Opening Extract from...

Treachery

Written by S. J. Parris

Published by HarperCollins

S. J. PARRIS

Treachery

HarperCollins*Publishers*

HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

Published by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2014
1

A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978 0 00 748119 4

This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are
the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is
entirely coincidental.

Set in Sabon by Palimpsest Book Production Limited
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

FSC™ is a non-profit international organisation established to promote
the responsible management of the world's forests. Products carrying the
FSC label are independently certified to assure consumers that they come
from forests that are managed to meet the social, economic and
ecological needs of present and future generations,
and other controlled sources.

Find out more about HarperCollins and the environment at
www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

From aboard Her Majesty's good ship the *Elizabeth Bonaventure*, Plymouth, this Sunday the twenty-second of August 1585

Right Honourable Sir Francis Walsingham

After my heartiest commendations to you, Master Secretary, it is with a heavy heart that I pick up my pen to write these words. You have no doubt expected fair news of the fleet's departure by now. It grieves me to tell you that we remain for the present at anchor here in Plymouth Sound, delayed at first by routine matters of supplies and provisioning, and awaiting still the arrival of the *Galleon Leicester* to complete our number, which we expect any day (and with it your son-in-law). Naturally, in a voyage of this size such minor setbacks are to be expected. But it is a far graver matter that weighs upon me now and which I feel I must convey to Your Honour, though I ask that for the present you do not reveal these sad circumstances to Her Majesty, for I hope to have the business resolved before too long without causing her unnecessary distress.

Your Honour perhaps knows, at least by reputation, Master Robert Dunne, a gentleman of Devon, sometime seen at court,

who proved a most worthy officer and companion when I made my voyage around the world seven years since, and was duly rewarded for his part in that venture. I had invited Dunne to join my crew for this our present voyage to Spain and the New World, though there were those among my closest advisers who counselled against it, given the man's personal troubles and what is said of him, which I need not elaborate here. Even so, I will not judge a man on hearsay but on his deeds, and I was determined to give Dunne a chance to recover his honour in the service of his country. Perhaps I would have done well to listen, though that is all one now.

From the outset Dunne's manner was curious; he seemed much withdrawn into himself, and furtive, as if he were afraid of someone at his shoulder, not at all the man I remembered. This I attributed to nervous anticipation of the voyage to come; to leave home and family for the far side of the world is not a venture to be undertaken lightly, and Dunne knew all too well what he might face. Last evening, he had been ashore with some of the other gentlemen. While we remain here in harbour I consider it wise to allow them the natural pursuits of young men and such diversions as Plymouth affords the sailor – there is time enough for them to be confined together below decks and subject to the harsh discipline of a ship's company once we haul anchor, though I make clear to the men under my command – as do my fellow captains – that they are expected to conduct themselves in such a way as will not bring the fleet into disrepute.

Dunne was brought back to the ship last night very much the worse for drink, which was also out of character; God knows the man had his vices, but I had confidence that drink was not among them, or I would not have appointed him to serve with me on Her Majesty's flagship. He was in the company of our parson, Padre Pettifer, who had found Dunne wandering in the streets in a high degree of drunkenness and thought best to bring him direct to the ship – a decision I would not have

made in his position, for I am told they had the Devil's own work to help Dunne into the rowboat and up the ladder to the deck of the *Elizabeth*. There they were met by my brother Thomas, who had taken his supper with me aboard and was on his way back to his own command. Knowing I was in my quarters, at work on my charts with young Gilbert, and thinking this matter not fit to trouble me with, my brother and the parson helped Dunne back to his cabin to recover, though Thomas later said Dunne appeared very wild, lashing out as if he could see enemies invisible to the rest, and addressing people who were not there, as if he had taken something more than wine. But, according to Padre Pettifer, almost the moment he lay down upon his bunk, he fell into a stupor from which he could not be woken, and so they left him to sleep off his excesses and repent of it in the morning.

What happened between that time and the following dawn is known only to God and, it grieves me to say, one other. The weather was foul, with rain and high winds; most of the men were below decks, save the two who kept the watch. At first light, my Spanish navigator, Jonas, came knocking at my door, in a fearful haste. He had tried to take Robert Dunne a draught of something that would restore him after the night's excesses, but the cabin was locked and Dunne would not be roused. I understood his concern – we have all seen men in drink choke on their own vomit unattended and so I went with him to see – I have a spare key to the private cabins and together we unlocked Dunne's door. But I was not prepared for what we found.

He was facing away from us at first, though as the ship rolled on the swell, he swung slowly around, and it was then that I noticed – but I run ahead of my story. Dunne was hanging by the neck from the lantern hook, a noose tight around his throat. Jonas cried out, and spilled some of the philtre he was carrying. I quickly hushed him, not wishing to alarm the men. With the door shut behind us, Jonas and I

lifted Dunne down and laid him on the bunk. The body was stiff already; he must have been dead some hours. I stayed with him and sent Jonas to fetch my brother from his own ship.

The death of a man by his own hand must be accounted in any circumstances not only a great sorrow but a great sin against God and nature. I confess that a brief anger flared in my breast that Dunne should have chosen this moment, for you know well that sailors are as devout and as superstitious as any men in Christendom, and this would be taken as an omen, a shadow over our voyage. I did not doubt that some would desert when they learned of such a death aboard, saying God had turned His face from us. Then I reprimanded myself for thinking foremost of the voyage when a man had been driven to such extremes of despair in our midst.

