchanging greetings and other formalities, Bird handed me a card identifying his business as
Bird’s Rare Books and Autographs. I thanked him, and offered them each a glass of Watty’s best
Bowmore whiskey, which both gladly accepted. I sipped my own and studied them at my
leisure. The older man was one of those unfortunate individuals who resembles a member of
the animal kingdom, the common name for which had been adopted as a surname by his
ancestors. I had known quite a few persons from families of Foxes, Bulls and Swans, but none of
them actually resembled a beast or bird. Mr. Bird, however, has a face that makes him look like
a cross between a grouse and a chicken. His nose is small and hooked and his dark eyes
perfectly round, making him appear perpetually startled. A few feathery tufts on an otherwise bald head add to the effect. He was expensively dressed, but crude in his manners and deportment. He struck me as one of those men who is fond of lecturing women about the shortcomings of the weaker sex. I disliked him instantly. Cave, on the other hand, arrived sporting the uniform of the dandy – a claw hammer coat and white ruffled shirt worn with smartly tailored breeches. His hair is luxuriant and tousled in the Romantic style now in vogue and made popular by the young king. That along with his darkly lashed, small blue eyes lent him a winsome quality that I suppose might appeal to a more impressionable woman.

Cave had spent June in Paris, he said, and drew me into a conversation in French about the Louvre Palace and the Tuileries Gardens. His loquacity and the way he roved from one subject to the next like a bee gathering pollen persuaded me that he was a charming scoundrel who had inherited his ancestor’s undisciplined intellect. Bird looked at once bored and distracted, his eyes roving over the shelves of the Watty’s large and expensive collection of books. I have never been much of a believer in the notion that a good dog instinctively distrusts all bad men. However, I noticed that Binty lifted his lip and emitted a low growl when Bird rose to examine some volumes located on a shelf above the spot where the little terrier was curled up on his favorite pillow. After hearing Bird mention the laudanum, I made sure to keep my glass at all times in front of me. At 6:30 the funereal Duncan shuffled in and announced that dinner was ready to be served. An hour later, we had finished three courses and were waiting for desert. When Duncan appeared with the bread pudding on a tarnished tray, I told him to take the pudding to the library where I and my guests would continue our conversation over sherry.
Once we had migrated back to the Watty’s preserve, it wasn’t long before I invited Cave to tell me about his interest in the papers that Sir Henry had asked me to curate. He was researching a book, he said, a compendium of biographies of the lives of early antiquaries, including his ancestor, Theobald Cave, whose large body of unpublished work he was currently reading. His research, he said, had revealed that Cave had been raised in a monastery in Abingdon and was an ardent Catholic. Through his long association with Sir Charles Arundell, Cave had been instrumental in the writing of *Leicester’s Commonwealth*. In his later years, he had converted to Protestantism and become an admirer of Queen Elizabeth. He deeply regretted the role he played in slandering Robert Dudley, he said, and had accepted a commission to write an account of the death of Amy Robsart that would clear his lordship’s name. The book was completed but never published. Theobald’s last posting was as a secretary to my ancestor, Sir Henry of Nottingham. Cave had died suddenly and his papers had remained in Sir Henry’s possession. Over the years, these manuscripts and other documents had passed through various hands and their importance overlooked. It was his hope, he said, that I would allow him to take possession of all the writings that came from the pen of his ancestor. He assured me that he was prepared to reimburse Sir Henry, unless, of course, my family would consider restoring these papers to him, Samuel Cave, a man of modest means and the only living descendant of Theobald Cave of Abingdon.

His request seemed reasonable. If I had not eavesdropped on his conversation with Bird, I would have been inclined to take what he said at face value and let him have all of Theobald Cave’s papers. I did not object to his profiting from anything he would discover. However, having read some of these same documents, I suspected that Samuel Cave may have inherited
Theobald’s penchant for stealing other people’s posessions. If those papers were valuable or of historic importance, then I felt it was my duty to first determine their provenance in order to protect my nephew’s interests. Also, I was extremely curious to learn exactly what Cave and Bird wanted. Whatever it was, it was far more likely that it concerned great persons, and perhaps even the fate of Lady Amy.

I was glad I had hidden away all of the papers pertaining to the tragic wife of Robert Dudley. As a diversion, I had placed Theobald’s manuscript dealing with witchcraft in a box along with an assortment of old pamphlets and other miscellaneous documents of no consequence. I told Bird and Cave that I had indeed come upon some of his ancestor’s writings mingled in with various deeds, ledgers and what not pertaining to the Stuarts and Montagues. I was quite firm when I told them that I could not simply relinquish the whole, but would be happy to set aside everything written by Theobald Cave. While I spoke, I noticed that Bird gave me his undivided attention and began blinking frantically when I said that it would need another month or more before I would be finished. Cave begged me to let him have a look at some of Theobald’s papers, and I agreed.

I rose and made a leisurely transit to the other side of the large library, where I commenced fumbling with the heavy lid on the box of papers that I had left on a side table. I did a fine impersonation of a fussy old woman as I rummaged through the whole. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Bird lean forward and pour the contents of a small vial into my drink while Cave pantomimed his objections. I returned to the table and handed the papers to Cave, who was effusive in his gratitude. As he looked through Theobald’s manuscript, I saw his face light up as if he had found something significant, but I assumed it was an act. He passed some
other papers over to Bird, who was more interested in shoveling pudding into his mouth and downing his glass of his sherry as if he were late for an appointment. I thought it strange behavior for a man who said he wanted to buy everything Sir Henry had in the way of autographs.

Duncan had retired for the evening, but I tinkled the bell as if to summon him. The old fellow was half deaf, as I well knew. The cook and her family occupied a small cottage on the estate and Watty had given the rest of the domestic help a short holiday in his absence. I was on my own for the night. I excused myself and took my glass of sherry with me so that I could dispose of the doctored contents. When I returned, I made a show of being tired, effectively ringing down the curtain on our little charade. When Bird made a clumsy show of gallantry, and asked if I wished him to accompany me upstairs to my room, I agreed. My repugnance for him was such that I declined to let him take my arm, and relied instead upon my sturdy cane. I felt so uneasy about his sudden interest in my well being that I did my best to dismiss him when we reached the top of the stairs. When he insisted upon seeing me to my door, I conceded, but led him to the door of an empty bed chamber quite distant from my own. After I wished him a sound night’s rest and shut the door, I waited several minutes to be sure he had gone downstairs before returning to my own bedroom. Before dinner, I had moved an armchair to my eavesdropping post in front of the mantle. I sat and made myself comfortable, and prepared to wait.

Cave had gone out for another smoke, but it wasn’t long before he was back and informed Bird that he would go down to the deserted library right away to sort through the box of papers and anything else that looked promising. I felt somewhat pleased, even a bit smug,
anticipating that my little ruse had been convincing. Of course, if he were searching for
anything related to the matter of Amy Robsart and Robert Dudley, he was wasting his time,
which he would discover soon enough. I wondered what Bird would say when Cave returned
empty handed, and sat quietly in the dark, gazing out the window at the night sky, which never
fails to entrance me and put my mind at ease. As we humans make our noisy gallop to the
grave here below, above us the silent, sparkling pageant of the constellations rolls onward at a
pace monumentally slow and reassuring. No wonder Hamlet thought himself in a bad way
when he could no longer see the glory in that majestical roof. My father enjoyed quoting that
gloomy prince, who was a Dane in name only, since he was, without a doubt, English by
temperament. My little reverie was interrupted by sounds filtering up from below. Cave was
back and had closed the door very quietly. However, both Bird and I heard the floor boards
creak, rousing Bird, who sounded groggy when he spoke.

“Well,” he said. “Where is it?”

“It’s here somewhere,” Cave said. “I’m sure of it. Just not in that box she left there for
me to rummage through, confound her!”

“Are you telling me that you don’t have it?” Bird was awake and on the attack.

“I’m telling you that we have to keep looking!”

“Looking?” Bird said. “Looking! That’s all we’ve been doing for the last two months! I
can’t believe I let you drag me all the way to Scotland on a fool’s errand. You’ll pay for this,
Cave, one way or another.”
Bird sounded so furious, I began to worry about what he might do to the little man, but Cave paid him no mind and continued to pace. “I’ve gone over this a hundred times! It’s all in the diary. Old Theobald sold more than one forgery during his life time, no doubt, but he never surrendered the original letter. Never! He kept it well hidden among his own papers to the day he died. Who would look for a ruby in a box of rocks? We both know that the last posting he had was with Sir Henry. And none of the Stuarts has since dared to put a match to the first Sir Henry’s piles of paper. Which means,” he said, “the letter has to be here somewhere. I would stake my life on it!” Cave ceased his pacing and I imagined him turning to face the obstreperous Bird. “The problem, sir,” said Cave, “is that our dear, crafty Lady Louisa is just the sort who might actually be bothered to read everything her thick-headed nephew handed over to her.” He paused. “The more I think about it,” he said, “the more I believe she might have found it! Which means,” he continued, “that she’s been lying to us.”

This last statement he delivered with the zeal of a barrister bent on winning over an obdurate panel of jurors. I did not think Bird would be persuaded, but I was wrong. What I heard next made me angry and also caused me to wonder if I had not made a terrible mistake by playing cat and mouse with two villains.

“So the old bat has been pulling our leg, then?” There was something menacing in his tone I didn’t like one bit.

“That she has,” said Cave. “She’s got it and she’s keeping it here somewhere out of sight.”
“Fat lot of good all your wisdom does us if we don’t know where! Have you considered the size of this mausoleum? It could be anywhere.”

“No, my good man. No indeed. Most people are not very inventive when it comes to hiding a thing. They keep it near at hand. Our Lady Louisa has tucked it away somewhere no one else goes without her say so, and where she can keep an eye on it at night.”

“You mean her bedroom,” said Bird. I was stunned when I heard this, and somewhat disgusted with myself that I had not been more inventive.

“Precisely,” said Cave. All we have to do is find some excuse to delay our departure and keep her out of her room long enough for me to go through her things. That won’t be a problem because there are no locks upon any of the bedroom doors.”

“How in God’s name are we going to manage that?”

“Leave that to me,” Cave said. “But first we need to come up with a plausible reason why we cannot depart first thing in the morning. Mayhap a little problem with one of the wheels on the trap. Something that requires fixing.”

“I have a better idea,” said Bird.

“Really?” said Cave, who did not try to mask his skepticism. “And what is that, pray tell?”

“Why wait and take our chances? There’s another way, which is to make her tell us right now—tonight!” His tone was so flat and matter of fact that it sent a chill through me.
“Make her?” said Cave, who was incredulous. “What are you suggesting? Because the letter won’t be of much use to us once we’re put in irons for abusing an elderly blueblood.” By this time, I was literally on the edge of my seat as I leaned forward to catch every word.

“If she doesn’t wake up in the morning,” said Bird, “who’s to say she didn’t pass away in her sleep, eh? Nothing violent. Just a pillow held firmly over the face.” I heard a gasp and realized it came from me.

Cave was taken aback. “Have you lost your mind? What are you suggesting? Don’t even say it, sir. The mere notion is positively sinister.”

Bird snorted. “You, sir, are nothing but a joke. I want to laugh, but I can’t. I’m giving you one last chance, Cave, and that’s it.”

“I will pretend,” said the younger man, “that we never had this conversation. I am going out to the carriage house to loosen one of the wheel bolts on the trap. It could take me awhile, so don’t wait up. When I come back, I’m going to lie down and attempt to sleep. I suggest you do the same.”

