
Opening Extract from...

The Heretics

Written by Rory Clements

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Chapter 1

THE KNOCK AT the door came as John Shakespeare unhooked his sword belt from a nail in the wall. 'Come in,' he said.

His assistant Boltfoot Cooper limped into the comfortable library of his master's house in Dowgate, close by the river in the city of London, and bowed. 'You have a visitor, master.'

'Not now. I am expected elsewhere.' He began buckling his belt. 'Pass me my cloak, Boltfoot.'

Boltfoot picked up the old black bear fur from the coffer where it had been flung and held it up for Shakespeare to pull about his shoulders.

'It is a man named Garrick Loake, sir. He begs you to spare him two minutes. He says he has most urgent business, of great import to the safety of the realm.'

'Who is he?'

Boltfoot's coarse seafarer's brow twisted in a frown. 'I know not, but from the varied colours of his attire, I might guess him to be a player or a poet. He did mention that your brother William recommended him to come to you.'

Shakespeare sighed. 'Send him in. Tell him he has two minutes, no more.'

*

Loake did indeed wear colourful clothes. They were in the Italian style, including a hat with an enormous feather. Boltfoot was right: he could not be anything but a player.

'Mr Loake? Is it true that my brother sent you?'

Loake bowed with a dramatic flourish. 'He did, Mr Shakespeare. And I am most honoured to make your acquaintance for I have heard a great deal of your bold exploits.'

'*Why* did Will send you here?'

'I took the liberty of confiding in him that I had concerns about a certain matter and he said straightway that you were the man to talk with.'

'Mr Loake, I have little time to spare you. Perhaps you would return tomorrow when I am less pressed.'

'I beg you to listen for a brief moment. I know what a busy man you are.'

Shakespeare remained standing. The library fire was blazing away and soon he would overheat in this fur. But he kept the cloak on. He did not wish to give this man the impression that he would stay and talk with him.

'I know your distinguished brother from the Theatre, Mr Burbage's fine playhouse in Shoreditch,' Loake continued. 'If you are as straight dealing as he is, then I am certain I can trust you.'

Shakespeare, a tall man with long hair, waited, merely smiling. His presence alone was often enough to lure men into revealing their secrets.

'I sometimes play there myself,' Loake went on. 'I am not a member of the company, but there is usually work for me as a hired man in one capacity or another. Yesterday, I was working with the costumes.' He twirled to display his brilliant outfit. 'I borrowed this, Mr Shakespeare. It is Capulet's apparel. Do you not think it becoming? Am I not a noble Veronese gentleman?'

'The certain matter, Mr Loake—'

'Forgive me, I shall come to that straightway. I have a secret to impart, you see. A secret involving papist intrigue. I believe young Cecil will pay very well for such intelligence.'

'You mean Sir Robert Cecil.' Shakespeare was not about to let his chief man be referred to as 'Young Cecil' by a stranger.

'Indeed, not old Burghley. It is the young Caesar who runs the Privy Council these days, is it not? His father holds the purse-strings, but the boy spends the gold. Your brother mentioned that you might have a pathway to that purse.'

Shakespeare was losing patience. He could not imagine that Will had said anything of the sort. 'Tell me the matter, Mr Loake. And do not refer to Sir Robert Cecil as *the boy*.'

'My information is worth twenty sovereigns, I am certain of it. Twenty gold sovereigns.'

'I fear you are ill informed.' The figure was laughable. There were too many snouts in the trough already. 'Very little is worth even twenty shillings. Twenty sovereigns is out of the question.'

'Well, that is my price. I have great need of gold, and I need it in haste, which is why I have come to you. I cannot go a penny below my asking price.'

Shakespeare stepped away from the oppressive heat of the fire and moved towards the door. 'Tell me what you know. And be quick about it.'

'What I know,' Loake said, 'is that there is a most foul conspiracy unfolding. It wafts from the papist fastness of eastern England, gathers force in the seminaries of Spain, but it will blow into a tempest here.' He lowered his voice for dramatic effect. 'A conspiracy the like of which England has never seen.'

'How do you know this?'

'It is my business to listen well, for I sometimes hold the book and prompt the players.'

'Names,' said Shakespeare wearily. 'Give me names. What manner of plot is this? Tell me the circumstance.'