But as I waited for my brother to arrive, my anger gave way to a greater fear, for I looked more closely at the corpse and at once I realised what was wrong, and a great dread took hold of me. I had no need of a physician to tell me this death was not as it first appeared. And so you will understand why I confide this to Your Honour, for I must keep my suspicions to myself until I know more. If a ship should be considered cursed to count a suicide on board, how much the worse to harbour one guilty of an even greater sin?

For this reason, I ask you for the present to keep your counsel. Be assured I will inform you of progress, but I wanted Your Honour to have this news from my own hand – rumour will find its way out of every crack, often distorted in some vital particular, and as I know you have eyes and ears here I would not wish you to be misinformed. It has been given out among the crew that it was self-slaughter, but there must be a coroner's inquest. You see that I cannot, with due care for my men and the investment of so many great nobles, including Your Honour and our Sovereign Queen herself, embark upon a voyage such as this believing I carry a killer among my

crew. If Her Majesty should hear we are delayed, I pray you allay any fears for the success of the expedition and assure her we will set sail as soon as Providence allows. I send this by fast rider and await your good counsel.

I remain Your Honour's
most ready to be commanded,
Francis Drake

ONE

'There! Is that not a sight to stir the blood, Bruno. Does she not make you glad to be alive?'

Sir Philip Sidney half stands as he gestures with pride to the river ahead, so that the small wherry lurches to the left with a great splash and the boatman curses aloud, raising an oar to keep us steady. I grab at the bench and peer through the thin mist to the object of Sidney's fervour. The galleon looms up like the side of a house, three tall masts rising against the dawn sky, trailing a cat's cradle of ropes and rigging that cross-hatch the pale backdrop of the clouds into geometric shapes.

'It is impressive,' I concede.

'Don't say "it", you show your ignorance.' Sidney sits back down with a thud and the boat rocks alarmingly again. '"She" for a ship. Do you want Francis Drake thinking we have no more seafaring knowledge than a couple of girls? You can drop us here at the steps,' he adds, to the boatman. 'Bring up the baggage and leave it on the wharf, near as you can to the ship. Good fellow.' He clinks his purse to show that the man's efforts will be rewarded.

As we draw closer and Woolwich dock emerges through the mist I see a bustle of activity surrounding the large vessel:

men rolling barrels and hefting great bundles tied in oil cloth, coiling ropes, hauling carts and barking orders that echo across the Thames with the shouts of gulls wheeling around the tops of the masts.

'I am quite happy for Sir Francis Drake to know that I cannot tell one end of a boat from the other,' I say, bracing myself as the wherry bumps against the dockside steps. 'The mark of a wise man is that he will admit how much he does not know. Besides, what does it matter? He is hardly expecting us to crew the boat for him, is he?'

Sidney tears his gaze away from the ship and glares at me.

'Ship, not a boat. And little do you know, Bruno. Drake is famed for making his gentlemen officers share the labour with his mariners. No man too grand that he cannot coil a rope or swab a deck alongside his fellows, whatever his title – that's Drake's style of captaincy. They say when he circumnavigated the globe—'

'But we are not among his officers, Philip. We are only visiting.'

There is a pause, then he bursts out laughing and slaps me on the shoulder.

'Of course not. Ridiculous suggestion.'

'I understand that you want to impress him—'

'Impress *him*? Ha.' Sidney rises and springs from the wherry to the steps, while the boatman clutches an iron ring in the wall to hold us level. The steps are slick with green weed and Sidney almost loses his footing, but rights himself before turning around, eyes flashing. 'Listen. Francis Drake may have squeezed a knighthood out of the Queen, but he is still the son of a farmer. My mother is the daughter of a duke.' He jabs himself in the chest with a thumb. 'My sister is the Countess of Pembroke. My uncle is the Earl of Leicester, favourite of the Queen of England. Tell me, why should I need to impress a man like Drake?'

Because in your heart, my friend, he is the man you would

secretly like to be, I think, though I smile to myself and say nothing. Not long ago, at court, Sidney had failed to show sufficient deference to some senior peer, who in response had called him the Queen's puppy before a roomful of noblemen. Now, whenever Sidney walks through the galleries or the gardens at the royal palaces, he swears he can hear the sound of sarcastic yapping and whistles trailing after him. How he would love to be famed as an adventurer rather than a lapdog to Elizabeth; I could almost pity him for it. Since the beginning of the summer, when the Queen finally decided to commit English troops to support the Protestants fighting the Spanish in the Low Countries, he has barely been able to contain his excitement at the thought of going to war. His uncle, the Earl of Leicester, is to lead the army and Sidney had been given to believe he would have command of the forces garrisoned at Flushing. Then, at the last minute, the Queen havered, fearful of losing two of her favourites at once. Early in August, she withdrew the offer of Flushing and appointed another commander, insisting Sidney stay at court, in her sight. He has begged her to consider his honour, but she laughs off his entreaties as if she finds them amusing, as if he is a child who wants to play at soldiers with the bigger boys. His pride is humiliated. At thirty, he feels his best years are ebbing away while he is confined at the Queen's whim to a woman's world of tapestries and velvet cushions. Now she sends him as an envoy to Plymouth; it is a long way from commanding a garrison, but even this brief escape from the court aboard a galleon has made him giddy with the prospect of freedom.

