
Opening Extract from...

Revenger

Written by Rory Clements

Published by John Murray

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RORY CLEMENTS

JOHN MURRAY

First published in Great Britain in 2010 by John Murray (Publishers)
An Hachette UK Company

First published in paperback in 2011

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-84854-085-9

Typeset in Adobe Garamond by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

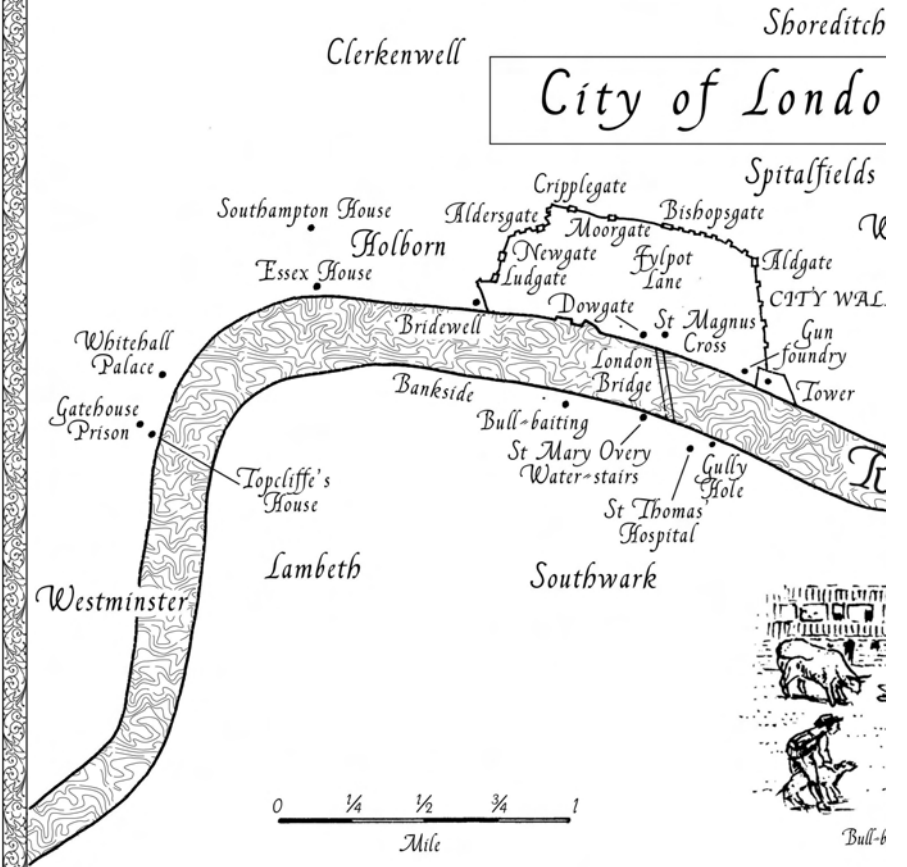
John Murray policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

John Murray (Publishers)
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.johnmurray.co.uk

Elizabethan England

Elizabeth



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Chapter 1

In the heat of the evening, just as daylight began to drift into dusk, Joe Jaggard took Amy Le Neve's hand in his and pulled her willingly away from her wedding feast.

Amy was slight, little more than five foot and less than a hundredweight. Her fair hair shone in the last of the light and her skin was as clear and soft as a milkmaid's. She was sixteen, yet her hand in Joe's great right hand was like a child's. He was eighteen years, six foot or more, lean and muscular and golden. In his left hand he clasped a wine flagon.

They ran on, breathless, until her bare foot struck a sharp flint and she faltered, crying out in shock and pain. Joe stopped and laid her down in the long grass. He kissed her foot and sucked the blood that trickled from the sole.

Tears flowed down her cheeks. Joe cupped her head in his hands, his fingers tangling in her tear-drenched hair, and kissed her face all over. He held her to him, engulfing her.

She pulled open his chemise of fine cambric, he pushed her wedding smock away from her calves, up over her flawless thighs, crumpling the thin summer worsted. It was lovemaking, but it was warfare too; the last delirious stabbings in a battle they knew to be lost.

Joe took a draught from the flagon. 'You know what, doll,' he said, and his voice became high-pitched, 'I do believe you are an

abomination. Get you behind me, daughter of Satan, for you are profane and impure and as frail as the rib of Adam. Verily, I say you are fallen into corruption.'

She jabbed him sharply in the ribs with her elbow. 'I'll abominate you,' she said, laughing with him. She sobered. 'The funny thing is, though, he *really* talks like that.'

'Winterberry? Winter-turd is what I call him. He's a dirty, breech-shitting lecher of a man, I do reckon. Puritans they call them. He's as pure as swine-slurry, steeped in venery and lewdness. He's got a face like a dog that's never been out the kennel and a suit of clothes so black and stark they'd scare the Antichrist back into hell. He's buying you, paying for you as he might bargain for a whore at a Southwark stew.'

They were silent a few moments. In the distance, they could just hear the occasional whisper of music caught on the warm breeze.