'I will, Mr Shakespeare, when you give me twenty sovereigns. For the present, I must hold my peace, for if I say more, then you will know as much as I do, and I will have no power to bargain.'

Shakespeare suddenly caught a whiff of sweat. This man was scared and desperate. 'You are wasting my time. Say what you know.'

Loake put up his right hand, which had a ring on each finger. It shook. 'I will tell you one thing, one thing only. The seminary involved is the College of St Gregory in Seville.'

'The English college of Jesuits?'

'The very same. So you will tell young Cecil to give me a purse of twenty gold sovereigns, as agreed?'

Shakespeare laughed. 'Mr Loake, I have agreed nothing. Now I must go. If you have something to tell me, then return in the morning.' He waved a hand in dismissal.

Many men came to Shakespeare's door, scratching like curs for coins in return for information; at times of want it was a daily occurrence. Most of the intelligence was worthless, scraps of tittle-tattle overheard in taverns and gaols. But it all had to be listened to and some of it, no more than a tiny portion, had to be investigated. There was something in the demeanour of this man that interested Shakespeare. He would like to see him again, to delve more deeply. But not now.

'Twenty, I must have twenty. Sovereigns.'

Despite himself, Shakespeare stayed. It was plain to him that Loake had no concept of how to conduct a negotiation; no idea that you must demand a high price so you can meet somewhere in the middle.

'Even if we could agree a figure, I would need to seek authorisation for the payment, and that would be impossible without

first knowing the details of your intelligence. Trust is required on both sides in such a transaction. I promise you this: if you tell me a secret as valuable as you claim, then I shall obtain up to five pounds on your behalf. Is that not fair dealing, Mr Loake?'

'I cannot go so low.'

Shakespeare rested his hand on the hilt of his sword as if to underline who held the power here.

'You must bear in mind, Mr Loake, that you have now informed me that you have knowledge of some treachery directed at this realm. If you do not tell me all you know, then you will be laying yourself open to a charge that you are an accessory to that treason.'

Loake drew himself up to his full height, which was not great, and wiped a sleeve of gold and blue across his sweat-glistening brow and prominent nose. 'Did your brother then lie when he said you were to be trusted?'

Shakespeare shook his head. 'I will not listen to insults, Mr Loake.'

Should he have Boltfoot take the man to Bridewell or the Fleet prison for the night? He rejected the notion; it would be a betrayal of his brother.

'Come back when you have collected your wits. I may have an offer for you if you tell me enough of interest. Be here half an hour after first light and I will see you.'

Chapter 2

It was dusk by the time Shakespeare got to Newgate prison. He came in secret, wearing his hat low over his forehead, his body swathed in black fur, concealing his identity from the long lines of curious onlookers already gathering for the next day's entertainment. The gloom was lit by a dozen bonfires and blazing cressets. Makeshift stalls had been put up to sell food and ale to those who would camp out here in this long, cold night to ensure the best view in the morning. Some among the waiting crowds stared at Shakespeare, but he ignored their insolent gaze and walked on with purpose.

He stopped at the main entrance beside the gate in the city wall. The road beneath his feet was cobbled and slippery; the gaol, towering above him, rose five storeys high into the darkening London sky. The last of the day's carts and drays clattered through the archway into the city. A flock of geese, driven by a man in a smock, waddled in to meet their fate. Shakespeare hammered with the pommel of his dagger on the gaol's heavy oak door. The head keeper, who had been waiting, opened it to him, welcoming his visitor with a bow and a sweep of the arm. The ring of keys that hung from his broad oxhide belt jangled as he ushered Shakespeare inside.

'How is he faring, Mr Keeper?'

'He does well, master. Never have I met so rare a man.'

Shakespeare turned and pushed back his hat to look into the keeper's eyes, gratified by what he saw there: honesty and genuine affection. He was not surprised; the condemned prisoner had that effect on many people. Shakespeare held the keeper's gaze. 'Where is he? In Limbo?'

The keeper nodded, a pained expression curling his lips. Limbo was a dark pit in the lower reaches of the ancient gaol, lacking light and air, where the condemned prepared themselves for the hangman. Its meagre bedding of straw was clogged with the ordure of frightened men.

'But at least he is alone there, master. No other felons await death.'

'Bring him to an upper cell. Let him breathe before he dies.'

'Mr Topcliffe commanded me, master—'

'Damn, Mr Topcliffe. I am here under orders from Sir Robert Cecil. Bring the prisoner up.'