I am less enthusiastic, though I am making an effort to hide this, for Sidney's sake. Hopping from the wherry to the steps is close enough to the water for my liking, I reflect, as I falter and flail towards the rope to keep my balance. My boots slip on each step and I try not to look down to the slick brown river below. I swim well enough, but I have been in the Thames by accident once before and the smell of it could knock a

man out before he strikes for shore; as to what floats beneath the surface, it is best not to stop and consider.

At the top of the steps, I stand for a moment as our boatman ties up his craft and begins to labour up the steps with our bags. Mostly Sidney's bags, to be accurate; I have brought only one, with a few changes of linen and some writing materials. He has assured me we will not be gone longer than a fortnight, three weeks at most, as we accompany the galleon along the southern coast of England to Plymouth harbour where it – or *she* – will join the rest of Sir Francis Drake's fleet. Yet Sidney himself seems to have packed for a voyage to the other side of the world; his servants follow us in another wherry with the remainder of his luggage. I have not remarked on this; instead I watch my friend through narrowed eyes as he hails one of the crew with a cheery hallo and engages the man in conversation. The sailor points up at the ship. Sidney is nodding earnestly, arms folded. Is he up to something, I ask myself? He has been behaving very strangely for the past few weeks, ever since his falling out with the Queen, and I know well that he does not take a blow to his pride with good grace. For the time being, though, I have no choice but to follow him.

'Come, Bruno,' he calls, imperious as ever, waving a lace-edged sleeve in the direction of the ship's gangplank. I bite down a smile. Sidney thinks he has dressed down for the voyage; gone are the usual puffed sleeves and breeches, the peascod doublet that makes all Englishmen of fashion look as if they are expecting a child, but the jacket he has chosen is not much more suitable, made of ivory silk embroidered with delicate gold tracery and tiny seed pearls. His ruff, though not so extravagantly wide as usual, is starched and pristine, and on his head he wears a black velvet cap with a jewelled brooch and a peacock's feather that dances at the back of his neck and frequently catches in his gold earring. I make bets with myself as to how long the feather will last in a sea breeze.

A gentleman descends the gangplank, his clothes marking him apart from the men loading on the dockside. He raises one hand in greeting. He appears about Sidney's own age, with reddish hair swept back from a high forehead and an impressive beard that looks as if it has been newly curled by a barber. As he steps down on to the wharf he bows briefly to Sidney; when he lifts his head and smiles, creases appear at the corners of his eyes, giving him a genial air.

'Welcome to the *Galleon Leicester*.' He holds his arms wide.

'Well met, Cousin.' Sidney embraces him with a great deal of gusto and back-slapping. 'Are we all set?'

'They are bringing the last of the munitions aboard now.' He gestures behind him to a group of sailors loading wooden crates on to the ship with a system of ropes and pulleys and much shouting. He turns to me with a brief, appraising look. 'And you must be the Italian. Your reputation precedes you.'

He does not curl his lip in the way most Englishmen do when they encounter a foreigner, particularly one from Catholic Europe, and I like him the better for it. Perhaps a man who has sailed half the globe has a more accommodating view of other nations. I wonder which of my reputations has reached his ears. I have several.

'Giordano Bruno of Nola, at your service, sir.' I bow low, to show reverence for our difference in status.

Sidney lays a hand on the man's shoulder and turns to me.

'May I present Sir Francis Knollys, brother-in-law to my uncle the Earl of Leicester and captain of this vessel for our voyage.'

'I am honoured, sir. It is good of you to have us aboard.'

Knollys grins. 'I know it. I have told Philip he is not to get in the way. The last thing I need on my ship is a couple of poets, getting under our feet and puking like children at the merest swell.' He squints up at the sky. 'I had hoped to be away by first light. Still, the wind is fair – we can make up time once we are into the English Sea. Have you sea legs,

Master Bruno, or will you have your head in a bucket all the way to Plymouth?'

'I have a stomach of iron.' I smile as I say it, so that he knows it may not be strictly true. I did not miss the disdain in the word 'poets', and nor did Sidney; I mind less, but I would rather not disgrace myself too far in front of this aristocratic sailor. Puking in a bucket is clearly, in his eyes, the surest way to cast doubt on one's manhood.

'Glad to hear it.' He nods his approval. 'I'll have your bags brought up. Come and see your quarters. No great luxury, I'm afraid – nothing befitting the Master of the Ordnance, but it will have to suffice.' He makes a mock bow to Sidney.

'You may sneer, Cousin, but when we're out in the Spanish Main facing the might of King Philip's garrisons, you will be glad someone competent troubled themselves with organising munitions,' Sidney says, affecting a lofty air.

'Someone competent? Who was he?' Knollys laughs at his own joke. 'In any case, what is this "*we*"?'

'What?'

'You said, "when *we're* out in the Spanish Main". But you and your friend are only coming as far as Plymouth, I thought?'

Sidney sucks in his cheeks. 'We the English, I meant. An expression of solidarity, Cousin.'

I notice he does not quite meet the other man's eye. I watch my friend's face and a suspicion begins to harden in the back of my mind.

