

A JOHN SHAKESPEARE STORY
FOR CHRISTMAS

The
Man
in the
Snow

RORY
CLEMENTS

'Does for Elizabeth's reign what C. J. Sansom does for Henry VIII's'
Sunday Times

Martyr
Revenger
Prince
Traitor
The Heretics

The Man in the Snow

Rory Clements

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John Shakespeare sat at his table, huddled into his padded doublet. Behind him, the fire in the hearth crackled and roared but could not compete with the cold air that blasted in off the river and howled through the gaps in the leaded windows. A wind as cold as death. He dipped his quill into the horn and wondered briefly whether, even here indoors, it were possible for ink to freeze solid.

He had been putting off writing this letter. With Christmas only two days away, he could delay no longer.

His parents would prefer his presence, of course, but there was no hope of that this year. Threats to the safety of the realm were multiplying. As Sir Robert Cecil's chief intelligencer he could not leave his post even on holy days. And then there was this weather: thick snow carpeted the land so that travelling any distance was impossible. Even the best riders would not manage the hundred-mile highway to Stratford-upon-Avon in such conditions. A letter would have to suffice and the courier would have to deliver it as and when he could.

Sitting back from the table, he looked at what he had written: news of the girls, Mary and Grace, both thriving in health and their lessons. He was about to move on to his adopted son, Andrew, when there was a knock at the door and Boltfoot Cooper limped into the room, his club-foot scraping across the rush-matted boards.

'Mr Peace is here to see you, master.'

Peace? A visit from Joshua Peace was a rare event indeed. Rare, but most welcome. 'Bring him in Boltfoot, and ask Jane to fetch us brandy, if you would.'

He put down his quill and rubbed the wet ink from his hands on the rag he kept at the side of the table as Boltfoot ushered Peace in.

'Well met, Joshua. Are you hail?' Shakespeare took his old friend's icy hand, then embraced him, struck by how gaunt and ill at ease he appeared.

'As well as any of God's creatures in this bleakest of winters, John. I swear the cold would freeze a man's very soul.'

'Well, take brandy with me. You will find some warmth there.'

Peace managed a faint smile. 'Brandy indeed. Yes, that is what a man needs. If not to warm him, then at least to numb the pain in the long, dark nights.'

'So have you come to cheer me up, to drink and make merry? Are we to go wassailing?'

'You make jest of me.' Peace took off his ice-coated felt hat and ran his hand across the smooth peak of his pate. His hair was nothing but a rim around the edges, a pauper's crown. 'Forgive me. It's getting to me.'

'Then I shall have to cheer you. Let us trudge through the snow to the Old Swan and sink in mellow oblivion together.'

'No, John. I have no temper for the company of strangers. Let them carouse without me. Work and sleep are my lot this season.'

Shakespeare's maidservant, Jane, appeared with a salver holding a flagon of brandy and two goblets. He poured two large measures of the spirit and handed one to Peace.

'Then what *has* brought you here?'

'I have care of a corpse that I wish you to look at. In truth I am at a loss as to what to do with it.'

'Is there foul play?'

'Most certainly. The man has been shot in the back.'

'Then it must be a matter for the justice and the sheriff.'

‘They are not interested.’

‘The justice is not interested in murder? In God’s name, why not?’

‘The victim is an Ethiop. They presume him to be either slave or deckhand from some foreign vessel. No one cares enough to inquire into his death. Anyway, they are all too preoccupied with the prospect of feasting.’

Shakespeare wished he were surprised by the reaction, but nonetheless murder was murder, whoever the victim. ‘How did he come to be entrusted to you?’

‘The watch brought him to me. They had no idea what to do with the body and said they did not want to bury a heathen in hallowed ground.’

‘A shameful business.’

‘Indeed it is. One of those who brought him to me suggested he was shot escaping, another that he hadn’t paid some quent merchant for use of his whore. Either way, they said, he had got his deserts.’

‘Drink your brandy, Joshua, and we will see.’

The stone walls of the crypt beneath St Paul’s dripped with water. The cacophonous sounds of teeming commerce above were muted here. This was where Joshua Peace worked alone as Searcher of the Dead.

Shakespeare was a tall man and his long hair hung about his face as he stared down at the mound on the trestle table. It was covered in a stained sheet that had once been white. Peace pulled back the covering to reveal the corpse, which lay face down, showing the wound.

Even in death, the skin had a wonderful, dark sheen, its beauty cruelly marred by a hole in the middle of the back, just beneath the delicate arc of the shoulder blades.

‘Could his death have been an accident?’ Shakespeare asked.

‘Look more closely, John. See the scorch marks around the entry wound. That tells me he was shot at close range. Most likely with a dag. This was murder.’

‘A dag?’ It was not that easy to get hold of a wheel-lock pistol. Such weapons were costly. Shakespeare sniffed the air. ‘How long has he been dead?’

‘You notice the absence of stench.’

‘Which must mean the death is recent.’

‘No, not in this case. The body was found beneath a drift of snow, somewhere close to Bishopsgate just outside the city wall. It had frozen solid. The bitter cold has delayed putrefaction. In truth, I cannot give you a time of death, except to say that it occurred some time in the past three weeks, since the snows came.’

Shakespeare reached forward and touched the skin. It was so luminous and bright, he half expected it to be warm, but it was as cold as ice.

‘It still hasn’t thawed through, John. It was brought to me this morning, rigid. The blood is frozen in the veins. Let me turn him over for you and show you his face.’

Peace put his practised arms beneath the slender body and turned it over.

Shakespeare took a step back in shock and then came closer again, to be sure. It was a face he had not seen in almost ten years, but he was certain. ‘His name is Giovanni Jesu. He attends upon the Earl of Oxford. *Attended ...*’ he trailed off.

‘You know him, John?’

‘I met him once when the earl was engaged as a commissioner at the trial of the Scottish Queen.’ Peace had been struck even then by the man’s remarkable beauty.

‘What was he? Servant?’