The keeper hesitated, but then uttered some sort of grunt and shuffled off into the rank depths of the gaol. Shakespeare pulled his hat back over his brow and waited.

Within a minute, the keeper returned. 'I have ordered him brought to a cell on the second floor. I will take you there now. You will not be disturbed.'

The single window was barred by a grating of iron rods, embedded into the stone walls. It was a small aperture, scarcely big enough to admit the last of the day's light. The cell was clean and the cold air as fresh as could be hoped for in such a dungeon.

Shakespeare had not seen Father Robert Southwell in eight years and the passage of time had not treated him well. The years of solitary confinement in the Tower and episodes of torture at the hands of Richard Topcliffe had broken his body. His once serene face was now gaunt and his slender back bent,

yet his eyes shone in the grey light. It seemed to Shakespeare that he had the exquisite fragility of church glass.

Southwell, his palms together in prayer, sank to his knees at the sight of his visitor, but Shakespeare raised him to his feet and clasped his hands. He turned to the gaoler, still hovering by the iron-strapped door. 'Bring us a flagon of good wine, Mr Keeper.' He dug fingers in his purse and pulled out a coin. 'That will pay for it.'

The keeper bowed and departed, leaving the door open.

'I could overpower you, Mr Shakespeare, and make my escape.'

Shakespeare smiled at the sad jest. Southwell would be hard pressed to do battle with a kitten.

'Shall we sit down, Father?'

There was a table and three stools, but the condemned Jesuit shook his head and continued to stand. His breathing was fast. Thin trails of vapour shot from his mouth and nose and vanished in the cold air. 'There is time enough for these bones to rest.'

'Are you being treated well?'

'I count the keeper as my friend. Many good people have sent in offerings of food and he has brought it to me, along with their messages of support. I never ate so well in the Tower as I do here.'

'Well, that is something at least.'

'Their generosity of spirit gladdens my heart, Mr Shakespeare. And on the matter of kindness, will you not tell me of your beloved wife, Catherine? You have a child, I believe.'

Shakespeare stiffened. Long before he had met Catherine in the year of eighty-seven, she had been a friend of Southwell and had received the sacraments from him. But now Catherine lay in her grave.

Southwell saw his pain. 'I am sorry. I see I intrude on some grief. Is she with God?'

'I must pray that she is.'

'Forgive me, I had not heard of your great loss, Mr Shakespeare. In the Tower, I heard nothing of the world beyond my four walls. I loved Catherine as a daughter or sister. I will pray for you both . . . and the child.'

'The child is well. She is called Mary. Catherine did not suffer . . .'

Shakespeare's voice broke and he shuddered, for the word resonated icily in this room. *Suffer.* He knew what agonies Southwell would have to suffer on the morrow. Convicted of treason at the court of King's Bench this day, he would be collected from his cell at dawn and dragged on a hurdle along the jarring road to Tyburn. There he would be hanged in front of a crowd of thousands, then cut down while he lived so that the butchers could tear his belly open and rip out his entrails to burn before his eyes. And at last, he would be quartered and beheaded.

Southwell noticed his visitor's unease. 'I think you are right, Mr Shakespeare. I will sit down. Come, sit with me. There are things I must tell you, though I am sure you are a busy man. Does Mr Cecil know you are here?'

'Yes, Sir Robert knows.'

'Ah – so he has been knighted. You see, I hear nothing. Well, I am sure it is deserved. He is my cousin, you know.'

'Yes, I know that. And I know that he admires your courage, if not your religion. And I can tell you, in confidence, that the Queen also knows I am here. She wishes to be told the contents of your heart. She wishes to know why one so holy and poetical should strive to bring about the destruction of her estate.'

Southwell frowned, as if he did not comprehend the question. 'I fear she has been fed falsehoods. I never meant the destruction of Her Majesty, nor any harm to England. I sought

nothing but the eternal good of souls, including hers. Even now I call on the Lord God to enlighten her, and her Council, and not to hold them guilty for my death.'

'But your Church excommunicated her. The Jesuits support invasion by Spain—'

'Many errors have been made on all sides, Mr Shakespeare. You may tell Her Royal Majesty that I honour her as my sovereign lady. I have prayed for her daily.'

'I will tell her. Is that why you asked me to come here, Father?'