Knollys leads us up the gangplank and aboard the *Leicester*. The crew turn to stare as we pass, though their hands do not falter in their tasks. I wonder what they make of us. Sidney – tall, rangy, expensively dressed, his face as bright as a boy's, despite the recently cultivated beard, as he drinks in his new surroundings – looks no more or less than what he is, an aristocrat with a taste for adventure. In my suit of black, perhaps they take me for a chaplain.

We follow Knollys through a door beneath the aftercastle, where we are ushered into a narrow cabin, barely wide enough for the three of us to stand comfortably, with two bunks built against the dividing wall. It smells, unsurprisingly, of damp, salt, fish, seaweed. If Sidney is deterred by the rough living arrangements, he does not allow it to show as he exclaims with delight over the cramped beds, so I determine to be equally stoical. Behind my back, though, my fists clench and unclench and I force myself to breathe slowly; since I was a child I have had a terror of enclosed spaces and to be confined here seems a punishment. I promise myself I will spend as much time as possible on the deck during the voyage, eyes fixed on the sky and the wide water.

'Make yourselves at home,' Knollys says, cheerfully waving a hand, enjoying the advantage his experience gives him over his more refined relative. 'I hope you have both brought thick cloaks – the wind will be fierce out at sea, for all it is supposed to be summer. I shall leave you here to get settled – I have much to do before we cast off. Come up on deck when you are ready and say your farewells to London.'

'I'll take the bottom bunk, I think,' Sidney announces, when Knollys has gone, tossing his hat on to the pillow. 'Not so far to fall if the sea is rough.'

I lean against the doorpost. 'Thank you. And you had better tell him we will need another cabin just for your clothes.'

Sidney eases himself into his bunk and attempts to stretch out his long legs. They will not fit and he is forced to lie with his knees pointing up like a woman in childbirth. 'You know, one of these days, Bruno, you will learn to show me the respect due from a man of your birth to one of mine. Of course, I have only myself to blame,' he continues, shifting position and knocking his hat on the floor. 'I have bred this insolence by treating you as an equal. It will have to stop. How in God's name am I supposed to sleep in this? I can't even lie flat. Was it built for a dwarf? I suppose you will have

no problem. God's wounds, they have better accommodation at the Fleet Prison!'

I pick up his hat and put it on at a jaunty angle.

'What were you expecting, feather beds and silk sheets? It was you who wanted to play at being an adventurer.'

He sits up, suddenly serious. 'We are not playing, Bruno. I am the Queen's Master of the Ordnance – this is a royal appointment. No, I am not in jest now. And you will thank me for it, wait and see. What else would you have done with the summer but brood on your situation? At least this way you will be occupied.'

'My *situation*, as you put it, will be no different when I return. Unless I can find some way to stay in England independent of the French embassy, I will be forced to return to Paris with the Ambassador in September. It is difficult not to brood.'

I try to keep the pique from my voice, but his casual tone is galling, when he is talking of my whole future, and perhaps my life.

He waves a hand. 'You worry too much. The new Ambassador – what's his name, Châteauneuf? – can't really throw you out on the streets, can he? Not while the French King supports you living at the embassy. He's just trying to intimidate you.'

'Well, he has succeeded.' I wrap my arms around my chest. 'King Henri has not paid my stipend for months – he has more to worry about at his own court than one exiled philosopher. The previous Ambassador was paying it himself from the embassy coffers – I have been surviving on that and what I earn from—' I break off; we exchange a significant look. 'And that is another problem,' I say, lowering my voice. 'Châteauneuf as good as accused me of spying for the Privy Council.'

'On what grounds?'

'He had no evidence. But they suspect the embassy's secret

correspondence is being intercepted. And since I am the only known enemy of the Catholic Church in residence, he has drawn his own conclusions.'

'Huh.' He draws his knees up. 'They are not as stupid as they appear, then. But you will have to be careful in future.'

'I fear it will be almost impossible for me to go on working for Walsingham as I have been. The previous Ambassador trusted me. Châteauneuf is determined not to – he will be watching my every move. He is the most dogmatic kind of Catholic – the sort that thinks tolerance is a burning offence. He will not keep someone like me under his roof. Those were his words.'

Sidney smiles. 'A defrocked monk, excommunicated for heresy. Yes, I can see that he might see you as dangerous. But I thought you were keen to return to Paris?'

I do not miss the insinuation.

'I wrote to King Henri last autumn to ask if I might return briefly. He said he could not have me back at court at present, it would only antagonise the Catholic League. Besides,' I lean against the wall and cross my arms, 'she will be long gone by now. If she was ever there.'

He nods slowly. Sidney understands what it is to love a woman you cannot have. There is no more to be said.

'Well, you can stop brooding. I have an answer to your problems.' The glint in his eye does not inspire confidence. Sidney is well intentioned but impulsive and his schemes are rarely practical; for all that, I cannot suppress a flicker of hope. Perhaps he means to speak to his father-in-law Walsingham for me, or even the Queen. Only a position at court would allow me to support myself in exile. Though she cannot publicly acknowledge it, I know that Walsingham has told the Queen how I have risked my life in her service over the past two years. Surely she will understand that I can never again live or write safely in a Catholic country while I am wanted by the Inquisition on charges of heresy.