‘Difficult to say precisely. I know there was a scandal. The earl brought him back from his tour of the great Italian cities. Siena or Padua, I believe. No, no, it was Venice. That is where Giovanni came from. He must have been a youth then, barely out of childhood. They arrived in 1577 and he was about twenty-two when I met him, so that would make him thirty-one or thereabouts now. I think the earl was captivated by his exquisite skin and his perfect features. If he saw something beautiful, I collected it. Giovanni was like a diamond or pearl to him. There were others, of course ...’

Joshua Peace nodded. ‘Yes, I have heard of them. But what are we to do about this man?’

‘At least we have a name now.’

‘But that does not tell us why he is dead nor who killed him.’

‘The motive is, perhaps, the least of our problems. We also have troublesome connections.’ Shakespeare grimaced at the thought. The Earl of Oxford was always trouble. Most difficult of all was his link to the Cecils. He had been ward to Lord Burghley, and had married his daughter. The history of the Earl of Oxford and the Cecil family was as strained as a galleon’s sheets in an easterly gale. Yet even more difficult was his history with the Queen. One moment he was her favourite, the next he was banished. Shakespeare began to sift the possible political complications through his mind, and did not like the dangers he perceived.

Peace said nothing but walked through to the adjoining room, returning with a trencher. There was a circle of holly on it.

‘What is that, Joshua?’

‘The watch told me it was around our corpse’s head, like a coronet.’

‘An emblem of martyrdom. Christ’s crown of thorns.’

‘The possibility had occurred to me. Though what it might signify in this case, I have no idea.’

‘What clothes was he wearing?’

‘Nothing else. The body was naked. He had, however, been clothed when he was killed, for I found a fragment of woollen cloth in the wound.’

‘Show me.’

Peace held out the trencher with the holly crown to Shakespeare. A jagged piece of cloth shone on the side of the platter. It was small and dark with dried blood, but there was enough to show that it was of high quality, with a cross-weave of gold thread.

‘Thank you, Joshua. I have no idea what is to be done about this, but I will put my mind to it.’

As Shakespeare hastened through the icy streets towards the river, he thought back to his only meeting with Giovanni Jesu. It had been in an anteroom at Fotheringhay back in the year 1586. Shakespeare had been taken off his intelligence work to help Walsingham prepare his case against Mary Queen of Scots. His job was to safeguard and organise the mass of secret documents from the Babington conspiracy that would be used to prove Mary’s guilt and lead to her death. It had been a menial and unpleasant task and Shakespeare had wished himself anywhere else, but he had nonetheless been irritated to be interrupted by a stranger who entered the room without knocking ...

Shakespeare looked up from the endless documents. The man was a blackamoor. ‘I am afraid the room has been taken over as Sir Francis’s private office. Who do you want?’

‘Edward ... the Earl of Oxford.’

‘Well, he is clearly not here.’

‘Do you know how long the commission will last?’

‘It will be finished soon enough.’

‘And so will the Scots Queen, yes?’

Shakespeare had looked at him sternly, hoping he would go away.

~~But the man made a comment about the impossibility of having two queens in one country,~~ the man added in his fluent but accented English, 'In truth, sir, it is like having two wives in one bedchamber or kitchen, a thing that is always likely to lead to death.'

Shakespeare found himself laughing. 'It would be wise, sir, to refrain from any more jests about the Queen or her cousin, unless you wish to join Mary on the block.'

'If a jester can't make jests, then who can?'

'Are you a jester?'

The young man had shrugged. 'Jester, bedfellow, curiosity, dog. People have called me all those and more.'

'Then what are you?'

'I am Giovanni Jesu, a man.'

'And I am exceedingly busy, so I would be grateful if you would please leave me to my work.'

Jesu had grinned, bowed very low and retreated from the room. It had been the only time they met but Shakespeare had never forgotten the encounter. He thought now of the cruel holly crown and the corpse on Joshua's slab. How had this vital, witty man come to this?

As he stepped from the boat on to the icy quayside at Greenwich Palace, Shakespeare spotted his colleague Francis Mills. 'Are you arriving or departing, Frank?'

'Departing. We have a priest to question in the Tower.'

'We?'

Mills nodded towards a waiting tiltboat. In the back, Shakespeare saw the white-haired figure of Richard Topcliffe, the official torturer and relentless persecutor of priests. Topcliffe caught his eye, gave a mocking bow of the head and smirked. Shakespeare gritted his teeth. He knew what such *questioning* would involve. He turned back to Mills. 'Go easy, Frank. It is the season of goodwill.'

It was hard to see any goodwill in Mills's grim expression. His eyes were haunted, his long, birdlike frame stooped as though a yoke of rocks weighed down his neck and shoulders. 'If you are here for Sir Robert, he's in council,' he said brusquely, turning away to join Topcliffe in the tiltboat.

Shakespeare stayed him with his hand. 'Before you go, Frank, do you know anything of a young man named Giovanni Jesu, in Oxford's retinue?'

'The blackamoor? One of Oxford's catamites, so it is said.'

Shakespeare shrugged. The gossips had made merry with the Roman circus of exotic, glittering youth that Edward de Vere, seventeenth Earl of Oxford, had brought back from Italy. There had been much salacious tittle-tattle, none of it proven. 'Have you ever met him? What else have you heard?'

'I can tell you that he came to court a few times and caused a stir, but then the earl was advised that he was harming his own reputation by being seen with the boy, that the Queen might be amused by his pretty friends on first acquaintance, but that was it. Oxford, of course, continued to take Giovanni wherever he wished. I recall that Mr Secretary was appalled. Eventually, Oxford was *ordered* to keep the boy away from court, at the Queen's command. As to your first question, no, I never spoke a word to the man. Why do you ask?'

'Because he has been murdered. Who would wish him dead?'

'I know not. But if any thoughts come to me, I will let you know.' Mills raised his hand to touch Shakespeare's sleeve in farewell. As he stepped into the tiltboat to join Topcliffe, he turned. 'I can tell you, John, that Mr Secretary Walsingham had his doubts. Unless proved otherwise, he considered every stranger to this land a potential enemy of the realm. Signor Jesu was no different.'