The keeper arrived with the wine and two goblets. Setting a tallow rushlight on the table between Shakespeare and the condemned man, he bowed and backed away to the door, without a word. Again, he left the door open. Shakespeare poured the wine.

'He watches and listens, Mr Shakespeare,' Southwell said quietly. 'He fears I will take my own life. He has been ordered to keep me alive so that my death is witnessed as a warning to others.' Southwell reached out and grasped Shakespeare's arm in his thin fingers. 'Did you ever hear of a Catholic priest that hurt himself so? Why should we add the destruction of our souls to the demise of our bodies?'

Shakespeare understood. He sipped his wine and waited.

'And so to your question. I asked for you, Mr Shakespeare, because there is something I must beg of you. One favour. If you will do this one thing for me, then I may go to my death in peace in the hope that I will be saved by the Passion of our Lord, Jesus Christ.'

'Then you had better tell me what it is, Father.'

The priest sighed, closed his eyes for a moment, then spoke, little more than a whisper. 'There is a girl, Mr Shakespeare. A girl named Thomasyn Jade. I want you to find her.'

Shakespeare got up and walked to the door. A figure shrank

back into the passageway beyond. Shakespeare shut the door, then returned to sit at the table.

'This harks back nine years to the dangerous days of summer in eighty-six,' Southwell said, his voice still low. 'It can be no secret to you that I was newly arrived in England, for I know that you were then working for Mr Secretary Walsingham, and his spies had told him of my coming.'

Shakespeare nodded. He recalled all too well those feverish, fearful days and weeks. It was the time of the Babington plot that had led to the downfall of Mary, Queen of Scots, and brought so many foolish young Catholic men to the scaffold, condemned for plotting to assassinate Elizabeth and put Mary on her throne.

'Within a month of my arrival the so-called plotters and others had been rounded up. Some were racked, many were executed. Among those held was Father William Weston of the Society of Jesus.'

'I know all this.'

London had been a cacophonous circle of the inferno. The bells of the city churches pealed all day long and into the night; the streets were ablaze with fires celebrating that the plot had been uncovered and foiled. And on the river, an endless procession of captured conspirators and priests was carried upstream, bound hand and foot, from the baleful Tower to the courts at Westminster, and then drawn to the place of execution. It had seemed as though the slaughter would never abate.

'Indeed, Mr Shakespeare. And I am sure, too, that you will know of the other dark events that occurred in those months, when certain Catholic priests carried out exorcisms on unfortunate souls possessed by demons.'

Shakespeare's mouth turned down in distaste. It had been a disgusting affair. Young women and men had been held for days and weeks on end, being subjected to the most repulsive

treatment by a group of priests and their acolytes, all in the name of ridding them of supposed demons. Many who had been sympathetic to the popish cause had been turned against it by the whole foul story.

'Yes, I remember it, Father Robert, for I spoke with Weston himself, but I believe the practice stopped at about the time of your arrival in England.'

The priest's eyes were downcast. His fine features brought to mind the name he had been given by the townsfolk of Douai in Flanders when he had attended the English College there as a young man: *the beautiful English youth*. That youth was now long gone, worn away by pain and deprivation, yet Shakespeare could still see the strange, troubling beauty in his soul.

'Yes, the exorcisms were halted. But much damage had already been done, and not just to the Catholic cause. The real victims, I fear, were some of those whom the priests were trying to help.'

'Was Thomasyn Jade one of them?'

'She was. It is no secret now that I met my Jesuit brother William Weston soon after my arrival and not long before his arrest. I did not know it at first, but it seems he was the prime mover of these exorcism rites. We travelled together to a house in Buckinghamshire – I will not tell you more than that – to confer and rest. We stayed there a week. During that time, a girl of seventeen or eighteen – Thomasyn – was brought to us by certain priests to be rid of devils. She had already undergone many more such ordeals at Denham House, near by, which, as you must know, was the centre of these goings-on.

'I watched in horror as the ritual was played out. She was stuck with pins to catch the devils beneath her skin and she was made to drink concoctions of herbs. The holy thumb of the martyr Campion was thrust in her mouth. Brimstone was burnt beneath her nose so that I believed she would choke

to death. I was affronted, Mr Shakespeare, for I saw that those who did these things were in mortal error. Those who witnessed the events were struck with such fear that they quaked and trembled and wept most bitterly. Within a short while, I brought the ceremony to a halt and, though Father Weston was my superior, I advised him that he would do well never to partake in such things again.'