Bird said nothing while Cave pulled out the truckle bed, followed by the sound of the door being shut as Cave left the room. I was shaken and uncertain what to do. At least I was one step ahead of them. Come morning, I would send them packing on the back of two Highland ponies if necessary and get word to my nephew that he should have nothing further to do with Bird or Cave. I doubted I would be able to get much rest and regretted I had not taken the precaution of having Duncan sit up and keep watch in the room next to mine. The old man was a terrible butler, but like most Highlanders he was a good shot. Watty kept a loaded
cavalry pistol in his desk and Duncan knew how to use it. I congratulated myself on having deceived Bird regarding the location of my bedroom and was considering whether I should go downstairs to fetch Duncan when I heard Bird plant his big feet on the floorboards beneath me, followed by the mild grunts made by a thick-waisted man bending down to put on his shoes. Next I heard him cross the room, open the door and close it shut behind him. I knew with a cold certainty that he was on his way upstairs to do what Cave would not, and smother me with my own pillow so that he could search my room at his leisure.

I felt a rush of panic. I wanted to flee, but the east wing has no back stairway and I realized that there was simply not enough time for me to get to the bottom of the stairs before Bird began his ascent. I fought to calm myself and considered that Bird was bound to go to the wrong room looking for me. That gave me a little bit of time to come up with a plan, but not much. I stood and looked out the window, where I saw Cave heading for the stables, which are separate from the more distant carriage barn where the trap was stored. I noticed that he was in a hurry. I thought of using my cane to break the glass and calling out to him, but I doubted that he would come to my rescue, and making a racket would only give me away. Duncan could not hear me, no matter how I shouted. A moment or two later, I heard Bird’s heavy tread advancing down the hallway as he walked past my door in the direction of the empty bedroom where he thought I was sleeping. I knew it would not be long before he began checking the other rooms to find me—the thought of which filled me with dread. At that moment, I felt more helpless than I had ever felt in my entire life. I was considering hiding myself in a large chest set against the wall when I was startled by the sound of a small dog yapping for all he was
worth. I glanced out the window and saw Binty nipping at Cave’s heels as he lead a horse out of
the open doors of the stable.

I realized in an instant what was taking place. I had not been mistaken when I saw the
look of delight on Cave’s face earlier that evening. My own fascination with the fate of Lady
Amy had made me myopic. Cave was hunting for something else, a letter concealed among his
ancestor’s scribblings—papers I had not bothered to sort through. Cave must have known that
the autograph he wanted was tucked away among the pages of this worthless manuscript. He
had found what he was looking for, then lied to Bird so that he could make a clean getaway
while his partner in crime slept on until morning! Unfortunately for me, Bird had his own notion
of how to proceed, which involved murdering me to obtain a letter I did not possess.

There was only one thing to do, which was to expose Cave’s deception. Fired by
indignation, I picked up my best walking stick and strode out into the hallway where I saw Bird
opening the door of the room where he thought I had gone to bed. The stick I had chosen was
made of oak and ornamented with a burled handle, which is the business end of any walking
stick. I lifted it high and struck the door as hard as I was able. A shockingly loud crack rang out,
startling Bird so severely that he almost fell backward. Before he could fully grasp what was
taking place, I thumped the floor with my stick and assumed the same imperious pose I had
seen my grandmother use when reprimanding an insolent servant.

“Mr. Bird,” I called out. “You must come here at once!” He turned and stared wildly at
me, confusion contorting his features. No doubt he was wondering why I had appeared before
him fully dressed and giving orders when he expected to find me somnolent and vulnerable.
“Hurry,” I ordered. “Or you will be too late. Cave is getting away!” This seemed to get through to him, and he began to trot rather clumsily down the hall toward me. As he drew near, I threw open the door and pointed toward the window.

“Go see for yourself,” I said. “He’s saddling your horse. Cave has deceived you, sir. He has the autograph and he’s leaving you behind to make excuses for him.” Bird was not an especially articulate man, and he had no words to spare in his rush to the window, which provided a framed view of his accomplice, dressed in evening clothes and struggling with the heavy saddle—a task made more difficult by Binty, who had a good grip on one of Cave’s trouser legs. I came into my room where I could heard Bird cursing as he leaned on the sill, his fists clenched. His back was turned to me, but I sensed his fury. The moon broke from behind a cloud and lit up the scene like a stage. I was earnestly hoping Bird would have the good sense to see I was right about Cave when the quiet was shattered by a wild howl that tore through the night like a demon let loose from hell. This unnerved Bird, who stepped back from the window as if prepared to flee. And it gave me heart, since I realized that Duncan’s old wolf hound had been roused by Binty’s barking. It wouldn’t be long before the old man was up and about, and preparing to turn loose the hunting dogs, who had joined in the canine chorus.

“I think you had better go now,” I said, in a stern voice, and meant it. Bird turned around and stared at me for only a moment, his eyes gone black with anger, before he rushed past me, nearly knocking me over as he fled through the open door.
Chapter Twenty-two: Windsor Castle

“Always with a maiden Queen, a maid I did end my life.”
Epitaph for Blanche Parry, written by her, for her monument in Bacton Church, Herefordshire

An hour or more of light remained as we began our approach toward Windsor Castle. If any sight could render Cave speechless, it would be this regal edifice, which is, in my humble opinion, unrivaled in its magnificence. Windsor was but a day’s march from London and the first place of refuge for royals whenever the plague returned and sent all fleeing before it. On those few fine summer days when heavy clouds do not obscure the sky, the rays of the setting sun fall directly upon the front of the palace, coaxing a rosy glow from the pale stone face of the twin towers that stand on each side of the grand portcullis. The back of the fortress is a reminder of its first purpose—to thwart all invaders. High walls and fortified battlements sit atop sheer chalk cliffs that line the river along the south bank of the Thames.

Over the centuries, we English have greatly improved upon the old motte-and-bailey fortress built by the French, constructing royal apartments in the upper bailey, adding wooden galleries, and also a cloister and a bridge on the east end leading to the park where Elizabeth hunts. Before King Henry grew tired of Anne Boleyn, he had the ceilings of his private apartments ochred for her and the walls whitewashed. Most recently, Mary had completed the work begun by Edward to lay pipe that brought in water from Blackmoor Park, which is more salubrious than the water from the old wells sunk into the cliffs. The new pipes feed a conduit and fountain in the upper ward. I admired this superb waterworks, and had been on hand on
more than occasion, before the Feast of St. George, to see the fountain brought back to life, its crystalline waters gushing up and outward in a dazzling shower.

The long promenade that led to the front entrance was not made for such as we. Cave and I rode to the gatehouse through which passed tradesmen, carts, and laborers, as well as unfortunates bound for the prison, where old King John shut up his foes and left them to starve. I cautioned Cave about the need to keep quiet, and refrain from flaunting his erudition, for he must pose as my hostler. I was known to the bailiff and his deputies, and was able to send word to Mistress Blanche that I had arrived with a letter for her. It was not long before she dispatched a barrel-chested manservant to escort me to the Chantry of Saint Ledger that lay in the northern transept of the great Chapel of St. George.

I had been there twice before, both times with Dudley, now conspicuously absent, when only a year before in April he had come here to don the scarlet hose and blue velvet mantle reserved for Knights of the Garter. Golden Tom rode here to be honored as well, but was loathe to sit at the same table with a Dudley. The Duke of Norfolk was most indignant that Elizabeth had chosen to raise Dudley up in the world because she liked to look at him over her pillow.

While it was most unusual for Mistress Blanche to be at Windsor when the Queen remained at Whitehall, it did not strike me as strange to find her in this quiet corner of the great cathedral. The chantry was an ideal space in which to meet unobserved and where we would not be overheard, since the dead may be trusted to keep secrets. Mistress Blanche preferred to pray in this small chapel, home to the tombs of Sir Thomas St. Leger and Anne St. Leger, niece to two kings. I wished to exhibit deference in both my speech and manner, and
bowed deeply before Mistress Blanche, who might have been posing for her own effigy, bathed as she was in the soft blue light of evening. She extended her bejeweled hand to me to be kissed. As I did so, I noticed that she held in her other hand a book. Whether it was the close air of the chantry or some other cause, I felt her mood to be heavy.

“Your ladyship carries the Queen’s prayer book.”

She regarded me narrowly, as a pedagogue does a backward student. “Have you read it?”

“I have,” I replied, “or at least a good part of it, though I do not yet possess a copy.”

“Then I shall gift you with one, for no knight should be without it.” I inclined my head and thanked her, but she did not acknowledge my gesture.

Instead she brandished the slender volume as if declaiming before the King’s bench. “Five months, sir!”

“I beg your ladyship’s pardon?”

“That is how long it took to revise and print this book.” She tapped the cover with one long index finger. “Bishop Oglethorpe placed the crown upon the Queen’s head in January and by June she gave us this, personally commissioned by her. Are you aware, sir, that she took care to read each page and specifically commanded the removal of the prayers against the pope?” I confessed my ignorance.

“The Queen is an astute thinker, but too liberal. She requires the guidance of others who are not so forgiving.” I nodded and followed as Mistress Blanche commenced walking
toward the sarcophagus of Lady Anne, lying supine and cast in alabaster. Even I could see that Lady Anne’s square headdress, carved when she died more than thirty years ago, was out of date, as well as her fluted sleeves. At her feet slept two small alabaster dogs wearing belled collars. Alongside her, facing the opposite direction was the figure of her second husband, Baron St. Leger, clad in armor plate, a unicorn at his feet and his head resting upon a helm adorned with a peacock.

“Life is so brief and filled with strife,” she mused. “Some days I wonder what God intends, yet I never doubt that Her Majesty was born to rule, and that God has guided and protected her each step of the way, from cradle to crown.” She paused and turned to regard me. “Perhaps you recall that I was among the gentlewomen who stayed with the Queen in her apartment in the Tower on the eve of her coronation. I shall never forget it, Sir Thomas. Those interminable hours lying abed in the dark, unable to sleep.” She paused, and I could imagine the scene she painted. The Tower was a haunted place where destinies both grim and glorious were revealed to its sequestered occupants, who had little to do but mark the passage of time. “It was a great relief to see the sun rise so we could begin preparations for the ceremony. When we left the fortress late that afternoon, it was terribly cold. Yet we did not care. For there is a deeper cold than that of winter that abides in the Tower. We both knew our fears would vanish the instant we saw the sky and heard the cheers of the crowds who awaited her coming.” She smiled in the dreamy way one does when revisiting the past. “Still and all, as much as the Princess wished to be at liberty, she insisted upon stopping to kneel and pray near the lion’s cage, to thank God for delivering her as he did Daniel from the lions.”

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“Our young Queen,” I said, “is not only wise beyond her years, but pious.” I had heard of this incident, but wondered if it were true, or merely a tale told to embroider Her Majesty’s reputation as a devout princess.

Mistress Blanche spoke always with care and usually with a purpose in mind. Her story had a point. “That Elizabeth Tudor reigns as Queen of England is a great blessing and also something of a miracle,” she said. “Yet no greater miracle, Sir Thomas, than that she lived to wear the crown.”

By way of reply, I said what I ought to say. “May God continue to preserve and protect Her Majesty.”

This pleased her. “Lend me your arm, sir and walk with me. I believe we shall soon hear the choir singing evensong.”

She had been so solemn that I was glad to see her manner soften. I came forward and extended my arm, and we walked together toward the altar. I admired her face in profile. Her chin was strong, her nose long and straight. She wore a green velvet headdress trimmed with pearls and glass beads of gold and green. Her cloak and high-necked gown were also green and edged with lace. To see her as a kindly aunt, and not for what she was—a powerful person at the very center of things—would be most unwise. A few young gentlewomen from influential families who had come to court seeking the favor of the Queen had made the grave error of attempting to bypass Mistress Blanche. Their costly gifts were returned, or worse yet, received with courtesy but never shown to the Her Majesty. The Queen trusted Mistress Blanche and
heeded her advice. Her influence was profound, yet she managed to make herself inconspicuous. I waited for her to speak, uncertain what was on her mind.