They made a disturbing pair seated side by side: Mills, thin and decayed in spirit; Topcliffe, old and hoary and cruel, incongruous in his court attire of gold and blue and a cape of black velvet.

'Our priest awaits,' Mills said.

And then the boat was gone.

After an hour's wait, Shakespeare was ushered into Sir Robert Cecil's apartments. The Privy Councillor – de facto principal secretary – was at his table, furling a scroll. He looked up, a small, neat man, with a well-cut beard. 'Ah, John, I am glad you have come. I had intended sending for you. There is work to be done.'

'Sir Robert.' Shakespeare bowed, amused. As if there were not work enough to be done already. The task was vast and growing by the day. Hundreds of pieces of correspondence passed his way – correspondence that had to be dealt with, however inconsequential it might at first appear. And there were the spies and informers who scratched around his door, promising to bring intelligence in exchange for gold and silver. Most of it was worthless, the tittle-tattle of mongrel beasts, overheard in beery taverns and putrid gaol cells. Yet there might be one small, seemingly unimportant, piece of

information among it that revealed a threat to England or the safety of the sovereign. And all it took was one undiscovered plot ...

Cecil slipped a ribbon around the scroll and placed it on a shelf, then turned back and smiled. He was clearly in a festive mood; most unusual for one as grave as Elizabeth's second most senior minister, especially in the immediate aftermath of a Privy Council meeting. 'At last we have some movement on the chaos in Ireland. Black Jack Norreys is to go there to put down these damnable uprisings.'

'I thought the general ailed.'

'Norreys always complains of his health. He simply doesn't want to go. Well, my father has answered all his demands and he *will* go. He doesn't know it yet, but he will discover the truth soon enough. In the meantime, I want you to turn your mind to the intelligence from Ireland. We need reliable information from within the Tyrone camp. I wish to know when the man farts and when he coughs, whom he conspires with and what he plots. He feigns loyalty to Her Majesty but treats with Philip of Spain and James of Scotland, to *our* detriment, and can be trusted no longer. He is behind every raid, every uprising, every sly assassin's blade. My father is certain that he will soon turn to open revolt.'

Shakespeare listened without surprise. He knew and understood the fears concerning Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone, the great Irish lord who had once been considered England's truest friend. What was less clear was why the government insisted on sending General Sir John Norreys into the fray. He had done heroic work for Queen and country, yet he was no longer young and he had been wounded so often that there was no reason to doubt his protestations of ill-health. Surely, he deserved a rest.

The matter of placing a spy inside O'Neill's entourage was another thing. 'I have been offered information by a disaffected member of his clan, one of the O'Neills,' Shakespeare said. 'The problem is that he has no intention of going back to Ireland.'

'Can he be persuaded?'

'I shall try. It is possible he knows of others in the clan who might be turned our way. We already have Byrne there, of course.'

'Byrne?' Cecil said the name quietly. Even here, at the heart of Greenwich Palace, there were always hearing ears. 'I don't trust him any more than I trust Tyrone. Find me two intelligencers unknown to each other who can get close to Tyrone. We can check each man's information against the other's.'

'It will take some little time.'

'There will be gold available for them. The Irish love gold, do they not?'

Shakespeare bowed once more. 'Do you wish *me* to go to Ireland, Sir Robert?'

'In God's faith, no, I need you here. Keep this at the forefront of your mind, John, and report back to me after Twelfth Night.'

Two weeks. Both men knew it could not be done so soon, especially not at this time of year, but there was to be no argument. Shakespeare nodded. 'Very well.' He paused, wondering how to broach the subject of the murder of the Earl of Oxford's man.

Cecil spotted the hesitation. 'Was there aught else you wished to say?'

'Yes, sir. It is a matter on which I would look to you for guidance. It concerns the Earl of Oxford.'

Cecil's small body tensed. 'Well, John, then you command my interest immediately. You must surely know a little of my family's difficult history with the earl?'

Shakespeare nodded. The Earl of Oxford had been married to Cecil's sister, Anne. He had left his wife for long periods while he consorted with whores and courtesans and boys. It was said he squandered all his inherited wealth on luxurious living and poor investments and that his judgment

was regarded as so poor that if he put money into a venture, investors fell over each other to withdraw their own stakes. All Oxford's lands and properties were now gone and he was reduced to renting other men's houses. Even with Anne Cecil dead, even with a new wife, he still held out a begging bowl to his former father-in-law and to Her Majesty. None of this was secret. Shakespeare knew it; the whole court knew it.

'So, pray tell me what you have discovered.'

'A member of the earl's retinue has been murdered. One of those he brought back from Venice, a young Moor named Giovanni Jesu. I recognised him as soon as I was shown his corpse. He had been shot in the back at close range and left in the snow north of Bishopsgate. Because the body was frozen Joshua Peace cannot put a time or date to his death.'

'Giovanni. Well, well. Yes, I recall the young man. A charming fellow of great good humour. Now that is a sad thing. And a strange affair. Does Oxford know of this?'

'I have not spoken to him. I came straight to you for your advice.'

'Well, why are *you* involved, John?'

'Joshua called on me. The body was taken to him by the watch because they did not know what to do with it. No one would inquire into the killing. Not the sheriff, not the justice. I fear they consider the poor man a heathen and of no worth.'

'And you want my permission to investigate?'

'I do.'

'Then you have it. You have my full authority. Clarkson will prepare letters patent so that Oxford and his entourage are obliged to give you full cooperation.' Cecil's dark eyes were gleaming. 'You must find out what you can of my lord of Oxford. Tell me how he lives. You know he sold the last of his estates, Castle Hedingham, to my father? And now he has a son to support! I am mighty intrigued – have reports brought to me without delay.'

'Yes, Sir Robert.' Shakespeare bowed once more and turned to leave the room.

'Oh, and John, do not forget Ireland ...'

The river journey against the tide was slow, cold and uncomfortable, the rowers complaining all the way. At the Swan water-stairs, Shakespeare paid the men the bare minimum, ignoring their grumbles.