'You will speak to the Queen?'

'Wait and see,' is all he says, with a cryptic wink that he knows infuriates me.

Sidney was appointed Master of the Ordnance early in the spring – a political appointment, a bauble from the Queen, no reflection of his military or naval abilities, which so far exist largely in his head. Over the summer he has been occupied with overseeing the provision of munitions for this latest venture of Francis Drake's. So when the Queen received word that Dom Antonio, the pretender to the Portuguese throne, was sailing for England to visit her and intended to land at Plymouth, Sidney volunteered immediately for the task of meeting and escorting him to London, so that he might see Drake's fleet at first hand.

The plan is that we sail with the *Galleon Leicester* as far as Plymouth, where the ships are assembling, spend a few days among the sailors and merchant adventurers while we wait for the Portuguese and his entourage, so that Sidney can strut about talking cannon-shot and navigation and generally making himself important, then return by road to London with our royal visitor by the end of the month, when the royal court will have made its way back to the city after a summer in the country. I am grateful for the diversion, but I cannot help dwelling on the reckoning that will come on our return. If Sidney can find a way for me to stay in London, I will be in his debt for a lifetime.

The sun is almost fully above the horizon when Knollys calls us back to the deck, its light shrouded by a thin gauze of white cloud. I think of a Sicilian lemon in a muslin bag, with a brief pang of nostalgia.

'We shall have clear weather today, God willing,' he says, nodding to the sky. 'Though it would not hurt to pray for a little more wind.'

'You're asking the wrong man,' Sidney says, nudging me. 'Bruno does not pray.'

Knollys regards me, amused. 'Wait until we're out at sea. He will.'

The ship casts off smoothly from her moorings; orders are shouted, ropes hauled in, and from above comes a great creak of timber and the billowing slap of canvas as the sails breathe in and out like bellows. For the first time since we boarded, I am truly aware of the deck shifting beneath my feet; a gentle motion, back and forth on the swell as the *Leicester* moves away from the dock and the children who earn pennies loading cargo and running errands cheer us on our way, scampering as far as they can run along the wharf to wave us out of sight. Knollys laughs and waves back, so Sidney and I follow suit as the sun breaks through in a sudden shaft that gilds the brass fittings and the warm grain of the wood and makes the water ahead sparkle with a hundred thousand points of light, and I think perhaps I will enjoy this after all. But each time I move I am reminded that the ground under my feet is no longer solid.

'Occupy yourselves for the present,' Knollys says, 'as long as you don't get in anyone's way.'

'I am fully ready to pull my weight, Cousin, just let me know what tasks I should take in hand. I have heard how Drake likes to run his crews and we are not here to sit about watching honest men toil while we drink French wine in the sun.' Sidney beams, spreading his hands wide as if to say, Here I am.

I look at him, alarmed; there had been no mention of this in the invitation. I glance up to the top of the mainmast, where a pennant with a gold crest flutters above the lookout platform. I hope he has not just volunteered us for shinning up rigging and swabbing decks.

Knollys looks him up and down, taking in the silk doublet, the lace cuffs, the ornaments. He smiles, but there is an edge to it.

'Good – the wine is strictly rationed. I must say, Philip, I

am surprised Her Majesty has allowed you to leave court for so long. In the circumstances.'

Sidney looks away. 'Someone has to bring Dom Antonio to London. He wouldn't make it in one piece on his own. You know Philip of Spain has a price on his head.'

'Even so. Given that you and she are at odds at present, I'm amazed she trusts you to come back again.' Knollys laughs, expecting Sidney to join in.

There is a pause that grows more uncomfortable the longer it continues. Sidney studies the horizon with intense concentration.

'Tell me,' I say, to relieve the silence, 'what kind of man is Francis Drake?'

'Stubborn,' says Sidney, without hesitation.

'A man of mettle,' Knollys offers, after some consideration.

'I have sat on parliamentary committees with him over the past few years,' says Sidney, 'and he is as single-minded as a ratting dog when he has his mind set to something. Pragmatic too, though, and damned hard-working – as you'd expect from a man raised to manual labour,' he adds, examining his fingernails.

'There is a combative aspect to him,' Knollys says thoughtfully, 'and a fierce ambition – though not for personal vanity, I don't think. It's more as if he enjoys pitting himself against the impossible. He can be the very soul of courtesy – I have seen him treat prisoners from captured ships with as much respect as he would pay his own men. But there is steel in him. If you cross him, by God, he will make you pay for it.' He sucks in a sharp breath and seems poised to expand on this, but apparently thinks better of it.

'Is he an educated man?' I ask.

'Not formally, though he is learned in matters that concern the sea, naturally,' Knollys says. 'But in his cabin he keeps an English Bible and a copy of Foxe's Book of Martyrs, as well as the writings of Magellan and French and Spanish volumes

on the art of navigation. He is excessively fond of music and makes sure he has men aboard who can play with some skill. Why do you ask?'

'Only that he is Europe's most famous mariner,' I say. 'I am intrigued to meet him – he has changed our understanding of the world. I imagine he must be a man of extraordinary qualities.'

Knollys nods, smiling. 'You will not be disappointed. Now, the two of you can watch the sights while I go about my business. God willing we shall have calm seas and a good wind and we will be in Plymouth inside two days.'