“"I hope," she said, "you do not harbor any doubts that the Queen is your master’s true friend."

I assured her that I did not, because they had known one another since they were children, and therefore shared a sympathy peculiar to them, one which grew out of the many trials they had endured in their youth.

“The Queen,” she said, “is one of Dudley’s very few allies. I do not seek to impugn him by saying so, but only mean to speak plainly, which is a measure of the respect I have for you.”

I thanked her. “That Lord Robert has many enemies is no secret,” I said, “nor is his great love for the Queen, which is only surpassed by his loyalty.”

“And yet,” she said, “his love for the Queen has not always been a blessing.”

“Though the Queen thinks otherwise, or at least she once did. I do not pretend to know her mind or heart.”

She turned to face me. “Please come and sit with me a moment.” I was weary after the long ride and welcomed the respite. The chapel pews are broad and deep, and smooth as stone. Mistress Blanche arranged the folds of her skirt and laid her prayer book in her lap. “You are too young to recall, Sir Thomas, the time when the Queen’s mother was ruined by lies and the cruelest sort of innuendo, yet I remember it very well. It was not only powerful men who spoke ill of Anne Boleyn, but housewives and fishmongers who made jests and called her an
adulterer, and worse.” Mistress Blanche was a young woman when Anne Boleyn was found guilty of treason and sent to the Tower. The marriage of Anne and Henry was annulled, and Elizabeth declared a bastard. The princess was not yet three years of age the day her mother was executed. It must have been harrowing for all those who cared for mother and daughter.

Mistress Blanche raised her hand to touch the cross at her neck. “The woman who sits next to the King is subject to scrutiny from both high and low. And a young woman who would rule alone, without a king at her side must at all times be beyond reproach, or she risks losing everything! She must not only guard her speech, but be perpetually vigilant as regards all that is bruited about from London to the Berkshires, and beyond. Elizabeth’s subjects must be made to not only love her but also to honor her, in word and deed. Every king must protect his crown from seditious speech. Yet no king must ever be as jealous of his good name as an unwed queen.”

I heartily agreed, and said so.

“All urge the Queen to marry, so she can give England an heir. Yet only those who truly care for her grasp the importance of quelling traitorous talk about Her Majesty’s person, which touches upon her fitness to wed. Even a whisper in the wind can be carried a great distance and do much harm.” I assured her that I understood.

She turned her opal eyes upon me, and gazed at me as if peering into my soul. “Do you truly, sir?” This was no mere question, but a challenge. She doubted me, and I felt a deep unease steal over me that chilled me to my marrow. “For I would be loathe,” she said, “to place
my trust in anyone, anyone at all, who knew of any evidence that would damage Her Majesty’s good name, and not do everything in his power to deal with such a threat.”

So this, I thought, is how things stand. Mistress Blanche knows about the letter. She is not only sifting me, but putting me on notice. Over the years, I had learned to be alert as regards the threat of suspicion, which comes seeping into minds and relations between persons like a cold breeze at the back of the neck—serving as an early warning that the summer of mutual good feeling is over. To lose trust was to lose everything that made it possible to survive in the world that Dudley occupied, and which I, by proxy, was required to make my way as best I could.

With this in mind, I returned Mistress Blanche’s gaze without allowing a flicker of unease to alter my expression, which I hoped was not only calm but resolute. I told her that I had something with me, a letter that she might want to see. It was, I said, written by the young princess almost a decade ago and delivered in secret to Robert Dudley while he was a prisoner in the Tower. I told her that I understood it was not a forgery, but Elizabeth’s own words, written in her hand. And that it would be recognized both by her signature and by the paper on which it was written, which was remarkable by virtue of having come from a book of blank paper made especially for the young princess. I had no doubt, I said, that the Queen herself would therefore recognize it at once.

“I suppose some might call it a love letter, in a purely innocent sense, of course,” I said.

“You seem to speak as one who has not read it.” She continued to study me, as if searching for any telltale sign of deception.
“No,” I said, “I have not.” I was not only incurious, but unwilling to peer too deeply into matters that did not concern me.

“I think that is for the best,” she answered, and appeared satisfied.

I could see the effect that my news had on her. She made no outward show of surprise or impatience. Yet I sensed how eager she was to take possession of the letter, as keen as a huntress within bowshot of an elusive stag.

Although we were sitting very near one another, I felt as if she were regarding me from a great distance. “This letter you speak of,” she said, “have you brought it with you?”

I nodded, then hesitated. Before surrendering the letter, I had thought to barter with her. I had planned to ask her to tell me what she knew of the vial I had found, and ask her as well about the widow’s errand to Dr. Bailey’s house and the matter of Nokes’s insistence that he had not killed Amy. I understood, however, that I did not need to inquire. Mistress Blanche had already told me what I needed to know. There was nothing she would not do to safeguard the Queen, no threat she would not remove if it lay within her power.

“I was told that Lady Amy took this from Dudley’s cell, years ago,” I said, “while she was visiting him and he was removed for questioning. My first thought was to return it to him. But now I think it best to place it in the hands of its author.” I paused. “I trust you to do to that. Of course, I also have a letter for you from Mrs. Odingsells.”

I removed the widow’s letter from inside the pouch at my belt, and also the folded sheet covered with Elizabeth’s handwriting, and handed both to her. She took them, and laid
the widow’s letter on her lap. Then she gently unfolded the single antique sheet, torn on one side where it had been removed from its binding years ago, and held it as one does a captive bird. From where I sat, I could see the looping signature, Elizabeth, at the bottom. Mistress Blanche closed her eyes and breathed deeply, as if thanking God. I thought she ought to be thanking me as well, though I would never have dared say so. She folded the letter with care and laid it gently between two pages of her book, which she closed with a solemnity that she brought to every task, no matter how small. Her mien, which had before been wintry, began to thaw.

She patted my hand. “I am much relieved to see that I have not misjudged you, Sir Thomas. I think we are truly friends, and understand one another.” She gave me a knowing sidelong glance. “What a pity you never married. We might still find a suitable wife for you.”

“Pray tell, why? I have no need.”

“No? Every man needs a wife.”

“And every woman a husband?”

“A wife serves, and a husband provides. My life is given to service, and I need no one to provide for me.”

“And I do not require a servant, Mistress Blanche. I am accustomed to the life of a bachelor. It is a bit lonely at times, I admit, but far simpler, and less, how shall I say? Less fraught.”

“What a peculiar comment,” she said. “Whatever do you mean?”
I considered a moment then tried to explain. “Whenever I am in the company of women, I feel I have a part to play, but no script to follow. Rather like those travelling Italian players, the ones whose art is to devise a scene, and then improvise their actions and words. I saw them perform once. They are guided by little more than a notion, so that none of them knows how the drama will unfold, and any one of them can alter the course of the plot and thereby change the ending at will.”

“Truly? I think I would find such an entertainment most unsettling,” she said. “If there is no script, then every actor must be terribly clever, or risk ruining the play.”

“And therein,” I said, “lies the amusement.”

She frowned but appeared intrigued. “Yet such an entertainment might fail to make us reflect upon the difference between a conceit acted out on stage and real deceit in our dealings with one another.”

“I cannot disagree, Mistress Blanche. Yet there is something to be said for a well crafted lie, which is a thing most delicate, whereas the truth is often quite brittle. I do not think we could make do on a diet of it without breaking our teeth.”

She looked at me askance for a moment, then shook her head. “I do enjoy your company, Sir Thomas. Yet I must ask you if there is anything else you wish to share with me?”

I paused to consider her question. “Nothing of consequence, Mistress Blanche.”

“Ah! I am most pleased to hear that.”
I resolved, however, to keep the vial I had found in the event I ever wished to pay a call upon the lovely Margery. Perhaps we could spend the day fishing, and I might share my discovery. Then again, I might not wish to see her, which made me very sad, but seemed more likely. I bid farewell to Mistress Blanche and returned unescorted to the stables to find Cave and Verney’s mare both gone.

I would not discover until many years later that the document that Cave had given to me, and I to Mistress Blanche, was a clever forgery. Cave had concealed the original letter in the crypt that night I came upon him in the dark. Before he hid it away, he took time to copy its contents onto a sheaf of blank paper that Elizabeth had sent with her note to Dudley to use to pen his reply—a further assurance that any note she received bearing his signature was genuine. As Cave prepared to leave Abingdon, he took with him the forgery, which he planned to pass off as genuine and sell to Sir Charles. He was keen to safeguard it, because the paper on which it was written could not be replaced. He surrendered it with great reluctance in order to throw Verney off of his trail and to deceive me and the Queen herself.

The day that Cave left on Verney’s mare, his purse full of gold, I was sure he could not have gotten far. However, I knew nothing of his deception and felt no urge to pursue him. Instead, I rode off in search of lodging in Windsor, where I spent the night. The next day, I set out for Kew, where I was bound by duty to go and make my report in person to Dudley.
Chapter Twenty-three: A Piece of Gossip

The Journal of Lady Louisa Stuart

Friday September 15, 1820

“Some of the relations (of Lady Queensbury) live thereabouts and like to spread the notion {that Sir Walter Scott’s novels were written by his brother’s wife} to which I will accede when I believe a cow was the Duke of Wellington’s charger at Talavera.”

From a letter written in February of 1821 by Lady Louisa Stuart to her friend, Miss Louisa Clinton, commenting on “that ridiculous piece of gossip” spread by Lady Queensbury.

Where shall I begin? So much has happened. Duncan took the odious Mr. Bird into Tweedbank before the sun was up and left him there. Perhaps I should have demanded some answers from him. However, not only did I never wish to speak with him again, I also knew I would be wasting my time. I will write to Sir Henry and inform him of the theft of the mysterious autograph, leaving out my narrow escape. Mr. Bird will not emerge from this affair unscathed, since his reputation will suffer after Sir Henry tells all of his friends at the clubs he frequents that Bird is a shady character at best if not an outright criminal. As for Cave, he made his getaway, but I believe Bird is the sort of man who holds a grudge and will do his best to settle scores.

Cave left behind his small trunk, which held his clothing and a few pieces of paper on which he had jotted some notes to himself. He apparently did not inherit his ancestor’s penchant for spinning yarns. However, I was able to draw a few tentative conclusions from his
notes. It seems that old Theobald was only marginally interested in Lady Amy. His true, lifelong passion was to write a book exposing what he called “The Myth of the Virgin Queen.” Apparently he had come upon a letter he was convinced was written and signed by the Princess Elizabeth and which he saw as definitive proof regarding the queen’s youthful indiscretions with Dudley. It was this letter that Samuel Cave was hunting. I have no idea if he knows of the existence of the other letter allegedly written by Lady Amy that Theobald Cave claimed to have copied. If he did, he might not have been so easily seduced by his ancestor’s claims, which have no basis in fact but grew out of his own imaginings and obsessions.

For my part, I have arrived at my own conclusions about how Amy Robsart died and who might have killed her. I do believe she did not die by accident, but was murdered. A ruling of death by misfortune did nothing to explain her strange behavior on the day of her death. According to Leicester’s Commonwealth, Dudley was his wife’s killer and the queen was responsible for covering up his crime. No one who knows the players involved can doubt that this book was written for the express purpose of damning Dudley. It therefore makes much more sense to consider who might have schemed to have Amy Robsart killed for reasons purely political. After reading the papers left behind by T.C. I fear that this sixteenth century antiquary has little to offer shedding light on this subject, with one exception. That being his admission that he helped Sir Charles write Leicester’s Commonwealth. Although he does not say so directly, it seems clear that it was likely Sir Charles who worked behind the scenes to conspire to have Lady Amy killed. And why? Not because he harbored any animus toward her, but because she was the wife of his greatest enemy, the man whom he despised, and whose downfall, if it had been achieved, would have changed the course of history. No doubt Sir
Charles and his cohorts hoped, at the very least, to maneuver the young queen into rejecting Dudley and marrying a Catholic prince. Or perhaps they were so deluded they thought Elizabeth might still marry Dudley, and find herself so reviled that she would lose her crown to her Scottish cousin. Sir Charles was perhaps Dudley’s most ruthless enemy in that he succeeded in creating a black legend that survived Dudley by almost three hundred years.