The warmth of the kitchen fire at his home in Dowgate was welcome. Shakespeare took half an hour to thaw himself and satisfy his hunger with fresh white manchet bread and beef, then pulled his black bear cloak about his shoulders once more and walked with Boltfoot to the stables, where their horses awaited. They mounted and set off slowly through the icy, slush-brown streets northwards towards the village of Stoke Newington.

Snow began to fall as they reached the countryside just north of Shoreditch. All around them, the fields and farmhouse thatches were white and the horizon melded into the sky. And then the light faded. Shakespeare cursed. Night came so early. They should have waited until morning.

Stoke Newington was one of those wealthy villages beloved of the city traders. Rich merchants from the great guilds kept large houses here so that they might take the fresh air and recreation away from the noisome streets, crime and plague of the city. As they rode into the village, Shakespeare looked about him. It was a pleasant, peaceful place. The horses' hoofs made no sound in the deep snow. From the candlelit church came the strains of Christmas caroling. It reminded Shakespeare of yuletide at home and he felt a pang for Stratford.

And yet, he guessed, to a man such as the Earl of Oxford the village must have held little charm. Indeed, it must have been a sorry comedown after his early life, raised in the palaces and grand halls of the royal court. Now, at the age of forty-five, deep in debt and desperate for gold, all hope of preferment for the Queen's one-time favourite seemed gone for ever. Shakespeare had met him only once, when their paths had crossed at Fotheringhay, but he did not expect the earl to remember him.

Shakespeare reined in his horse as the earl's rented manor house loomed up ahead through the darkness and the falling snow. It was a new stone building with glass a-plenty. Lights blazed in half a dozen windows.

'A fair house, master,' Boltfoot said.

'For a local squire, merchant or justice, perhaps. But for the premier earl of all England? I think not.'

As no servant or groom approached, Shakespeare dismounted and handed his reins to Boltfoot. He trudged through the knee-deep snow up to the arched front porch and rapped his fist on solid oak.

The door was opened by a young, livery-clad footman.

'My name is John Shakespeare. I wish to see the earl. Tell him I am here from the office of Sir Robert Cecil.'

'I shall fetch Mr Stickley, his steward.'

Within a minute, the steward had arrived. He was old, very thin and bent, his black clothes hanging from him as though they belonged to a man twice his size.

'Good evening, sir. I am afraid his lordship is indisposed.'

'Is he ill?'

'No, sir.'

'Then I will wait.'

The steward bowed his grey head with just the right amount of restrained deference.

Shakespeare and Boltfoot waited in a comfortable withdrawing room. A maid came in to stoke the fire and they stood before it, drying themselves.

As she was about to leave, she hesitated. 'Shall I have refreshment brought to you, sir? Perhaps some mulled wine?'

'Indeed. Thank you, mistress.'

She looked at Boltfoot, then turned back to Shakespeare. 'Would your serving man like to accompany me to the kitchens? Mr Stickley says the earl would not be pleased to find him here.'

'Well, Boltfoot, what do you say? Will you go to the kitchens or abide here with me and take your chances?'

'I'll go to the kitchens,' said Boltfoot, who knew exactly what his master expected of him.

The maid bowed and left with Boltfoot. She returned a few minutes later with hot, spiced wine, then set about the fire with a pair of bellows.

'How long have you worked for the earl?'

'Five years, sir.'

'I imagine you know his associates.'

'By sight and name only. His friends are all great ladies and gentlemen and do not notice me.'

'What about a man named Giovanni Jesu?'

'Giovanni?' She said the name quietly.

'Yes, Giovanni Jesu. He comes from this household, does he not? Do you know him?'

Carefully, she laid the bellows by the tongs and fire shovel. 'Oh yes, sir, I know Giovanni very well. Do you bring news of him, sir?'

She was a comely young woman, Shakespeare noted, fair-haired with light blue eyes. She was dressed demurely in commonplace kirtle and lawn coif.

'Has he been in the earl's retinue of late?'

'He has, though he often goes his own way these days. I have not seen him this past fortnight. Have you heard anything of him, sir? Is he in trouble?'

'Why should you suppose that? What is your name?'

'Dorcas, sir. Dorcas Catton—' She started at the sound of voices outside.

Shakespeare saw her worried glance. 'Thank you, Dorcas. You may leave.'

Shakespeare heard the earl before he saw him. He was shrieking profanities as he lurched through the withdrawing room door and Shakespeare saw immediately that he was drunk.

Edward de Vere, seventeenth Earl of Oxford, stood with legs apart, dagger in hand, as though ready to take on the world, if he did not fall on his face first.

Shakespeare bowed to him. 'My lord.'

'Who in the name of God are you? And what are you doing in my house? Cecil's man, are you? The words were both angry and slurred.

'Yes, my lord, I am John Shakespeare. I am an assistant secretary in Sir Robert's office.'

'And the dwarf has sent you, has he? If you have come to me with the means to remove myself from this hovel, then you are welcome. If you have come to tell me that the Queen of England has granted me the farming of Cornish tin, then I will shake your hand. If not, then I shall run you through like a dog.' He waved his dagger erratically. It was long and deadly, with a haft of carved antler.

'It is about a man named Giovanni Jesu.'

The earl swayed and frowned, his eyes narrowing as though trying to obtain a clearer view of his visitor. Transferring the dagger to his left hand, he grasped hold of the door with his right to steady himself. 'I have heard of you. You are a spy. And brother to Will.'

'Indeed, my lord. Will is one of my younger brothers.'

‘Then I will talk to you. What is this about Giovanni, damn his black hide?’

‘I am afraid he is dead.’

The words did not seem to register in the earl’s intoxicated brain.

‘He was shot. His body left in the snow,’ Shakespeare continued.

‘Giovanni dead?’

Shakespeare nodded, his eyes keenly attentive to Oxford’s florid face, trying to gauge his reaction.

‘Shot?’

‘In the back. One ball. It would have pierced his heart.’

‘No. You cannot kill Giovanni.’

‘I am sorry, my lord, but it is certain.’