He waves us vaguely towards the front of the ship. I follow Sidney up a few almost vertical stairs to the high deck. As soon as Knollys has turned his back, Sidney disregards his command; he greets the nearest sailor heartily and presses him with questions about his business – why does he tie that rope so, what does it signify that the topsails are still furled, what is the hierarchy of men in the crew, where is the farthest he himself has been from England – barely pausing to draw breath, until the poor fellow looks about wildly for someone to save him from this interrogation.

Smiling, I leave them to it and find myself a quiet spot at the very prow. I do, as it happens, know one end of a ship from the other – I spent part of my youth around the Bay of Naples – but I reason that the more useless I make myself appear, the more I will be left to my own devices. What does pique my interest here is the art of navigation; I should like to have the opportunity to talk to Knollys about his charts and instruments, if he would allow. Since sailors for centuries have calculated their position by the stars with ever more precise calibrations, and since for those same centuries all our charts of the heavens have been based on erroneous beliefs about the movement of the stars and planets in their spheres, I am curious to know how navigators and cartographers will adapt to the new configuration of the universe, now that we

know the Sun and not the Earth lies at its centre, and that the fixed stars are no such thing, their sphere no longer the outer limit of the cosmos. I wonder if these are ideas I could discuss with an experienced sailor like Knollys. He circumnavigated the globe with Drake in 1577, according to Sidney, on the voyage that made them famous and wealthy men; surely in the course of such a journey the calculations they made must have added up to confirmation that the Earth turns about the Sun and not the reverse? Drake and the men who sailed with him are forbidden by the Queen from publishing accounts or maps of their route, for fear they would fall into the hands of the Spanish, but perhaps Knollys might be persuaded at least to discuss the scientific discoveries of his travels with me in confidence, as one man of learning to another.

Ahead the Thames gleams like beaten metal as clouds scud across the face of the sun and their shadows follow over the water; in this light, you could almost forget it is a soup of human filth. I rest my forearms on the wooden guardrail and look down. I must check myself; with my state so precarious, it behoves me to be wary of what I say in public, until I know how it may be received. Knollys is, by all accounts, a good Protestant, like his brother-in-law Leicester and Sidney, but I would be a fool to imagine that these ideas of the Pole Copernicus have been accepted by more than a very few. Only two years ago I was openly ridiculed at the University of Oxford for expressing such a view in a public debate. Just because the Inquisition cannot reach me in Elizabeth's territories, it does not follow that all Englishmen are enlightened.

We make steady progress along the river as it widens towards the estuary, here and there passing clusters of dwellings little more than shacks, where fishing boats bob alongside makeshift jetties. To either side the land is flat and marshy, pocked with pools reflecting the pale expanse of the sky.

London gives you a sense of being hemmed in, pressed on all sides; there the sky is a dirty ribbon glimpsed if you crane your neck between the eaves of tall houses that lean in towards one another across narrow alleys, blocking the light. As we move further from the city, I feel my shoulders relax; the air freshens and begins to carry a tang of salt, and I inhale deeply, relishing this new sense of space. The sounds grow familiar: the snap of sailcloth, the creaks and groans of moving timber, the rhythmic breaking of waves against the hull as we rise and fall, the endless skwah-skwah of the gulls.

After supper, while Sidney settles to cards with Knollys and his gentlemen officers, I excuse myself and return to the deck. The wind is keener now and I have to wrap my cloak close around me against the cold, but I had rather be here in the salt air than confined in the captain's cabin, with its fug of tobacco smoke and sweet wine. Directly ahead, the sun has almost sunk into the water, leaving the sky streaked orange and pink in its wake. To our right, or what Sidney insists I call starboard, the English coast is a dark smudge. To the left, on the other side of the endlessly shifting water, lies France, and I narrow my eyes towards the distant clouds as if I could see it.

The boards creak behind me and Sidney appears at my side, a clay pipe clamped between his teeth. He takes out a tinder-box from the pouch at his belt and battles for some moments to light it in the wind.

'Thinking again, Bruno?'

'It is a living, of sorts.'

He grunts, takes the pipe from his mouth, puffs out a cloud of smoke and stretches his arms wide, lifting his chest to the rising moon.

'Nothing like fresh sea air.'

'It was before you arrived.'

He leans with his back to the rail and grins. 'Leave off, you sound like my wife. She always complains about the

smell of a pipe. Especially now.' He sighs and turns to face the sea again. 'By God, it is a relief to be out of that house. Women are even more contrary than usual when they are with child. Why is one not warned of that in advance, I wonder?'

'This time last year you were fretting you might not manage an heir at all. I'd have thought you'd be glad.'

'It is all to please other people, Bruno. A man born to my station in life – certain things are expected of you. They are not necessarily your own choices.'

'You don't want to be a father?'

'I would have liked to become a father once I was in a position to support sons and daughters myself, rather than still living in my father-in-law's house. But . . . well.' He laces his fingers together and cracks his knuckles. 'They will not let me go to war until I have got an heir, in case I don't come back. So I suppose I should be pleased.'

The sails billow and snap above us; the ship moves implacably forward, stately, unhurried. After a long silence, Sidney taps his pipe out on the rail in front of him.