He belonged to that ancient tribe of gossip mongers who have always been among us and will no doubt prosper as the appetite for tittle tattle remains insatiable. The most troubling aspect of the way in which a poisonous whisper can swell into a whirlwind of scandal is not the single source of it—the mischievous instigator. It is rather that a successful rumor requires the participation of the gullible multitudes. What was true during Elizabeth’s reign remains true now. The fishmonger and the lady to the manor born, and all in between, sit at the table of rumor with knives sharpened. And therein lies the genius of Sir Charles, who took a body of rumor that had been circulating for years about Dudley, and with them did something quite ingenious. And that was to convert the whole into a book that was read and re-read for its salacious content, and taken up as truth by the next three generations of historians, poets and playwrights.
Chapter Twenty-four: The Hood Upon Her Head

The spring of 1588, one month after the death of Robert Dudley

“When his lordship was in full hope to marry her majesty, and his wife stood in his
light, he did but send her aside to the house of his servant, Forster of Cumnor by
Oxford, where shortly thereafter she had the chance to fall from a pair of stairs,
and so to break her neck, but yet without the hurting of her hood that stood upon
her head.”

From Leicester’s Commonwealth, better known as Father Parson’s Greencoat for the Jesuit,
Robert Parsons, who promoted it

Put a point on that quill of thine, Master Cave, whilst I pour thee a posset. Write down
every word. Take it to the stationers to be stitched or bound if thou have silver enough. Make
another Parson’s Greencoat of it, if thou like. What a dish of hot coals that were! Nothing but
lies, though. I know, cause I was there. It was Lord Robert’s shrew of a wife that tried to have him
killed, and not the other way around!

What’s that? Course I did. That August was when I done it, whilst her ladyship was
sleepin.’ I took a bottle of that potion she bought from Bailey and put another in its place. That
was some weeks after I went with Lady Amy to Oxford. She set great store by those little brown
bottles Bailey gave her. But I never seen any benefit from it. So I did what the Widow paid me to
do, which was to swap out Bailey’s potion for somethin’ that might have done her some good.
That’s what the Widow told me. It was her that took me in after Lady Amy died, and treated me
very well too, for as long as she lived. As for all that talk about her ladyship being poisoned, that’s
all it is. She was sick from jealousy of the Queen is all. That and an ailment in her breast. Though
a cunning man told her it was from a terrible curse put on her by the Queen. And there may have

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been some truth in that too, which is another reason I kept quiet, and not cause I done her any harm.

I can’t tell thee everything that happened that day, but I can tell thee what I saw with my own eyes, and never told another soul till now. Well then, thou hast already heard tell how Lady Amy sent all her people away that Sunday on the day of the fair, and me along with them. Cept I never went to the fair, but stayed close by, the better to keep a sharp eye out and warn Lord Robert if I saw him comin’. God must have been lookin’ out for him as well, cause he never came! I reckon he knew her ladyship had an evil design to have him set upon and murdered by that wicked priest, may God curse him. He was a drunk and a thief as well, I reckon.

How do I know? Cause when I come back inside the grange, I saw him comin’ out of Lady Amy’s rooms with somethin’ in his hands. Whatever it was, he must have stole it. After he left, I started down the stairs. That’s when I saw her ladyship lyin’ dead on the steps. I knew straight off that the priest was the one that killed her, most likely by shovin’ her when her back was turned. I suppose he were paid to do it. But who was behind it all, I can’t say. Though it’s certain it couldn’t have been his lordship, since Lord Robert were an Anglican and would have no dealings with a papist.

I can tell thee for certain that Forster’s man Whitgift mistook what happened when he testified that he were the first to come upon her body. Cause I were the first and Sir Richard the second! After that murderin’ priest left, I went down to get a better look, and saw her neck was broke, which was no more than she deserved. I was standin’ next to her corpse when I heard someone else comin’ and hid downstairs. Servants are bound to be blamed, whether we done
anythin’ or not. Anyways, that’s when I saw Sir Richard and everythin’ that happened next. And I shan’t ever forget it. Sir Richard came up to her body and looked it over as calm as a warrener checkin’ his nets for hares. Instead of raisin’ an alarm, he lifted her up and laid her out on the bottom of the stairs. That were strange enough. But not near as strange as what he did next. Which was to use his sword to strike the back of her head sharp blow—as if she weren’t dead enough! The last thing he done was to draw her hood back over her head.

Only later, while I was puzzlin’ over why he would have done such a thing, that it came to me. Sir Richard figured her ladyship had died from a fall, and he wanted it to appear that she was murdered! He done all that to make it look like whoever done the killin’ did his best to disguise his evil deed as a mishap, don’t you see? But makin’ a poor job of it by leavin’ her hood on her head. So’s everybody would judge it not only a murder, but a cover up as well.

Why he would do such a thing, knowin’ Lord Robert would be blamed, helped me to see him for what he was. Sir Richard was no friend of his lordship. I guess he was on the side of whoever it was that wanted to blacken his name so’s the Queen wouldn’t marry him. Anyways, I saw him wipe his sword off with his silk kerchief and leave by the back way. That’s when I snuck out to mingle with the other servants comin’ back from Abingdon. I saw too much, Master Cave, and didn’t care to admit to it.

There’s one more thing you ought to know, and that’s to do with Whitgift. He lied like a gypsy when he swore to the jury that he found the corpse with the hood down. Forster must have made him say it, you see, no doubt wantin’ her ladyship’s death to be ruled a mishap. So Lord Robert couldn’t be blamed—which he was anyways by most, though the jury found it to
be otherwise. I reckon they was paid to say so, since no one believed Lady Amy broke her neck from a fall. In the end, all of them was wrong. She was murdered, sure enough, but it wasn’t Lord Robert or any of his who done it.

As for all the lies that Lady Amy told about our good Queen Bess and whether she let Lord Robert take her maidenhead, I have naught to say about that and never shall! Tis no affair of mine or thine, by God’s teeth! And that ought to be the end of it.
Chapter Twenty-five: The Virgin Queen

Whitehall Palace in the winter of 1588; three months after the death of Robert Dudley

“He that cometh in print because he would be known is like the fool that cometh into the market because he would be seen.”

_Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit_ (1578) by John Lyly

Francis Walsingham is not the sort of man who allows himself to be seduced by pleasant self deceptions. Time is getting the best of him, and he knows it. His knees shudder at odd moments and he is tormented by an intermittent ringing in his ears for which no cause can be found. He and the Queen are growing old. There was a time when Elizabeth took pride in remaining on her feet for hours, forcing her audience to stand until they came near to fainting. No longer. Still, the Queen at 55 remains formidable, he thinks, though fraying about the edges. He would never say so, but he believes her to have aged far better than her father. King Henry VIII was magnificent in his youth and wretched in his fifth and last decade. At the end, he was as swollen as a toad bloated with its own poison. Never mind. These days his greatest fear is that he will outlive the Queen. For a world without Elizabeth is one which he cannot conceive. It is as if one were to imagine an England absent weather.

His mind is wandering and her voice calls him back. “History, my dear Sir Francis, is what we pronounce it to have been. It is time you and I think beyond decrees and pamphlets.” She is not done lecturing him, and leans forward, her attention as white hot as a beam from an alchemist’s magnifying glass. “We must commission our own historical text,” she says, “the
best, most persuasive volume with a story at its heart, and frame it as a factual account—one that points the finger of blame at the true murderer.” She sits back, waiting for his response, a faint smile playing upon her lips.

He is stunned. He waits a moment and draws a deep breath. “And who, may I ask, shall that be?”

She waves her hand. “I have not yet decided.”

His palms are damp. Nothing good can come of this fresh passion to revive an old scandal. For years he has wondered what the Queen knows of the rather delicate matter of who did what and when, both before and after Lady Amy died. What can she be thinking? Perhaps she remains in the dark about what truly took place. Yet it is also possible she knows the truth in its entirety and is supremely confident in her power to reshape events on a whim. He is certain about one thing. No one is more dear to the Queen than Mistress Parry, who went blind last year and resigned from her post as Keeper of the Queen’s Jewels. Elizabeth will hear nothing of sending her nursemaid to a quiet retirement at her family home in Newcourt. And so Mistres Blanche remains here at Whitehall, sleeping every night in the Queen’s bedchamber, where Elizabeth reads to her by candlelight most evenings until the old dame drops off to sleep like an infant. Everything comes full circle, the thinks. Or almost everything.

All these thoughts he leaves unspoken, and does his best to concentrate on the matter at hand. “I can think of only two men who have the wit to author such a document,” he says, “and who may also be trusted. One of them is so frail he may not live to see Whitsunday. The
other is in Antwerp, spying on English Catholics. If we remove him, he cannot easily be replaced.”

She is all business. “I know the men of whom you speak. They will not do. They are too high minded. What we require, sir, is a scribe who will scruple at nothing. Not a poet, no, nor a scholar. What is wanted is a man who wields his quill as a weapon.” He can see where this is going, and knows he is helpless to stop it. “Our writer for hire must be a subtle knave who knows how to mingle truth and lies, fact with fancy. One who will appear to have scoured the Berkshires and beyond to uncover the killer. Someone, in short, who would sell his sister to the Devil for silver.”

He resigns himself and submits, for now. “Your Grace has someone in mind?”

“This man you have in the Tower, Theobald Cave is his name?”

He nods. “A scoundrel of the worst sort.”

“But a clever one. If results matter, and they always do. You say he went with Sir Charles to France, and helped him pen Leicester’s Commonwealth? What intelligence do you possess regarding this Cave? Is he a secret papist?”

“He denies it, and I find nothing to the contrary. He insists he took the commission from Sir Charles because he was destitute, and in fear for his life if he refused. His poverty at least appears to be genuine.”

This amuses her. “Tosh, sir! In that regard, he is little different than the sons of half the country’s peerage. How long has Master Cave been our guest in the Tower?”
“Six days, I think. Perhaps a bit longer.”

She drums her long, painted nails upon the arm of her chair. “Pay another call on him. Have the guards bring him a cup of warm wine and a proper jerkin and hose to wear. Then we shall see whether he is willing to barter his talents for his liberty. Make it clear that his continued well being depends upon his absolute loyalty.”

He bows again, this time more deeply, taking care not to let slip the mask of composure that conceals his doubt. As for Cave, if he must set him free, then he must. That little flea will not catch a ride on the first dog that goes by without being followed and watched by his men. Who knows what sort of mischief such a pest might devise, given a pot of ink and enough bread to keep him from starving while he wastes good paper. Then he wonders. After this screed is printed, what surety will they have that its anonymous author will keep his peace? No matter. Such a book may be written to appease the Queen, but it will never be published. He will see to that.
Afterword

“The Thing That Thou Saw Only in Thought:” Crafting a Creative Dissertation

*Misfortune* is a work of historiographic metafiction\(^1\) with a mystery at its heart; it takes as its subject what many regard as an unsolved crime: the suspicious death on Sunday September 8, 1560 of Amy Robsart, the wife of Robert Dudley, Lord Leicester, the favorite of Elizabeth I.\(^2\) This novel is concerned with and comments upon authors as historical actors, stolen stories and fiction masquerading as nonfiction. My primary intention as I embarked upon this project was to write a work of historical fiction that is also a novel of detection as defined by Charles J. Rzepka.\(^3\) I chose to adhere to the known body of historical evidence, both factual and circumstantial, related to the death of Amy Robsart while inventing my own story of the crime.\(^4\) In doing so, I followed in the methodological footsteps of other writers of innovative historical fiction, as described by Martha Tuck Rozett in her book, *Constructing a World: Shakespeare’s England and the New Historical Fiction*. Rozett explains that this process often involves inventing motives for characters based upon historical persons: “Using the same

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\(^1\) Linda Hutcheon defines historiographic metafiction as pertaining to novels “that are not only intensely self-reflective, but that also both re-introduce historical context into metafiction and problematize the entire question of historical knowledge” (Hutcheon 285-286).