Shakespeare was surprised to hear Southwell voice such open criticism of a fellow of the same order.

The priest waved his hand. 'Do not misunderstand me. I have nothing but admiration for the work and ministry of Father Weston. He is a saintly man. Perhaps too saintly sometimes, too unworldly. He did what he did out of fine motives, trying to save souls. But he was misguided in subscribing to the rite of exorcism, nor am I alone among the Catholic fraternity in thinking this way. I have sometimes wondered since whether the simple fact of his failing eyesight might have made him easily deluded by others less honest. I do not believe he saw evil spirits under the girl's skin, nor do I believe he truly saw them coming from her mouth and . . .' He hesitated, scarce able to say the shameful words. 'And from her privy parts. But *he* believed he did.'

'Why do you want me to find the girl?'

'Because she was ill used by us. When she came to the house, she was shaking with fear; she was halfway mad with frenzy and weeping. I should never have allowed the exorcism to proceed as far as it did.'

'And what became of her at the end of the day's torments?'

'She was given cordials and food, and I spoke soothing words to her. I tried to discover more about her, but she could not speak. I tried to pray with her, but she became yet more distressed. I was at a loss. I did not know what to do for her. With five sisters of my own, I understand women's ways, but I

am aware that the years among men at the Society colleges have made me less easy in their company. Thomasyn could not stay at that house and I could not take her with me. Instead she was taken away by the priests who had brought her, back to the house near by whence she had come.'

'Denham House?'

'Indeed.'

Shakespeare gave a wry smile. He had heard much about Denham House, a putrid place, a dark hole of corruption and wickedness.

'I fear I did not do well by her, Mr Shakespeare. Three weeks later the priests who housed her were themselves arrested, as was Father Weston. Thomasyn Jade was taken away by the pursuivants, but her story reached certain courtiers and she was soon freed into the care of a great Protestant lady, the Countess of Kent. It was hoped that she would undo the priests' efforts to reconcile the wretched girl to the Church of Rome, and take her back to Protestantism. But within a few days I heard that she had disappeared. I prayed for her every day and worried for her, for she was an afflicted young woman and in need of proper care and spiritual nourishment. I sought her as best I could, but in the year of ninety-two, as you know, I was myself arrested. I have heard nothing of her since. Her memory haunts me, and I cannot go easily to my death.'

'And if I find her?'

'My family and friends have set aside money on her behalf. They will be as godparents to her and she will be well cared for. There is nothing sinister, no more exorcisms. Nor will they seek to influence her choice of faith. I ask only that you find her . . . if she is alive.'

'Why should I do this for you, Father Southwell? You came to England as a traitor. Since then you have longed for martyrdom. You must see that you are my enemy.'

Robert Southwell crossed himself. 'You know that is not so, Mr Shakespeare.'

It was true. They were not enemies. And while Shakespeare could never comprehend Southwell's quest for death, nor like the way he held to the superstitions of Rome, he admired his courage, his piety and his poetry. If it was true, as the English state insisted, that some Jesuits contrived the death of princes, then Southwell was not one of them. Either way, though, he was about to have his martyrdom.

Shakespeare nodded slowly. This man had once risked life and liberty to help him; he could not refuse him now. 'I will do what I can, Father. You had better tell me every detail you know.'

Just over a mile north-east of Newgate, near Bishopsgate, Garrick Loake sat alone in an alehouse booth. He had downed four pints of strong beer and was beginning to feel hazy. Yet he was not drunk, not enough to ignore the uncomfortable feeling that his meeting with John Shakespeare had gone badly. Would it go any better on the morrow? A fresh tankard was slopped down in front of him. He paid the maid a penny, then picked up the vessel and drank deeply.

The problem was there was no going back now. He had told Shakespeare too much to shirk their next meeting, and so he would be at his house in the morning. What about tonight, though? He couldn't go home; it wasn't safe there. Not now. He looked around at the other drinkers in the taproom. Every man seemed a threat.

He fished out his purse and saw that his hand was shaking. Counting the meagre contents, he gauged that if he drank no more, there might just be enough for a room for the night at one of the cheaper inns. And he would say a prayer that Mr Shakespeare would save his skin.