The earl’s legs began to wobble. Shakespeare moved forward to take his upper arm and helped him towards a stool by the hearth. The earl was breathing heavily, gasping for breath, but managed to wrench himself away from Shakespeare’s grasp and stood with his hand against the fire-mantel. Giovanni Jesu, it seemed, had been more than just a servant.

Shakespeare gazed at the earl’s face intently. He had no more than a scratching of beard and a thin, wispy moustache and was attired in a doublet that had probably been tailored in Italy and was of a very fine cut and cloth, though a few years out of the mode. There were changes though. The tiredness in the eyes, the spidery veins on the skin’s surface, the softness of a man who had once been the hardest rider at the tilt. The main difference in Oxford, however, was his girth. He was a great deal fatter than Shakespeare recalled.

‘Do you need to lie down? Shall I summon a servant?’

‘Leave me alone, you damned puppy.’

Shakespeare turned away, picked up his goblet of mulled wine from the table and took a generous sip. He was aware that Oxford’s eyes were on him, following him blearily, waiting for a reaction. The whole world knew that the earl had once called the heroic Sir Philip Sidney a puppy, an incident that had resulted in a challenge to a duel. Shakespeare cared not a cat’s flea what the cup-shotten earl called him.

‘Did you hear what I said? I called you puppy. Are you man or cur?’

Shakespeare took another sip, then turned back with a smile. ‘It is getting late. I am hungry and wish to see Signor Jesu’s accommodation.’

Oxford launched himself away from the fire towards the door. ‘Do what you please, puppy. Do what you damned well please.’

As he staggered out, a woman dressed in rich attire appeared in the corridor outside. Oxford looked at her with bloodshot indifference, shrugged his shoulders and was gone, cursing and banging as he went.

The woman waited until the noise died down, then directed her attention to their guest. ‘I am the Countess of Oxford,’ she said. ‘And I believe you are Mr Shakespeare?’

He bowed. ‘Indeed, my lady.’

‘It seems you bring grave news.’ She made no apology for her husband’s condition.

‘My lady?’

‘Your serving man rather abruptly told Dorcas of poor Giovanni’s death and she ran sobbing into the hall. It was exceeding tactless of him.’

Shakespeare sighed. He had wanted Boltfoot to observe the reaction of the servants, but he had not expected this. ‘I apologise if you heard it that way. It must be a terrible shock for you all.’

‘Especially for Dorcas. I may as well tell you, for you are certain to find out: she is mother

Giovanni's bastard daughter.'

'Indeed? I would know more of this.'

'Then you will have to talk to her. Or to my husband. It was he who determined that she be allowed to remain here.'

Shakespeare was surprised. Few noble houses would have allowed a maidservant to stay in employment in such circumstances.

'You are thinking this most unconventional, Mr Shakespeare. Well, my husband cares nothing for the strictures of clerics or the good opinion of burghers. I would have sent the girl packing, but then we are. She has been strung out like a skin on tenterhooks these past two weeks, awaiting some word of Giovanni.'

'May I talk with her?'

'You may. My husband, on the other hand is a different matter. He is past his best this evening and you will get no sense from him. I suggest you make plans to stay tonight and try tomorrow morning
Late morning ...'

Boltfoot sat in the smoky kitchen eating a bowl of thick broth. In the far corner of the big room Dorcas Catton was sobbing quietly, comforted by an older woman, while the other servants went about their business in silence, obviously shocked. Boltfoot noticed a well-built young man with a mass of red curls, a tidy gingery beard and dark, deep eyes, go over to Dorcas and try to comfort her. She shook him away and sobbed all the louder. When he persisted, she bared her teeth like a cat threatened by a dog. The man, wearing a cook's apron, backed away, leering.

'Who is that man, Mr Stickley?' Boltfoot addressed the question quietly to the elderly steward who was hovering nearby.

'That is Monsieur Marot the cook. Lucien Marot – or Curly, as he is known to us.'

'Troublemaker is he?'

'I would not say that, Mr Cooper. A little hot-headed, but not a troublemaker. He wants to comfort her, that is all. But Dorcas is too upset, which is natural for a young woman. Giovanni's death is a shock to us all.'

Boltfoot said nothing more, merely ate his potage and watched.

Shakespeare was taken to a table in the dining parlour and brought the remains of a songbird pie and bread, with a cup of Gascon wine. He ate alone by the light of half a dozen beeswax candles until, eventually, the countess reappeared.

She sat down near him and smiled wanly. 'I am afraid Edward cannot abide any of this. He hates this place, living among all these peasants and merchants. These *sordid tradesmen*, as he calls them. He considers himself brought very low and blames the Cecil family for all his travails.'

Elizabeth de Vere had a long face, clear skin and bright eyes. Born Elizabeth Trentham, she was in her early twenties, no more than half her husband's age. Shakespeare found himself warming to her.

'My husband suffers many disappointments. He has a position to uphold and the wherewithal wanting.'

'I quite understand.'

'But that is not why you are here, is it?'

'Indeed not, ma'am. I wish to discover who killed Signor Jesu and why. In the first instance, I should like to inspect his quarters and talk with anyone in the house who knew him. I am sure you would all wish his murderer brought to justice.'

'You are certain he is the dead man?'

'There can be no doubt. I met him once, nine years ago.'

Elizabeth de Vere smiled sadly. Shakespeare wondered about her role as Oxford's second wife. Was he kinder to her than he had been to Anne Cecil? Elizabeth, a former maid of honour to the Queen, had at least given him the son and heir he longed for. And if he enjoyed collecting things of beauty, then she must surely qualify.

'My lady, if I may ask, what precisely was Signor Jesu's position in this household?'

'Ah, yes, a very good question, Mr Shakespeare, and one that is not easily answered. It is complicated, you see. Giovanni was the residue of another time and place. He emanated from the days when my lord of Oxford was a great deal more wealthy and well-favoured. Edward considered Giovanni an ornament. There were other such young men of talent and beauty whom he brought home from his tour of the Italies, but they all drifted away; Giovanni stayed. He was not servant, but nor was he guest.'