'I put a group of armed men and servants on the road to Plymouth two days ago. They will meet us there and escort Dom Antonio back to London.'

My earlier suspicions prickle again.

'Along with us,' I prompt.

Sidney turns to me with a triumphant smile, his eyes gleaming in the fading light. He grips my sleeve. 'We are not going back to London, my friend. By the time Dom Antonio is warming his boots at Whitehall, you and I shall be halfway across the Atlantic.'

I stare at him for a long while, waiting – hoping – for some sign that this is another of his jokes. The wild light in his eyes suggests otherwise.

'What, are we going to stow away? Hide among the baggage?'

‘I told you I had a plan for you, did I not?’ He leans back again, delighted with himself.

‘I thought it might be something realistic.’

‘Christ’s bones – don’t be such a naysayer, Bruno. Listen to me. What is the great problem that you and I share?’

‘The urge to write poetry, and a liking for difficult women.’

‘Other than those.’ He looks at me; I wait. ‘We lack independence, because we lack money.’

‘Ah. That.’

‘Exactly! And how do we solve it? We must be given money, or we must make it ourselves. And since I see no one inclined to give us any at present, what better way than to take it from the Spanish? To come home covered in glory, with a treasure of thousands in the hold – the look on her face then would be something to see, would it not?’

For a moment I think he means his wife, until I realise.

‘This is all to defy the Queen, then? For not sending you to the Low Countries? You plan to sail to the other side of the world without her permission?’

He does not answer immediately. Instead he looks out over the water, inhaling deeply.

‘Do you know how much Francis Drake brought home from his voyage around the world? No? Well, I shall tell you. Over half a million pounds of Spanish treasure. Ten thousand of that the Queen gave him for himself, more to be shared among his men. And that is only what he declared.’ He breaks off, shaking his head. ‘He has bought himself a manor house in Devon, a former abbey with all its land, and a coat of arms. The son of a yeoman farmer! And I cannot buy so much as a cottage for my family. My son will grow up knowing every mouthful he eats was provided by his grandfather, while his father sat by, dependent as a woman. How do you think that makes me feel?’

‘I understand you are frustrated, and angry with the Queen—’

‘The fellow she means to give the command of Flushing is my inferior in every degree. It is a public humiliation. I cannot walk through the galleries of Whitehall knowing the whole court is laughing at my expense. I am unmanned at every turn.’ The hand resting on the rail bunches into a fist.

‘So you must come home a conquering hero.’

‘What else is there for an Englishman to do but fight the Spanish?’ When he turns to me, I see he is white with anger. ‘It is no more than my duty, and she would prevent me for fear of letting her favourites out of her sight – she must keep us all clinging to her skirts, because she dreads to be alone. But I would be more than a pet to an ageing spinster, Bruno.’ He glances around quickly, to make sure this has not been overheard. ‘Picture it, will you – the thrill of bearding the King of Spain in his own territories, sailing back to England rich men. The Queen will not have gifts enough to express her thanks.’

I want to laugh, he is so earnest. Instead I rub the stubble on my chin, hand over my mouth, until I can speak with a straight face.

‘You really mean to do this? Sail with Drake to the Spanish Main? Does he even know?’

He shrugs, as if this were a minor detail. ‘I hinted at it numerous times as I was assisting him with the preparations this summer. I am not sure he took me seriously. But I can’t think he would object.’

‘He will, if he knows you travel without the Queen’s consent and against her wishes. He will not want to lose her favour.’ But I am not thinking of Drake’s advantage, only my own. The Queen will be livid with Sidney for flouting her command and if I am party to his enterprise, I will share her displeasure. Sidney will bounce back, because he is who he is, but my standing with her, such as it is, may never recover. And that is the best outcome; that is assuming we return at all.

‘Francis Drake would not be in a position to undertake this venture if it were not for me,’ Sidney says, his voice low

and urgent. 'Half the ships in his fleet and a good deal of the funds raised come from private investors *I* brought to him, gentlemen *I* persuaded to help finance the voyage.' He jabs himself in the chest with his thumb to make the point. 'He can hardly turn me away at the quayside.'

I shake my head and look away, over the waves. He is overstating his part in the venture, I am sure, but there is no reasoning with him when he is set on a course. If he will not brook objection from the Queen of England, he will certainly hear none from me.

'I have no military experience, Philip, I am not a fighter. This is not for me.'

He snorts. 'How can you even say so? I have seen you fight, Bruno, and take on men twice your size. For a philosopher, you can be very daunting.' He flashes a sudden grin and I am relieved; I fear we are on the verge of a rift.

'I can acquit myself in a tavern brawl, if I have to. That is not quite the same as boarding a ship or capturing a port. What use would I be at sea?'

'What use are you in London now that the new Ambassador means to watch your every step, or kick you out altogether? You are no use to anyone at present, Bruno, not without patronage.'

I turn sharply away, keeping silent until I can trust myself to speak without betraying my anger. I can feel him simmering beside me, tapping the stem of the clay pipe hard against the wooden guardrail until it snaps and he throws it with a curse into the sea.

'Thank you for reminding me of my place, Sir Philip,' I say at length, in a voice that comes out tight and strangled.

'Oh, for the love of Christ, Bruno! I meant only that you are of more use on this voyage than anywhere else, for now. Besides, he asked for you.'

'Who did?'