\(^2\) References in this essay to *Amy Robsart* denote the historical person, while references to *Amy* denote the character. References to *Elizabeth I* denote the historical person, while references to the *queen* denote the character of Queen Elizabeth. I use *Robert Dudley* to refer to the historical person and *Dudley* to refer to the character of the same name. In general, full names are used to refer to historical persons, while abbreviated names refer to characters.

\(^3\) According to Rzepka, a novel of detection must have four factors essential to contemporary detective fiction: a detective, a mystery to be solved (not necessarily a crime), an investigation that results in a solution, and a plot that allows the reader to participate in the investigation, or the so-called “puzzle element” (10).

\(^4\) In referring to the “story of the crime” and the “story of the investigation,” I draw upon terminology used by Rzepka, whose observations and terms are informed by the structural analysis of Tzvetan Todorov. As Todorov explains, the story of the crime is concerned with “what really happened” whereas the story of the investigation shows how the detective-narrator “has come to know about it” (45).
documents available to writers of nonfiction, historical novelists engage in imaginative speculation about why their subjects ‘did it’ and what they might have been doing during the gaps between recorded events” (104). My goal was not to exhaustively cross reference every account, but to read widely and critically and make a best judgement assessment regarding facts and other evidence, keeping in mind the limitations of even the best historical investigations. In essence, this novel agrees with the tongue-in-cheek definition of history offered by novelist Julian Barnes via the character of a school boy, Colin, in *The Sense of an Ending*, in which Colin stands up in class and quotes a fictional French historian named Patrick Lagrange: “History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacy of documentation” (Barnes 18). Embracing this perspective, I chose to conceptually locate this novel within the realm of “new” or innovative historical fiction as defined by Rozett (3). These novels tend to reflect a postmodern sensibility and embrace what Rozett calls “a resistance to old certainties about what happened and why” as well as “a recognition of the subjectivity, the uncertainty, the multiplicity of ‘truths’ inherent in any account of past events” (2).

A key aspect of this project involved disrupting gender stereotypes by making more fluid the roles of murderer and victim that historians and writers of fiction have long assigned to Robert Dudley and Amy Robsart; in *Misfortune*, Robert Dudley is the intended victim of a failed murder plot, while his wife is both would-be murderer and victim. My culminating intention, which emerged as a result of ongoing research, was to connect the events and personalities surrounding the death of Amy Robsart to *Leicester’s Commonwealth*, a seminal work of political propaganda first published in 1584 that accused Dudley of murdering his wife, along with other
crimes. These aims gave rise to working strategies, all of which evolved but were never significantly altered during the course of writing this novel. What did change is something equally vital—the story of the crime—which in turn required adjustments to the plot.5

In this essay, I talk about why and how I reworked the plot, which gradually became more complex and tightly woven. Since this is a creative dissertation, matters related to point of view, narrative arrays,6 style and the writing process itself are also addressed, as well as the challenges posed by creating characters based upon historical persons. I identify my strategies for developing the metafictional character of the novel and attempt to shed light on the creative process as it relates to the fiction writer’s license to explore what Ann Rigney calls the “blurred area” that lies between history and fiction (6). I also discuss my journey as a writer, especially as regards problems related to the work of closing the “logico-temporal gap” that separates the present discovery of the crime from the crime itself (Porter 29). The creative choices I made were influenced by many novelists and a few historians, something I touch upon. I conclude with my thoughts on period language and the research process, which was extensive and much aided by the use of archival material available online.

The metafictional concerns of the novel are expressed in ways both indirect and direct, effectively showing and telling via content and commentary. In general, I avoided the “insistent attention” to artifice evident in many works of metafiction in favor of what John Gardiner calls “a gentler use of metafictional techniques” (87). These include the characters’ ruminations on

5 The word plot refers to “the interplay between array and narrative”; narrative refers to “events as they appear in the sequence of their actual telling, that is, in the time-frame of the reader’s immediate, serial experience of the text” (Rzepka 19).
6 The term array refers to “the events appearing in the text as they are conceived by the reader in the order of their original occurrence, whether the occurrence takes place before or after the story begins” (Rzepka 19).
histories and history itself, and the mingling of the content of invented letters and journal entries attributed to my characters with the contents of actual letters written by historical persons from both the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. *Misfortune* revolves around writers and writing and features characters who slant stories to suit their own agendas. Inspired by Iain Pear’s *An Instance of the Fingerpost*, which features Anthony Wood, a historian caught up in the fallout from a murder, I invented the character of Theobald Cave, a hapless antiquary who is both a writer and minor player in history-shaping events. As a young man, Cave is involved in the intrigue surrounding the death of Amy Robsart; as an adult, he is hired to help write *Leicester’s Commonwealth*.

Cave’s employer is Sir Charles, a character loosely based upon Sir Charles Arundell, who is thought to have been the anonymous author of *Leicester’s Commonwealth*. Its tale of murder and sexual intrigue influenced several generations of playwrights, poets and authors, including Sir Walter Scott, author of *Kenilworth*, the popular romance that revived interest in Amy Robsart’s death and the so-called black legend of Robert Dudley, poisoner and wife killer. Other textual artifacts as clues figure prominently in the novel. An invented love letter written by Princess Elizabeth is presented as a key piece of evidence that raises but never answers questions about the queen’s virginity, a subject of intense speculation during her lifetime and since. Reflections on both historical fiction and works of history are offered up by my characters, including that of Queen Elizabeth, who sets out to neutralize *Leicester’s*

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7 I like this creative take on *history* (the thing as opposed to the discipline) offered by the character of Piers in *The Avignon Quintet* by Lawrence Durrell: “Can’t you see how marvelous history is? The presence of other people whose actions and thoughts seem to still hang about in the air?” (95).

8 The word *clues* refers to “points where the concealed plot pierces the investigative one” (Nickerson 78).
Commonwealth by commissioning another biased account that she believes will reform Dudley’s tainted legacy. As a further twist, she enlists the help of Cave, whom her agents have imprisoned for helping to write the book commissioned by Dudley’s enemies. In addition, one of my two detectives, Lady Louisa Stuart, reads and critiques the novel *Kenilworth* as it is being written with an eye to historicity. Lady Louisa is concerned with historicity or historical actuality as she understands it. This involves a quest for the probable truth, which she discusses in her journal, the contents of which are borrowed from and imitative of *The Letters of Lady Louisa Stuart to Miss Louisa Clinton*.

Although the real Lady Louisa Stuart was not at Abbotsford while Scott wrote *Kenilworth*, she was a friend of Scott’s and someone he relied upon for editorial input. She was an astute critic of historical fiction and its methods, which she commented upon in her correspondence with Scott and others. As the novel progresses, my Lady Louisa becomes more concerned with historicity itself and the identity of the anonymous author of *Leicester’s Commonwealth* than with the suspicious death of Amy Robsart.

*Misfortune* is set in both the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries; it features two amateur detectives and parallel investigations. The dominant narrative is that of the investigation that takes place in September of 1560 at Cumnor Place in the Berkshires, London and Windsor during the week following Amy’s murder. The subordinate investigation is set in Scotland at Scott’s country estate of Abbotsford near Tweedbank while he is writing *Kenilworth* in September of 1820. Sir Thomas Blount is the sixteenth-century detective and the primary narrator. Blount’s story of the investigation adopts the more intimate tone of a storyteller, whereas Lady Louisa’s voice is that of the journaling writer. Lady Louisa’s investigation unfolds
over the course of a month as she reads Scott’s romance, *Kenilworth*, while Blount’s account spans eight days, beginning on Monday, the day after Amy is killed, and ending a week later on the following Monday.

The two detectives are representative of two types familiar to readers of detective fiction. Blount is modeled upon the hard-boiled detective who has a personal stake in the investigation and puts his life and reputation on the line to solve the crime. Lady Louisa is a classic armchair detective whose strength is her detachment; she relies upon powers of analysis and textual evidence. My Lady Louisa, like her namesake, is an elderly blueblood who is also a writer. The long-lived Lady Louisa Stuart (1757-1851) left behind a treasure trove of letters, and many of my faux journal entries contain observations taken directly from her correspondence with Scott and others. The dominant mystery is Amy’s suspicious death. However, as Blount probes her death, he is visited by ghosts from his past and is compelled to learn the truth about the death of a young serving woman, Anne Winchell, with whom he was infatuated and whose suicide casts a shadow over Blount’s relationship with his employer. Lady Louisa leaves her armchair to eavesdrop and discover the hidden agenda of two strangers who come to Abbotsford with the intention of stealing a valuable letter. One of the thieves is a direct descendant of Cave’s and bears more than a passing resemblance to his larcenous ancestor. While Blount hunts evil doers, Lady Louisa turns her attention to questions of who wrote what and why.

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9 The eavesdropping scenes are a nod to the exploits of women sleuths in early detective fiction in general and more specifically those of Marian Halcombe in *The Woman in White*; Halcombe is an amateur detective who climbs out on a roof to listen in on a conversation between two villains who are scheming to fake the death of Halcombe’s half sister, Laura Fairlie, in order to rob her of her inheritance.
Misfortune introduces events that took place both before and after Amy’s murder, in part via the reflections of Cave, whose writings are discovered in a cache of antique papers that Lady Louisa brings with her to sort through during her visit to Abbotsford. As she examines the documents passed down through several generations of Montagues and Stuarts, she comes across Cave’s accounts of events leading up to the Amy’s murder, including a description of the wedding of Amy and Dudley in 1550. (Cave’s second-hand report is based upon his interview with Amy’s embittered stepbrother, John Appleyard.) Cave’s papers provide a misleading, romanticized story about Amy’s past. Although most of the events take place in September of 1560, the novel begins in the year 1588, after the death of Robert Dudley, and ends in the year 1603, after the death of Elizabeth I. In the first version, Misfortune had a Part I and a Part II. Part I dramatized events that took place after the death of Amy Robsart and which concerned the aftermath of the scandal. My goal was to locate the story of the crime in a larger historical framework. However, I eventually did away with this two-part structure in favor a more streamlined plot that allowed the story of the investigation to get off to a more robust start.

From the beginning, I planned to adhere to the historical evidence as regards the known facts and the political realities of the time, but to be inventive and unfettered as regards storytelling possibilities, especially the story of the crime and Amy’s life story. In other words, I did not set out to concoct the final, unimpeachable explanation of how Amy Robsart died or who killed her. My intention was to invent a crime story that would be plausible in the universe of the novel itself, and not as an alternative to much debated theories of the crime offered up by historians and other experts. These range from the early popular myth that Amy Robsart was killed by assassins who entered her bedroom via a secret passage way and the possibility
that she committed suicide, to the more recent and plausible forensic explanation that she fell after suffering a spontaneous fracture of the spine caused by advanced breast cancer. (This event would have occurred while she was descending a pair of stairs, thus making it appear that the fall caused the fatal fracture when the reverse was true.)