‘Did you know him well?’

‘~~We exchanged pleasantries, no more. Giovanni was one of the furnishings, if you like, an item inherited when we married.~~’

‘Was he close to your husband?’

‘I would like to say that they were like brothers, but that would not be quite the truth. Edward was always a fool for a pretty face, be it male or female.’

Shakespeare bowed his head in appreciation of her candour. ‘Thank you, my lady. And might I speak with Dorcas Catton?’

‘Not tonight, Mr Shakespeare. As with my husband, I think you had better wait until the morning. But I will take you to the dead man’s room.’

Giovanni’s chamber was at the side of the house on the first floor. At any other season, it would probably have been pleasant enough, but on this winter’s night it was cold, the fire as dead as the man himself and the inside of the window frosted with filaments of ice.

The bed was a plain wooden cot ranged along one wall and neatly clothed in woollen blankets and a feather bolster. There were two old stools and a chamber pot. The dominant feature of the room was a picture on the wall to the left of the door. Shakespeare held up his lantern. Drawn in ink, with washes of colour, it depicted a city of waterways, perhaps his home town Venice. Beneath the picture stood a carved coffer with padlock.

‘Do you have a key to this coffer, my lady?’

‘No, why should I?’

‘Does one of the servants? Perhaps Dorcas Catton has it.’

‘I have no idea. I shall leave you to your searches and ask Stickley if he knows about any key.’

‘Perhaps you would also ask him to send my man Cooper up here to me.’

If Elizabeth de Vere disliked being ordered about in her own home, she did her best to conceal it. She smiled sweetly. ‘And you must feel free to sleep in this room tonight. Unless, of course, you have a fear of ghosts.’

‘This room would suit me perfectly. You are most generous.’

‘Good. Your man can sleep in the stables. And, Mr Shakespeare, I must tell you that this household will be celebrating Christmas as always, murder or no murder.’

After she left, Shakespeare began to scour the room, lantern in hand. The blankets on the bed revealed nothing. Shakespeare shook them, but all that emerged was dust. He turned over the mattress, felt it all over for secrets concealed within, then looked beneath the bed; the space was empty.

On a table by the window he found a comb, a razor, a pair of iron scissors, a large Latin Bible, quill and an inkhorn. He thumbed the pages of the Bible, which were unworn and had clearly seen little use.

There was a knock at the door and Boltfoot came in.

Shakespeare nodded towards the coffer. ‘We need to get this open.’

‘No one among the servants has a key.’ Boltfoot held up a crowbar. ‘But Stickley found this.’

‘Good man.’

A minute later, the coffer had been wrenched open and Shakespeare was peering inside while Boltfoot held the lantern. He pulled out a well-cut doublet, some hose, shirts and stockings, a small box with a pile of silver and gold coins. Shakespeare counted them. They amounted to three pounds six shillings. Not a fortune, but a fair reserve of money.

‘What do you think, Boltfoot?’

‘Not much in the way of possessions for a man who has lived with the earl all these years.’

~~‘Perhaps someone has searched this room before us. Someone who took the key from him and opened this coffer. Someone who killed him with a shot to the back.’~~

As he spoke, Shakespeare spotted something on the floorboards, a glint in the light of the lantern. He bent down and picked it up. It was a small sliver of metal, no more than a quarter-inch long. He held it between his fingers, then loosened the ties of his purse and deposited it within.

‘What have you found, master?’

Shakespeare ignored the question. It could wait. ‘Tell me, Boltfoot, what did you discover in the kitchens?’

‘I found that there are those who loved Giovanni, and at least one who hated him.’

‘Dorcas Catton, I presume, is among those who loved him?’

‘Her child by him is the most lovely baby I ever did see. From the colour of the babe’s skin I would say there was no doubt he was the father. Yes, she loved him.’

‘How many servants did you meet?’

‘There are twelve in all. You met Dorcas the maid and Wat Stickley the steward. He is the chief man, and has been with his lordship for ever. The one who interested me was a Frenchman named Curly Marot, who has charge of the kitchens and among the others is reputed a great deviser of fine dishes. I did not take to him. There was something amiss in his approach to Dorcas. In truth I almost believe she loathed him. And he did not seem upset by the news of Jesu’s death.’

‘And are you certain it was news to him?’

‘No, master. No, I am not certain of that at all.’

‘Well, I shall seek out Monsieur Marot on the morrow. Come, let us take one last look around the chamber and then retire to bed. I believe you are being consigned to the stables.’

Boltfoot grinned. ‘It cannot be colder there than this ice chamber.’

Shakespeare slept fully clothed, huddled in blankets that did little to stave off the cold. An hour before dawn, he woke. He thought he heard a distant cry. He rose to piss in the pot, then heard the noise again. A dull scream – somewhere in the house. No, not *in* the house, but outside. Throwing open the shutters, he looked out, but could see nothing other than the ever falling snow. He thought he heard voices, muffled and indistinct.

Swiftly, he lit his lantern, pulled on his boots, picked up his weapons and slipped from the chamber.

The boards creaked beneath his feet. Somewhere deep in the house a baby wailed, but that was not the sound he had heard. Downstairs, he made his way to the back of the rambling building and found a passage through to the kitchens. A back door gave out on to a courtyard and the stables. He spotted a figure across the way and tensed.

‘Master.’ The word was barely more than a whisper, but it carried.

Shakespeare nodded. It was Boltfoot, standing at the barn door, caliver in his arms. A rushlight on the flagstone by his feet cast an eerie glow. He nodded back to Shakespeare as he trudged through the snow towards him.

‘What is it, Boltfoot?’

‘I thought I heard screams. When I came out there was nothing. No one. I was wondering whether you would come for me. Did I imagine it, master?’

‘Your ears did not deceive you. There *were* screams – and voices.’

They stood a moment and listened. A loud whinnying broke the silence, then a cry and another voice, deeper and fainter. The sounds came from the front of the house. Shakespeare began to run, the lantern swaying with strange bursts of light and shadow. Boltfoot limped behind him.