'Francis Drake. That's why I invited you.'

I frown, suspicious.

'Drake doesn't know me. Why would he ask for me?'

'Well, not by name. But this summer, in London, he asked me if I could find him a scholar to help him with something. He was very particular about it, though he would not explain why.'

'But *you* are a scholar. Surely he knows that?'

'I won't do, apparently. He is looking for someone with a knowledge of ancient languages, ancient texts. A man of learning and discretion, he said, for a sensitive task. I told him I knew just the fellow.' He beams, slinging an arm around my shoulder, all geniality again. 'He told me to bring you to Plymouth when I came. Think, Bruno – I don't know what he wants, but if you could do him some sort of service, it might smooth our way to a berth aboard his ship.'

I say nothing. When he invited me on this journey to Plymouth, he showered me with flattery: he could not dream of going without me, he said; he would miss my conversation; there was no one among his circle at court he would rather travel with, no one whose company he prized more highly. Now it transpires that he wants me as a sort of currency; something he can use to barter with Drake. Like a foolish girl, I have allowed myself to be sweet-talked into believing he wanted me for my own qualities. I also know that I am absurd to feel slighted, and this makes me all the more angry, with him and with myself. I shrug his arm off me.

'Oh, come on, Bruno. I cannot think of going without you – what, left to the company of grizzled old sea dogs for months on end, with no conversation that isn't of weevils and cordage and drinking their own piss? You would not abandon me to such a fate.' He drops to one knee, his hands pressed together in supplication.

Reluctantly, I crack a smile. 'Weevils and drinking our own piss? Well then, you have sold it to me.'

'See? I knew you would not be able to resist.' He bounces back to his feet and brushes himself down.

Our friendship has always been marked by good-natured teasing, but his earlier words have stung; perhaps this is truly how he views me. Nothing without patronage.

'Seriously, Philip,' I turn to look him in the eye. 'To risk the Queen's displeasure so brazenly – are you really willing? I am not sure that I am.'

'I swear to you, Bruno, by the time we come home, the sight of the riches we bring to her treasury will make her forget on the instant.' When I do not reply, he leans in, dropping his voice to a whisper. 'You do realise the money Walsingham pays you is not charity? He pays you for information. And if the Baron de Châteauneuf has as good as banished you, how can you continue to provide it?'

'I will find a way. I always have before. Walsingham knows I will not let him down.'

'Come, Bruno!' He gives me a little shake, to jolly me along. 'Do you not yearn to see the New World? What good is it to dream of worlds beyond the fixed stars if you dare not travel our own globe?' He pushes a hand through his hair so that the front sticks up in tufts, a gesture he makes without knowing whenever he is agitated. 'You're thirty-seven years old. If you want nothing more from life than to sit in a room with a book, I can't think why you ever left the cloister.'

'Because I would have been sentenced to death by the Inquisition,' I say, quietly. As he well knows. But how do you explain to a man like Sidney the reality of a life in exile? 'And what of your wife and child?' I add, as he stretches again and turns as if to leave.

He looks at me as if he does not understand the question. 'What of them?'

'Your first child is due in, what, three months? And you mean to be halfway across an ocean.' With no good odds on returning, I do not say aloud. Even I know that Francis Drake's famous circumnavigation returned to England with only one ship of six and a third of the men. But Sidney is as

irrepressible as a boy when he sets his heart on something; he clearly believes there is no question but that we will return triumphant with armfuls of Spanish gold.

He frowns. 'But I have done my part. She will have the child whether I am there or not, and there will be nursemaids to take care of it. God's blood, Bruno, I have done what they asked of me, I have got an heir, that is why they have had me cooped up at Barn Elms for the past two years. Am I not permitted a little freedom now?'

I am tempted to observe that he has possibly misunderstood the nature of marriage, but I refrain; I am hardly qualified to advise him about women. Besides, there is no profit in making him more irritable. His anger, I see now, is not at me, but at everyone who would voice the same objections: his wife, his father-in-law, Francis Drake, the Queen. He is rehearsing his self-justification. I have great affection for Sidney, and he has many qualities I admire, but he can be spoilt and does not respond well to being thwarted.

'It might be a girl,' I reply.

He makes a noise of exasperation. 'I am going back down for a drink. Are you coming?'

'I think I will stay here for a while.'

'As you wish.' At the head of the stairs to the main deck he turns back, one hand on the guardrail. 'You know, I am trying to find a way to help you, Bruno. I thought I might have a little more thanks than this.' He sounds wounded. In my amazement at his mad scheme, it had not occurred to me that I might have hurt his feelings.

'Forgive me. I am grateful for your efforts – do not think otherwise.'

'You are coming, then? To the New World?' His face brightens.

'Let me get used to the idea.'

He disappears to the lower deck and I return my attention

to the restless black water that surrounds us. Two weeks of this had seemed a diversion; months on end is another proposition entirely. In sunlight, the sea looked benign, obliging; now its vastness strikes me as overwhelming. To challenge it, to attempt to best it with such a small vessel, appears grotesquely presumptuous. But perhaps all acts of courage look like folly at first. The breeze lifts my hair from my face, and I realise that the sun has fully set and the horizon is no longer visible on either side. There is no divide between sea and sky, nothing but endless darkness and the indifferent stars.