All of this relates to my decision to treat Amy Robsart’s mysterious death as a murder while adhering to what is known about how she died and what occurred on the day of her death, including her odd behavior and angry insistence that her servants leave Cumnor Hall and attend a fair in nearby Abingdon. This body of evidence is drawn from diverse sources, but has been most thoroughly compiled in Chris Skidmore’s investigative account, *Death and the Virgin*. This meant that I must concoct a story that was entirely fictional as regards the characters’ motives and actions, but grounded in evidence familiar to those acquainted with the case, including the coroner’s report recently uncovered by Skidmore, who found it among legal records in the National Archives at Kew, where it had remained undiscovered for 450 years (Skidmore 230).

Because Robert Dudley was much reviled and twice targeted for assassination, I decided to create a character based upon Sir Charles Arundell, one of Dudley’s lifelong enemies, and make him the architect of a plan to murder Amy in order to frame Dudley and thereby prevent him from marrying the queen. In this regard, I chose to follow the path laid by more than one contemporary historian, including Sara Gristwood, author of *Elizabeth and Leicester: Power, Passion and Politics*. Gristwood makes the convincing argument that if Amy Robsart was indeed murdered, that Dudley’s enemies, including and especially William Cecil, Elizabeth I’s chief advisor and Secretary of State, could very well have been the culprits. Gristwood argues that
“Cecil had the best motive. One has only to think of Cecil’s position before Amy’s scandalous
death; and his very different position after it” (119). Essentially, I agreed with Gristwood that it
was Dudley’s enemies and not Dudley who had the most to gain. Instead of Cecil, however, I
chose to make Sir Charles the villain in chief. Sir Charles Arundell was not only one of Dudley’s
most bitter enemies, but also the likely author of Leicester’s Commonwealth. Making Sir Charles
the architect of a plan to defame Dudley helped me tie together two of the novel’s major
concerns. In Misfortune, Sir Charles colludes with Henry Fitzalan, an earl, and Thomas Howard,
a duke; all three characters, like their namesakes, are Catholic sympathizers and enemies of
Dudley who have strong personal and political motives for destroying him. From a literary
standpoint, this theory also provides a counterpoint to the story told in Kenilworth, which
largely adheres to the original thesis of Leicester’s Commonwealth.

In taking this approach, one in which Dudley’s enemies first conspire with his wife to
murder him and then betray her and make her the target, I gave myself a thorny problem to
solve. As the novel progressed, I further complicated the picture by deciding that this scheme
would end in failure, but that a second cohort of conspirators would set out to murder Amy for
reasons of their own—and succeed. My challenge then became to construct a story of the
crime that would adhere to the historical evidence and also be the culmination of two
intersecting conspiracies. After roughing out many different crime stories (ten in all) my final
version was influenced by the characters I created and also by plot enhancements that I saw as
leading my sixteenth-century detective toward a resolution that would prove morally
ambiguous and personally problematic. In the end, Blount learns who killed Amy, how and why,
but chooses not to expose the guilty parties.
One of the most important developments in writing the first draft was my decision to link two closely related mysteries – who killed Amy Robsart and who wrote *Leicester’s Commonwealth* – via the character of Sir Charles. The notion that Sir Charles Arundell might have wished to ruin Dudley by killing his wife is not an unreasonable conceit, given his personal animosity for Dudley and his grasp of the destructive power of rumor. Skidmore explains that Sir Charles Arundell “had held a long and bitter hatred against the Dudleys” whom he blamed for the execution of his father, Sir Thomas Arundell (345). The novel’s ongoing focus on Sir Charles and *Leicester’s Commonwealth* is therefore not only overtly historical, bringing to the forefront an important early tract that was both a banned book and bestseller of its day, but also covertly metafictional in nature, in that it dramatizes how a slanted portrayal of a historic figure can dominate scholarly discourse and influence how Dudley was depicted for three centuries in ballads, plays and literature.

From the outset, I strove to infuse this novel with a feminine sensibility typical of what Rozett calls “women centered historical fiction” that “speaks directly to the female experience” (107). Like other authors of women-centered historical fiction, I chose to portray a well-known historic figure, Elizabeth I, and also to invent characters based upon lesser-known women who were contemporaries of Elizabeth I and who played a part in the scandal. The Amy of *Misfortune* is flawed but defiant and also resistant in the face of male coercion; she is surrounded by powerful men who see her as an expendable pawn in their schemes to force the queen to surrender her autonomy and marry a man who will effectively usurp her. I sought to avoid portraying Amy Robsart as a pitiable and otherwise uninteresting victim by giving her a strong personality and credible motives for wanting to have her husband murdered. Unlike
Scott’s Countess Amy—a wide-eyed ingénue who adores her husband—my Amy is a bitter, disillusioned wife. She is not only angry and desperate, which the real Amy Robsart was reported to have been, but also cunning and resourceful. In addition, she has a complicated sexual history, and does not marry for love, as many historians have speculated, but because her parents are socially ambitious. In Misfortune, the Robsart-Dudley match is blighted from the start, given that the bride is pregnant with her father-in-law’s bastard. Dudley comes to the marriage filled with resentment at being made to marry the daughter of a mere Norfolk knight while his brothers’ brides are the daughters of powerful peers of the realm.

As the novel progressed, I decided that dramatizing the political and personal intrigues surrounding Leicester’s Commonwealth would enhance my quest to write a novel that was concerned with the relationship between history and literature. Published in France in 1584 and smuggled into England, Leicester’s Commonwealth is best understood in journalistic terms as a hatchet job on Dudley, and a successful one, since it shaped the so-called black legend that depicted Dudley as a thorough-going villain who was also to blame for Elizabeth I having failed to produce “an heir of the body.” It was anonymously authored by disaffected English Catholics living in exile in Paris and promoted by Jesuit Robert Parsons. Presented as a dialogue between a Cambridge scholar and a gentleman, it painted a portrait of Dudley as a sexually-obsessed poisoner and ruthlessly ambitious politician. It also smeared the women with whom Dudley was romantically involved. In addition to calling for Dudley’s arrest and execution, it argued for the succession rights of Mary Queen of Scots, which were then in doubt due to her suspected involvement in plots to assassinate Elizabeth I.
Concerning character creation and development, I found the task of building biographies more daunting when I began with a blank slate. From the outset, I expected to use what is known about Lord Leicester to develop a fictional Dudley, although the real man remains something of a cipher. Robert Dudley the historical figure is arguably a fictional construct as well, since numerous and varied portraits of him have been drawn by biographers. The same can be said of Elizabeth I. My task was not to sit in judgement of these versions, but to consider what has been written and construct one of my own. As I wrote, I found it helpful to mine the abundant historical record for insights into the much-studied personality of Robert Dudley. (He liked salads, gambling and fishing, and at all times struggled to pay his bills; he was alternately restrained in his behavior and too bold.) By contrast, I had to adopt a start-from-scratch approach in order to fashion a fictional Amy Robsart. Historians have produced a collation of biographical facts, such as the names of Amy Robsart’s parents and siblings, when she was born, married and died, as well as rumors about her illness and mental distress; yet nothing is known of her character or even her appearance.

I was therefore challenged to invent my own version of Amy Robsart—someone who would be sympathetic but also vain and cunning. Whereas many historians surmise that she may have met Robert Dudley for the first time when he and his father rode north to suppress a rebellion begun by Amy Robsart’s uncle by marriage, Robert Kett, (also mentioned in the novel) I decided her life would be more complicated if her sexual initiation involved Dudley’s father, John Dudley, the Earl of Warwick. This choice was inspired by accounts both fictional and historic. A similar, semi-incestuous relationship between a father and daughter-in-law is depicted in Wolf Hall. I also had in mind the notorious conduct of Lord Admiral Thomas
Seymour, husband of Katherine Parr, stepmother to then Princess Elizabeth. Seymour’s flirtatious and seductive behavior toward Princess Elizabeth, then fourteen and living with Parr and Seymour at Sudeley Hall, resulted in a scandal and Seymour’s execution.

Sketching a profile for my lead amateur detective was not that difficult. However, giving him a distinctive voice and a rich inner life proved daunting. While many of literature’s most popular detectives are strikingly odd and charismatic personalities, I envisioned my detective as more ordinary, a career man who is habituated to putting his own needs on hold while he tidies up the messes left by his glamorous employer, whose immensely complicated personal life includes a bitter wife and a demanding royal mistress. Blount remains troubled by an incident from his youth, the suicide of his first crush, Anne Winchell, a serving girl who worked for the Dudleys. It was Blount who found her body hanging from a rafter in the stables. Her suicide at age sixteen was investigated by a rigged jury and ruled an accident, in part to spare her family, but also to conceal the truth: that she was despondent after being turned out by the Dudleys when her pregnancy became known. Blount has always blamed another Dudley family ward and retainer, Sir Richard Verney, for her death, but comes to suspect it was actually Dudley who seduced her. He eventually learns that the man responsible was none other than his patron, John Dudley, portrayed in Misfortune as a charming sexual opportunist who preys upon both Anne and Amy while they are under his roof at Ely House in London. As a young man, Blount was obliged to lie and participate in the cover-up of Anne’s suicide, which was falsely ruled an accident, and fears he is once again being used by Dudley, who is more concerned with his reputation than learning how his wife died.
Blount’s character is based upon a historical person of the same name who was Robert Dudley’s distant relative and longtime retainer. After Robert Dudley’s wife was found dead, the queen sent her favorite away to the Dairy House at Kew, where he was required to remain in obedient to the Elizabethan equivalent of house arrest. The real Sir Thomas Blount was tasked by his employer with acting on his behalf and going to the scene of the crime, Cumnor Hall in the Berkshires, to learn everything he could about what happened. A small but intriguing body of information exists about Blount, whom Dudley trusted and addressed as “cousin.” Letters written to Dudley by Blount and other documents indicate that he was a literate and resourceful investigator who knew how to keep a low profile and hobnob with commoners to get the low down on local gossip. The scene in Misfortune in which he stops at a tavern for that express purpose is based on an actual incident described in one of his letters to Robert Dudley. Years later, it was also Thomas Blount who played an active role on Robert Dudley’s behalf when John Appleyard turned against his brother-in-law and accused him of murdering his wife.

My fictional Blount is a knight who fought alongside the Dudleys on French battlefields. Like the real Thomas Blount, he is dispatched to Cumnor Hall to learn the truth about what happened to Amy, whom he knows very well but does not like. The fictional Blount is a Dudley insider, an orphan who was fostered by John Dudley and his wife, Jane Guildford Dudley, who took him in after the death of Blount’s mother and father, minor freeholders who lived near the Dudley family estate in Staffordshire. He is educated and well spoken. He is not handsome, but tall and intimidating. His nemesis is Verney, who acts as a double agent, shadow detective and

10 According to historian Alison Weir, “Dudley had hoped that the coroner’s enquiry would expose Amy’s murderer and thus clear his own name” (103).
spy who betrays Dudley. The character of Verney borrows only the name of the historical person who was blamed in *Leicester’s Commonwealth* for attempting to poison Amy Robsart and also for ordering one of his henchmen to murder her. Verney’s role in *Misfortune* is to sabotage Blount’s investigation, which he does both to conceal his betrayal of Dudley and the fact that he knew Amy was going to be murdered and did nothing to prevent it in order to further his own agenda, which involves ingratiating himself with Cecil.