At the front of the manor, they spotted movement in the snow, some fifty yards away, near the avenue of trees that led from the house to the road. Shakespeare drew his sword and advanced. There was another scream, then a sob. A squat figure, cowed and dark, faced Shakespeare for a few moments, then edged away and broke into a loping run.

‘Stop!’ Shakespeare shouted, but the figure had disappeared into the snow. He heard the light clink of stirrups and spurs, a slap and the soft sound of hoofs in snow. And then, as if from nowhere, a bay horse and its unidentifiable rider burst from the curtain of white, wheeled in front of him and in an instant was gone, vanished into the downy snow.

‘Look. There,’ Shakespeare said, pointing to a line of quickly filling footprints.

They did not have to follow the trail far. Shakespeare held out the lantern. By its yellow light, he saw a woman lying curled like a new babe, naked, in deep snow, her skin pink and stark against the white.

‘Oh, no ...’

Though the face was turned away from him, Shakespeare recognised her instantly as the maidservant Dorcas Catton. She was motionless. Nearby was a white linen nightgown, cast aside and torn, as though it had been ripped or cut from her body.

Shakespeare knelt beside the figure. He was about to touch her, fearing that she was dead, when the slender body shuddered and a great sob came from her. Suddenly, her whole form was shaking.

Shakespeare handed the lantern to Boltfoot and bent forward again, laying the shredded and discarded night-garment over her for some cover, however inadequate. ‘Dorcas, are you injured?’

She was shivering and weeping, gasping through tears. She looked at him, wide-eyed, clutching the ragged gown to her breast.

‘Let me help you up.’ Gently, he put his arms under her and lifted. She weighed almost nothing. As he turned, he saw lights flickering at the front of the house, as it woke to the unfolding drama.

Shakespeare carried Dorcas towards the front door, where the countess stood, in a blue velvet gown, her hair covered in a lawn night-cap.

‘What in God’s name is going on, Mr Shakespeare?’

‘That is what I intend to discover, my lady ...’

A fire was set and beeswax candles were lit in the withdrawing room, casting a warm aura as Dorcas was helped to a settle, wrapped in a blanket and surrounded by cushions. Her fair hair was lank from the snow and fell about her face in tails. From the jagged cut marks on her nightdress, which now lay on the floor, it was clear to Shakespeare that the garment had been slashed from her body with a blade. She was shaken but not badly injured. The only sign of the violent assault was bruising on her arm and neck where she had been dragged into the snow. How had the assailant got her there? Had she been pulled from her bed – or was it someone she knew who had arranged to meet her outside the house?

‘Who did this to you, Dorcas?’ the countess said, her voice quiet but firm.

‘I must go to the baby.’

‘The baby is well. Agnes is looking after her. First you must tell us what happened.’

Dorcas clutched the blanket tightly around her slim body. She did not raise her head and would not meet the eyes of her mistress or Shakespeare.

‘I know you are dismayed, my dear, but you really must tell us what you know. There was a horseman. It was clearly the man who did this to you. You knew him, didn’t you?’

Dorcas said nothing. She was shivering with cold and shock. Shakespeare moved to crouch down in front of her so that their faces were level. He tried to seek her eyes behind the strands of wet hair, but they were closed and she would not look up. ‘Is this something to do with the death of Giovanni?’ he asked, his voice gentle. ‘Was this the man who killed him? If you know something, it would be best for you to tell us.’

She burst into great retching sobs. Shakespeare thought she was more terrified than anyone he had ever seen.

‘Talk to me, Dorcas. If you are in danger, I will protect you.’

‘I want my baby.’

Shakespeare looked towards the countess.

She gave a brisk shake of the head. ‘I will summon Agnes. She can take Dorcas to her room and stay with her and the child until she is ready to talk to us. Perhaps a few hours’ sleep might help ...’

Shakespeare sighed. The countess was right. But there would be no sleep for him now. He had already sent Boltfoot to the servants’ quarters with orders that they all be brought from their beds to the kitchen for questioning. He needed to know whether any of them was missing. And he was interested to hear the testimony of Curly Marot.

Within the hour, Shakespeare had ordered Boltfoot to saddle up. ‘I have a task for you,’ he said.

‘There is a great deal of snow, master.’

‘I am sure the weather was worse than this when you sailed the world under Drake.’

Boltfoot accepted the mission without further demur.

Shakespeare went to the kitchen where the servants were ranged before him. They were all present. He looked them over. There was little about them to arouse curiosity, let alone suspicion.

‘Who has something to tell me regarding this morning’s incident?’ he demanded.

No one spoke.

‘What of the death of Giovanni Jesu? Do you have any thoughts on that? I know he spent a great deal of time among you all. Who might have wished him harm?’

The group stood sullenly and in silence.

‘I tell you this,’ Shakespeare persisted, ‘if you know anything, it would be better for you to come to me than I find information some other way.’ He dismissed them with an impatient wave of his arm, except for the steward, Stickley, whom he asked about the sleeping arrangements in the manor house.

‘Four maidservants share one room and the men are split between two other rooms. Only Dorcas has a small room to herself, and that is because she has a baby.’

‘Well, leave her there with Agnes for the moment. I may wish to search her chamber later, when she is rested.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And you are certain that all members of the earl’s retinue are accounted for?’

‘I am, sir. None went missing in the night.’

‘Very well, Mr Stickley. Bring back Monsieur Marot if you would.’

Stickley bowed and departed. Shakespeare was worried. It was clear that Dorcas Catton was in grave danger – but did the threat come from this house or outside?

When Stickley and Marot returned, Shakespeare was sitting back on a chair at the kitchen table. He studied them both as they entered the room.

‘You stay, too, Mr Stickley.’

They stood side by side. Stickley was stiff, his grey face a mask of solemnity, as befitted a nobleman’s senior man. Not so Curly Marot; he had the prickly aspect of a servant who considers himself well above his allotted station and had no inclination to be questioned.