My decision to let Blount tell his own story led me to rewrite several chapters to allow him to speak in the first person, much like the character of Nicholas Barber, who narrates *Morality Play*, a murder mystery set in the fourteenth century. I began using the more distant third person point of view, but switched to the more intimate first person to allow Blount to be both self reporting and also self revealing. This felt right to me after reading Sara Waters’ historical thriller, *Fingersmith*, in which two women characters present their versions of events regarding an elaborate criminal scheme in which they are alternately victims and perpetrators. In *Fingersmith*, each narrator simply launches into her tale of what happened, which I found to be straight forward and engaging. Using the first person also seemed a more direct means of accessing the character’s moods and emotions, something Waters does with verve, such as when one of the novel’s narrators, Maud, describes her response to being forced to read out loud from her uncle’s collection of erotica. “My hot cheek cools, my colour dies, the heat quite fades from my limbs. The restlessness turns all to scorn” (Waters 211). Blount’s all around toughness was inspired by the character of Captain William Barfoot, a former soldier and street brawler who takes on the role of hired investigator in *Entered from the Sun*.
As a novice writer, I found most challenging the work of constructing a plot and creating dramatic scenes that grew out of tension between characters and also made the plot move forward. The difficulty I experienced was certainly due to my inexperience, but also the inherent complexity of novels of detection, in this case further complicated by the need to be historically accurate. Like most readers of stories of detection, I came to this project well accustomed to the mental process of reconstructing the story of the crime.\textsuperscript{11} However, I soon found myself engaged in a new imaginative exercise as I began to experience how the writer of detective fiction must think in the time-driven world of the novel. In this world, the writer determines and therefore knows what has already occurred before the story of the investigation begins and also what lies ahead—down to every twist and turn on the path followed by the detective as he\textsuperscript{12} makes his way in a sphere of ever-expanding but limited knowledge. The difficulty for me lay in the flexibility required to keep these two experientially unique perspectives separate so that I could write convincing scenes in which my detective is bewildered and caught off guard.

This virtual world also impressed upon me the difficulties of chronological ordering in relation to the ongoing deceptive behavior of other characters. In addition to the open story of the investigation, the writer must also construct and keep track of what I came to think of as all that goes on meanwhile—the unbeknownst narrative arrays of ongoing covert behavior on the part of characters who attempt to evade detection or sabotage the investigation. These

\textsuperscript{11} Rzepka discusses this imaginative exercise, which involves \textit{analects}, “the narrative construction of arrays that may proceed the inception of the narrative itself” (19).

\textsuperscript{12} Although this story involves two detectives, male and female, I use “he” here because Blount is the lead detective.
subversive events often take place off stage, if you will, and are contemporaneous with the story of the investigation. The suspect and others who hope to prevent the detective from solving the crime frequently lie to his face; they also act behind his back, committing crimes or acts of sabotage. These off-stage crimes must eventually be made known along with the larger story of the crime. The murder of Howard Ady, for instance, is not witnessed by Blount, but discovered after the fact. The word “meanwhile” comes to mind, as in the following: Blount sets out on Wednesday morning to find Ady. Meanwhile, unbeknownst to him, Nokes has murdered Ady and is coming back to Ady’s house to confront and possibly kill Cave, who is saved by Blount’s chance arrival. The writer of detective fiction is obliged to keep these events in sync by remaining aware of not only what is hidden from the detective as it happens, but also how it will be revealed, when and by whom. (Ady is found dead in Chapter Thirteen, but the circumstances of his death are not revealed until Chapter Sixteen when Blount interviews Ady’s killer, Father Nokes.)

Some of my major concerns while writing Misfortune involved choices I made about narrative voice and point of view. In How Fiction Works, James Wood tells us that the writer of fiction has limited options in this regard. “The house of fiction has many windows but only two or three doors. I can tell a story in the third person or in the first person and perhaps in the second person singular or in the first person plural, although successful examples of these are rare indeed. And that is it” (3). At the outset, I planned to more or less mirror historical novelists Hilary Mantel and George Garrett, who both rely extensively on close third person in Wolf Hall and Death of a Fox. Close third person is a useful modification of the omniscient voice that allows access to a character’s thoughts. “A novelist’s omniscience soon enough becomes a
kind of secret sharing; this is called ‘free indirect style,’ a term novelists have lots of different nicknames for—close third person, or going into character” (Wood 8). Rendered in the present tense, this character-driven perspective also lends freshness to prose and allows for the more breezy “says” versus the more formal “said” when writing dialogue. My stylistic choice was influenced by Garrett and the way he inhabits the thoughts of his characters, stringing together fragments and long, elegant sentences as he does in Death of the Fox, an end-of-days tale of the life of Sir Walter Raleigh.

As I began writing the story of the investigation, some characters faded into the background while others stepped forward. Whereas I had originally intended to make Scott a character of note, he has been reduced to a minor, nonspeaking part. Conversely, the character of Cave emerged and took on an important role. He is on view as both a young man caught up in historical events and later on as a writer for hire whose job is to present a biased account of the same events. In addition to Elizabeth I and Amy Robsart, Misfortune also features three women characters based upon lesser historical persons; they are Blanche Parry, the queen’s senior gentlewoman and former nursemaid, Edith Odingsells, a gentlewoman known to the Dudleys, and Amy Robsart’s maid, Temperance Pirgo. The real Edith Odingsells was a resident of Cumnor Hall who was present the day Amy Robsart died. She was the sister-in-law of Anthony Forster, then master of Cumnor Hall and Dudley’s treasurer; her male relatives were longtime allies of Elizabeth I. Temperance Pirgo is remembered only for her role as maid to Amy Robsart, and by virtue of her having been interviewed by Thomas Blount following the death of her mistress. In my story, she participates in Amy’s murder and gives misleading testimony.
It is fair to say that constructing a work of detective fiction requires some intricate maneuvers in the process of closing the “logico-temporal gap” that separates the present discovery of the crime from the crime itself (Porter 29). In practical terms, any retroactive changes can prove highly problematic, since every piece of this multi-layered puzzle must fit together. Hints dropped must find their proper resting place; if something is meant to be unresolved or vague, this too must be foreseen, so that gaps and gray areas in the story are also intentional. Ideally, the story of the investigation should result in a solution that the reader regards as surprising—or at least not obvious—and which also satisfies the body of evidence as well as making sense in terms of the motivations of the characters. In his famous essay, “The Simple Art of Murder,” Raymond Chandler describes this approach as one that fools the reader “without cheating him” (Chandler). One of the most difficult aspects of writing Misfortune was confronting my doubts about creative decisions I had made at the start of this project—doubts that lead me to make changes and do a good bit of back tracking and rewriting.

In her afterword to Restoration, Tremain explains that her “plan for development” was to trace the rise, fall and redemption of her engaging protagonist, Robert Merivel (402). About a third of the way through writing her first draft, however, her plan “began to wobble” as she was confronted with serious doubts that the protagonist she had created, the frivolous Merivel, could “ever earn the redemptive ending I’d mapped out for him” (403). Her solution: stop writing and devise a new ending that would work for her character. Tremain decided, in effect, to let Merivel be Merivel and to instead change the story to suit his character. As I wrote Misfortune, I felt a similar sort of “wobble” that made me rethink both the story of the crime and the plot. At first I envisioned Amy’s maid, Temperance Pirgo, as an agent of the
unexpected, the minor player who kills her mistress, who has abused her for years. (In this discarded scenario, the two clash over Amy’s plan to murder Dudley, and Pirgo shoves her mistress down the stairs when her back is turned.) However, this came to seem less than satisfying in that it did not do enough to connect Amy’s death to the intrigues at court, or prove personally problematic for Blount. I took a deep breath and discarded this approach for one that allowed me to implicate two women close to Blount and to introduce as well the controversial question of Elizabeth I’s sexual history. By the end of Misfortune, the clues point toward Mistress Blanche taking matters into her own hands by directing the Widow Odingsells to poison Amy with help from Pirgo, who betrays her mistress by substituting a vial of poison for a vial of mithridate.

Mistress Blanche is motivated by her desire to protect the unmarried queen, whom she believes is threatened with ruin by rumor and innuendo if the contents of a stolen love letter are revealed. (The contents of the letter that Lady Blanche wants to suppress are never made known, but only hinted at, leaving unanswered the question of Elizabeth’s virginity.) In the end, Mistress Blanche, Mrs. Odingsells and Pirgo work together to poison the gravely-ill Amy, who falls and breaks her neck after she is sickened by the poison that has been substituted for the prophylactic mithridate with which she doses herself, hoping to stay alive long enough to take her revenge on Dudley. As a further complication, it is revealed that the stolen love letter that Blount forces Cave to surrender is a forgery of the original, which Cave first hides in the crypt beneath Cumnor Hall, then retrieves years later. When Cave’s nineteenth-century descendant, Samuel Cave, goes hunting for the original letter at Abbotsford, his deceptions endanger Lady Louisa, who must think her way out of a life-or-death predicament. (This further plot twist was
added during a rewrite in order to allow Lady Louisa to demonstrate her detective skills and to add suspense to the story of her investigation.)

As stated, changing the story of the crime necessitated significant changes in the story of the investigation. I went to work, adding another plot twist that forced my detective to deal with personal and psychological complications close to home. I decided that Blount should become romantically involved with the queen’s spy, Mrs. Odingsells, whom he regards as a rival, and who is eventually revealed to be a co-conspirator in the scheme to eliminate Amy. By the end of *Misfortune*, Blount is forced once again to take a morally ambiguous stance in which he participates in a cover up of the crime. Blount is a traditional detective who will not stop until he learns what really happened and who did what. However, he feels no compulsion to bring Amy’s killers to justice after having learned the truth about her: that she was partly responsible for driving a young girl to suicide and was plotting to murder her husband.

Todorov tells us that “not much” happens in the story of the investigation, in which the characters do more learning than acting (44). As such, many detective novels rely heavily on dialogue, and *Misfortune* is no exception. I enjoyed inventing dialogue for the characters of Verney, Blount, the queen and Mistress Blanche, yet struggled to give Amy a voice and explore her dark emotions. (Ultimately, she has her say in a letter that tells her story.) Pirgo’s rusticated speaking voice also needed a good deal of fine tuning. All of this overlapped with ongoing concerns about allowing the characters to speak in a way that would be natural and unaffected, while also evoking the distinctive, High-Church eloquence of early modern English. While I wished to avoid making my characters sound too modern, neither did I want them to strut about spouting lines that seemed to have been lifted from a sixteenth century play. I therefore
did my best to act as an educated translator, one who is familiar with but not strictly imitative of the language found in period plays and documents, both literary and non-literary, including letters, early how-to books, ballads, epitaphs and poetry.

I also conducted ongoing etymological research, relying upon glossaries and online resources to track down the origins of words and determine when they came into use. My intention was avoid the intrusion of the blatantly modern into my linguistic landscape. Instead of “launch” I use “catapult,” for instance, and “heavy” rather than “depressed.” I made many exceptions, choosing, for instance, to use “listen” rather than “hark” and “I think” as opposed to “methinks.” In general, I favor the judicious use of archaic words and expressions; readers should be able to immerse themselves in the atmospheric word-world of the novel without feeling as if they need to come up for air. In this regard, I agree with Patricia Finney, the author of *Firedrake’s Eye*, a work of historical fiction set in Elizabethan England. In her introduction to that novel, Finney explains that she did not set out to produce “a pastiche” of Elizabethan English, since such attempts can prove “either accurate and difficult to read, or inaccurate and irritating” (vii). Similarly, in his review of *Wolf Hall*, Stephen Greenblatt argues that the writer’s charge is not to provide an exact imitation of how Thomas Cromwell might have spoken, but to bring him aurally to life. “Historical accuracy is not the issue: scrutiny of Cromwell’s surviving letters suggests that he probably did not sound very much like Mantel’s hero. What matters is the illusion of reality, the ability to summon up ghosts” (Greenblatt).

Matters pertaining to period vocabulary, syntax and grammar were endlessly intriguing, especially as regards formal versus colloquial speech – the latter being much more difficult to invent. I made good use of the plays of Thomas Dekker, especially *The Shoemaker’s Holiday,*
first performed in 1599, which I mined for period expressions and to acquire a sense of how a
working-class man or woman might have spoken. This play and others are available online at
both Luminarian.org and Bartleby.com. I preferred the latter, due to the inclusion of helpful
footnotes, which explain, for instance, that “true bias” should be read as “inclination” and that
a “Portuguese” was a gold coin worth three pounds twelve shillings. I paid attention to the
evolution of English during the early modern period. I learned that “thou” (subjective) and
“thee” (objective) were still in use during the mid-sixteenth century, and “you” was coming into
use. (Thou was more familiar and even affectionate, but it could be condescending, whereas
“you” was more formal; a master might address a servant as “thou” but never the other way
around.) Elizabeth I’s letters\(^\text{13}\) reveal that her correspondence pertaining to matters of state
invariably found her using the formal “you,” whereas those addressed to intimates called for
the more familiar “thou.” For certain personality types, of which I am one, research can be
addictive. It is easy to get lost in all things Elizabethan: diet, ritual, dress, theater, architecture,
folklore and entertainments are all fascinating topics. I strove to both name and describe
specific places, dishes, everyday objects and art work, and also sketched word pictures that
would have made sense to an early-modern person. Each scene set me off in a different
direction, conducting my own historical scavenger hunt. How long would it take to ride by horse
from Cumnor Place to London? When is the Thames at low tide? How would one have travelled

\(^{13}\) In one affectionate letter to her godson, John Harington, which the queen begins with the salutation,
‘Boy Jack,’ Elizabeth I shared with her godson a copy of one of her speeches to Parliament so that he might study
her words. “Ponder them in thy hours of leisure, and play with them till they enter thy understanding; so shalt
thou hereafter, perchance, find some good fruits hereof when thy godmother is out of remembrance; and I do this
because thy father was ready to serve us and love us in trouble and thrall” (Tudor 78-79).
from the Tower of London to Whitehall Palace, most of which burned in the fire of 1622? When was Siege of Boulogne? How many children did Jane Guildford Dudley give birth to and how many survived? How common was suicide in Tudor England and what methods were most common? Did dog breeds as we know them exist in the sixteenth century? What did the Duke of Norfolk look like? What was an appropriate tip for a servant?

Many rich sources of information in terms of both practical matters and the world view of Elizabethans are available in the form of documents found online, such as the *Book of Orders and Rules* by Anthony Maria Browne, the Viscount Montague. This manual for household management was first published in 1595 and reprinted in a volume of the *Sussex Archaeological Collections* in 1854. Wonderful stray facts emerge from glossaries, and the one attached to the *Book of Orders and Rules* is typical in this regard. One learns that a “livery book” was a record of daily expenses kept by a steward, and that men who caught rabbits were “warreners”—bits of color that could end up in a scene. Early editors have also left behind some interesting insights, such as this from Sir James Sibbald David Scott, who attached “A note on the editing process” to Browne’s manual. In a sonorous voice typical of his century, Scott reflects upon the unstructured prose of the book’s sixteenth-century author. “His lordship had no more sense of the paragraph than other writers of his day. He often seems to write until he runs out of breath, as if afraid of being interrupted” (Scott 2).

Other historical sources relied upon during the writing of this novel include the previously mentioned *Leicester’s Commonwealth* and books of history that either discuss the scandal or contain information regarding relevant persons and events. These include *The Ketts of Norfolk: A Yeoman Family*, compiled by L.M. Kett; *The Romance of the Peerage: Curiosities of..."
Family History by George Lillie Craik; The Antiquities of Berkshires by Elias Ashmole; and the highly detailed Inquiry read at the Congress of the British Archeological Association held at Newbury in 1859, being a refutation of the calumnies charged against Sir Robert Dudley, Anthony Forster and others by Thomas Joseph Pettigrew. I also invested some time familiarizing myself with the contemporary debate about the mystery surrounding the authorship of Leicester’s Commonwealth, also known as Parson’s Greencoat—for the English Jesuit Robert Parsons, who many scholars argue was the primary author of a book that was likely the result of a collaborative effort. No conclusive solution has emerged; however, the names of two individuals, Robert Parsons and Charles Arundell, are most prominent in scholarly investigations devoted to identifying the author of the anonymous tract. This greatly influenced my decision to make my fictional Sir Charles the author of Leicester’s Commonwealth and also the man responsible for an invented scheme to defame Dudley by murdering his wife.

Some early books that proved helpful as regards the Elizabethan world view and the observations of early historians include Holinshed’s Chronicles of England Scotland and Ireland. This first attempt at a comprehensive review of British history is meandering and highly opinionated, and provided insight into the mindset of early historians. I also became intrigued by The Cosmological Glasse, one of the first major books to come from the presses of Protestant printer John Day after the ascension of Elizabeth I. This discovery led me to adopt Day as a minor character and to introduce into the novel an important development in publishing, which was the dawning awareness of the impact of books printed in English for a wider audience of English-speaking readers. Also helpful were early prayer books, epitaphs, pamphlets containing the so-called confessions of witches and diaries of Jesuits held prisoner in
the Tower of London. I also read numerous biographies and biographical treatments, both print and online. Alison Weir’s biography, *The Life of Elizabeth I*, was indispensable, and Lytton Strachey’s *Elizabeth and Essex* provided insight into the personality of the aging queen.

I also studied the correspondence of Lady Stuart. Many of her letters were reproduced in their entirety in a collection, *The Letters of Lady Louisa Stuart to Miss Louisa Clinton*, which is 431 pages in length and which I downloaded for easy reference. Excerpts from Lady Stuart’s letters to Scott and more than three dozen references to her appear in Edgar Johnson’s massive two-volume biography of Sir Walter Scott. In it, she is described as “an admirer of Scott’s, though never a slavish one” (Johnson 1018). “Lady Louisa had learned literary taste from her father’s great library at Luton Hoo, loved Clarendon and Plutarch, read French, Spanish and Portuguese, knew all the intimate history of the past hundred years, and scribbled verses and witty prose in secret” (Johnson 162). Her reflections on what she dislikes about most historical novels, which appear in Chapter Four, are taken nearly word for word from her correspondence, as is the quote that appears in the epigraph for Chapter Twenty-three.

My own books kept at the ready include E.M.W. Tillyard’s *The Elizabethan World Picture*, *The Intimate Letters of England’s Queens*, compiled by Margaret Sanders, Johnson’s biography, *Sir Walter Scott*, and the 1954 edition of *The Renaissance in England*, which is 1014 pages in length and contains a glossary of 5,600 entries of early Elizabethan words and phrases. My experiences as a crime reporter in New York and Oklahoma also proved useful, since I was able to draw upon homicides I covered. I once wrote about the murder of an elderly man in Walton, Oklahoma—a disagreeable family patriarch who had been smothered in his sleep by his step daughter. This case led me to devise the threat of a similar fate for my elderly
detective, Lady Louisa. Also useful and inspiring were the illustrations in *English Costumes from the Fourteenth Through the Nineteenth Century*. This book includes several hundred full-length drawings of the clothing worn by both men and women as well as smaller drawings depicting styles of head-dress, hats and caps. Each group of illustrations is accompanied by insights into the fashion of the times. I also made good use of illustrated history books and went online to study photographs of period woodcuts, tapestries, furniture and portraits.

All of these sources and more were mined for the epigraphs with which I begin each chapter. I discovered the John Dryden quote about the Greek historian Polybius, which appears at the start of Chapter Ten, when I first saw the scanned image of the title page of Pettigrew’s inquiry into the death of Amy Robsart. I did some checking to learn the source of the quote, which I found in another online book, *The Works of John Dryden in Verse and Prose*, which contains *The History of Polybius and His Writings*, about the Greek historian, Polybius, a critic of histories tainted by the personal prejudices of their authors. All of these epigraphs were chosen with care. They provide a further metafictional flourish, since they include commentary on the subjective nature of historical narrative or touch upon the similarities between history and literature. All are sourced and dated and serve as historical markers. They also include facts and historical insights related to the mystery itself and provide hints as to what might have happened; others set a mood or touch upon a theme. Some were discovered while I dipped into literature of the period—something I did daily as a warm up exercise before I began writing. Reading poetry allowed me to hear the voices of dead versifiers and spend a bit of time in their vanished world. A favorite resource was my hefty anthology of Renaissance prose and poetry. My other go-to book for inspiration was *Death of a Fox*, which is chockablock with rich
period detail. To read *Death of a Fox* is to be immersed in a sensual sphere in which bodies sweat, leather snaps, slippers slide, and rush lights stink of grease.

As regards Amy Robsart’s controversial death, the most important resource in writing this novel was Skidmore’s nonfiction book, *Death and the Virgin*, which is the most up to date and exhaustive work reviewing the fatal incident and all the persons involved, including the minor characters and more obscure documents pertaining to the matter. Especially helpful were reproductions of letters written by Robert Dudley and Thomas Blount, the contents of which I both selectively borrowed and also imitated to create my own invented letters. Skidmore’s book attracted attention when it was published in 2010 because he had located the previously undiscovered autopsy report that labeled Amy Robsart’s death a mishap. This report seemed to point toward the possibility of foul play, since it showed that in addition to a broken neck, Amy Robsart also suffered two head wounds, one of which was two inches deep and could have proven fatal on its own (Skidmore 365). I refer to these head wounds in Chapter Eight, in which the coroner conducts his inspection of Amy’s corpse in front of the assembled jury, a scene that was inspired by a coroner’s inquest dramatized in an early detective novel, *The Leavenworth Case*, by Anna Katharine Green.

Skidmore’s discovery was an important one, given that many students of this case, both amateurs and professionals, had come to doubt that Amy Robsart was the victim of violence, based upon an important, game-changing theory published in 1956 by physician Ian Aird that argued that she may have been dying of metastatic breast cancer that resulted in a spontaneous and fatal fracture of the spine (Skidmore 227). By contrast, the original autopsy report shows that she suffered two severe head wounds or “dints,” a term used at the time to
describe a wound from a sword. This new finding revived interest in the 460-year-old case and made very credible the possibility that Amy Robsart had been murdered. Skidmore argues that the scandal that resulted from the death of Amy Robsart put an end to any hope that Dudley had of marrying Elizabeth I. However, he does not arrive at any conclusion as to who was responsible, citing the limitations of fact-based scholarly inquiry. “For the historian, unlike the detective, the dead can only reveal so much” (Skidmore 371).

In her afterword to Restoration, Tremain explains that she set out to write a “fictional response to the climate of greed and selfishness that she felt had taken hold during the Thatcher years” (403). She cast about for controversies to illustrate this societal problem, but found that world events “came sweeping by and made them obsolete” and so looked back in time to the seventeenth century when a similar climate prevailed in England (403). By contrast, I did not set out to invent a story that would shed light on a contemporary problem, but chose to focus on the Amy Robsart case because it is an unsolved mystery, and because Amy Robsart’s story is always considered in relation to that of Elizabeth I, the enigmatic Virgin Queen. Rozett tellingly refers to it as “an intriguing secondary narrative in Queen Elizabeth’s biography” (104). Elizabeth Tudor’s sexual history remains opaque, especially as regards her involvement with Robert Dudley, something I bring out in this novel. Elizabeth I was a consummate performer who used the disguise of hyper-femininity in order to assume male prerogatives and adopt masculine roles. Her achievements, determination to remain unwed and her love affair with power all speak to women today. By contrast, Amy Robsart’s story has endured not because she was an important figure, but because of her husband’s notoriety, and also because her case remains unsolved and perhaps unsolvable. Time has drawn a veil over
what happened that day, leaving behind only tantalizing clues and theories, all of which continue to invite fictional intervention.


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the calumnies charged against Sir Robert Dudley, K.G., Anthony Forster, and others:
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