Shakespeare allowed them to stew for a few moments, then spoke, his voice languid, his intent lethal. ‘Tell me, Monsieur Marot, why did you dislike Giovanni Jesu so much?’

The question seemed to take the cook by surprise. His eyes darkened with puzzlement and something like fear.

‘It is a simple enough question, Monsieur Marot. I believe you bore Giovanni Jesu malice. Had he done you some injury?’

Marot’s eyes flicked to the thin, impassive figure of Stickley.

‘You will find no answers there,’ Shakespeare said.

Marot turned his shoulder and glared at Stickley. ‘Must I answer this man?’ His voice was thick and accented.

‘I think it would behove you well to do so, Monsieur Marot.’

‘Very well. Damn your eyes.’ He spoke without looking at Shakespeare. ‘He was a heathen, a necromancer, a dealer with devils. He had a black hide and a blacker heart.’ At last he looked at his interrogator and stabbed a finger at him. ‘He *deserved* to die. Satan has taken his own.’

‘Did you kill him?’

‘No, but I would to God it *had* been me.’

‘Who did then?’

‘I know not, but if I learn his name I will shake his hand and give him my last penny as a token of my thanks.’

‘Where do you come from, Monsieur Marot?’

‘Paris. My father cooked for Catherine de Medici. I came to England to work for Oxford because

believed him your premier earl with palaces and estates. Look at this.’ He snorted and indicated his surroundings. ‘Now I must cook in a cattle byre and consort with peasants.’

‘Perhaps it is your proper place.’

‘What?’ Marot raised his hand into a fist.

Shakespeare did not flinch. He had seen the instinct for violence in the man.

Stickley took Marot’s fist and lowered it. ‘Don’t make things worse, Curly.’

Shakespeare addressed himself to the steward. ‘Is this an honest man?’

‘He is a hard worker. Earns his bread.’

‘That was not what I asked.’

‘I would like to think him honest. He has given me no cause to doubt him. A jury can decide on a man’s guilt or innocence, but only God knows what is in his heart.’

Dawn was almost upon them. Shakespeare was tired and these two men were making him irritable. The last thing he needed was the dull, rustic sermonising of an over-cautious steward and the prickly complaints of a disappointed French cook. ‘I did not give you leave to play the hedge-priest, Mr Stickley. Step down from your pulpit. What I want is your *opinion*: did Monsieur Marot here kill Mr Jesu?’

‘I think not.’

‘Good. That is a start. Now tell me this: why was there bad blood between these two men?’

Stickley hesitated.

‘These questions can be asked here, in the comfort of this kitchen, or you can be removed to Bridewell and be questioned there. The choice is yours, Mr Stickley. And the same applies to you, Monsieur Marot.’

‘I think he did not like the colour of Giovanni’s skin.’

‘No. That will not do. There was something else. And I think it involved Dorcas Catton, did it not?’

Stickley sighed. ‘It is my belief that Monsieur Marot holds some affection in his heart for Mistress Catton. He felt aggrieved by the attention Mr Jesu paid her.’

‘And so when she came with child by Giovanni, he was jealous?’

‘I believe that to be true, though these are questions he must answer for himself.’

Shakespeare did not bother to look towards Marot. He could feel the heat of his grey, basilisk eyes

The Earl of Oxford sat alone at the long table in the dining parlour. He held his head in his hands. In front of him were platters of food: eggs, bacon, bread, butter and beef. A tankard of ale stood close to his right elbow. He had consumed none of it.

‘Good day to you, my lord,’ Shakespeare said as he entered the room. ‘I trust you slept well.’

Slowly, the earl raised his eyes. They were bleary and revealed the pain within his skull. ‘God and blood and thunder, are you still here?’ His voice was barely above a whisper and trailed off into a groan.

‘Has anyone told you of the disturbance in the night?’

‘*What* disturbance? *You* are the disturbance here, Mr Shakespeare—’

‘There was an intruder. The maidservant Dorcas Catton was attacked.’

‘Dorcas attacked?’

‘A man dragged her, screaming, to the front of the house. He cut her nightdress from her and threw her into the snow.’

‘Someone did this to Dorcas? Why?’

‘That is what I must discover. She is terrified and will say nothing. It is possible that worse would have occurred had the assailant not been disturbed. We must deduce that the attack is linked to the death of Signor Jesu.’

The earl picked up his tankard of ale and drank deeply, then spluttered and coughed.

‘My lord?’

He pushed away the plates of food. ‘And so this foul world disintegrates. How can a man eat when his old friends are food for worms? If you are hoping to question me, Mr Shakespeare, you will be disappointed. I have nothing to say to you about Giovanni save that I mourn his passing. More than you can imagine. If you are able to discover the murderer, then I will be delighted to attend the hanging and applaud when he dances his jig.’

‘You can at least tell me a little about his origins, my lord. This is a murder inquiry. I need information.’

‘His origins? He came from the fetid gutters of Venice. His mother was a whore, his father unknown. I gave her ten gold ducats and he was mine. It brightened my day simply to behold him. He was my trinket and my boon companion. But now he is dead and no grieving by me will bring him back. And that is all you need to know.’

‘My lord, if you will talk to me, it may assist me in finding his killer. His relationship with Dorcas interests me greatly. Were you distressed when he brought her with child?’

‘Mr Shakespeare, do you think I am a country girl swooning over a penny romance?’

‘It merely occurred to me that such an event might have made things difficult in this house. I am trying to divine whether anyone in your employ might have had cause to do Giovanni harm. For instance, it seems Marot the cook bore hatred for him.’

‘This is kitchen tittle-tattle. I will not listen to it. If you believe you have evidence against one of my retainers, arrest him and have him arraigned in a court of law. Now, will you please leave me and let me tend to my head, which is filled with exploding gunpowder.’

‘There is one last matter, then I will leave you in peace.’

The earl emitted a long sigh that metamorphosed into a low howl of genuine pain and anguish.

Shakespeare put his purse on the table and loosened the tie. He tipped the contents into his left hand and removed the sliver of metal that he had found in Giovanni’s chamber. He held it out to the Earl of Oxford.

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