'We'll go,' said Joe. 'We'll go to London. I've got gold.'

'I can't leave my family. They'll get the law on us. You'll be locked away and whipped. Strung up at Tyburn. I don't know what.'

He turned to her, angry now. 'Would you rather go to *his* bed? Would you have *him* play with you?'

'You know I don't want that! They forced me to marry him.'

He turned his gaze from her. 'I'll kill them all, Amy. I'll do for them – your kin, the lot. I'll scrape the figs from Winter-turd's arse and push them down his throat.'

She kissed him. 'It's hopeless. I'll have to go back there tonight. I'm a married woman now.'

His eyes were closed. Then he opened them and smiled at her. 'No, doll,' he said. 'There's stuff we can do. *I* can do. I promise you I can make it so we can be together forever. Trust me. Now kiss me again.'

They kissed, long and lingering. It was the last thing they ever did. They had not heard the creeping footfalls in the grass.

The first blow killed Joe. He knew nothing of it. Amy had no more than two seconds to register the horror, before the second blow came.

Chapter 2

JOHN SHAKESPEARE FOUND his wife, Catherine, in the oak-panelled school hall, teaching their four-year-old daughter Mary her alphabet from a hornbook. Catherine met his eye but she did not smile. She tossed back her long dark hair as if ridding herself of a fly. Shakespeare sensed her anger and did his best to ignore it. He knew what she wanted to discuss, so he deliberately avoided the subject and said, 'Rumsey Blade is set on flogging Pimlock yet again.'

'Yes,' she said curtly. 'I know. Six stripes. Blade has it in for the boy.'

'Pimlock takes it with fortitude.'

'Well, I don't, John. How can boys study when they face such punishments?'

There was nothing more to be said on the subject. It was merely another worry for Shakespeare to deal with as High Master of the Margaret Woode School for the Poor Boys of London. Like it or not, they were stuck with Rumsey Blade and his beloved birchrods; he had been inflicted on them by the fiercely Protestant Bishop Aylmer to ensure no Roman Catholic teachings burrowed their way into the curriculum. Catherine's Papist leanings were well known and disliked.

'But there *was* the other matter . . .' Catherine continued.

Shakespeare's neck muscles tensed. 'Must we talk about such things in front of the child?'

Catherine patted her daughter. 'Kiss your father and go to Jane,' she said briskly. Mary, delicate and comely like her mother, ran to Shakespeare and stood to receive and give a kiss, then ran off to find the maid, Jane Cooper, in the nursery.

'Now you have no excuse to avoid the subject.'

'We have nothing to discuss,' Shakespeare said, painfully aware of how brittle he must sound. 'My position is plain. You must not go to the mass.'

Catherine stood up and faced her husband. Her blue eyes were cold and unloving. 'I have surrendered to you on every aspect of our lives together,' she said quietly. 'Our daughter is brought up conforming to the Anglican church, we run a conformist school and I entertain no priests under our roof. I even attend the parish church so that I incur no fines for recusancy. Do you not think I have played my part, John?'

'I know it, Catherine, but . . .'

'Then why forbid me this one boon?'

John Shakespeare did not like to cross his wife. Usually it was pointless to do so, anyway, for she had a stubborn way. Yet this request was one he would fight to the bitter conclusion. He could not have her putting herself and the family in jeopardy.

'You know why, Catherine,' he said, his face set.

'No, John, I do *not* know why. I need you to explain it to me again, for I am but a mere woman and of simple wit.'

It would be a secret Roman Catholic mass. Such events were fraught with danger; simply to know the whereabouts of a priest, let alone harbour one, could lead to torture and the scaffold. And this mass was yet more perilous, for it was to be said by the fugitive Jesuit Father Robert Southwell, a man Catherine Shakespeare knew as a friend. He had evaded capture for six

years and was regarded by Elizabeth and her Privy Council as an irritant thorn to be plucked from their flesh at all costs.

'Catherine,' he said, trying to soften his voice – the last thing he wanted was this rift between them to escalate into an unbridgeable gulf – 'I know you have made many compromises. But have I not done likewise? Did I not forsake my career with Walsingham to marry you?'

'So I must obey you?' Catherine said, almost spitting the words.

'I would rather you made your own – considered – decision. But, yes, I say you *must* obey me in this.' He had never spoken to her like this before.

She glared at him. When she spoke, her words were harsh. 'So, as Thomas Becon says in his *Christian State of Matrimony*, women and horses must be well-governed. Is that how you are guided?' She laughed with derision. 'Am I a *mare* to be so treated by you, Mr Shakespeare?'

'I have no more to say on the matter, Mistress Shakespeare. You will not go to a mass, especially not one said by the priest Southwell. He is denounced as a traitor. To consort with him would taint you and the rest of us with treason. Would you give Topcliffe the evidence he needs to destroy us and send our child in chains to the treadmill at Bridewell? Let that be an end to it.'

Shakespeare turned and strode away. He did not look back because he had no wish to meet her withering glare. He went to the courtyard and sat on a low wall, in the shade. He was shaking. This was bad, very bad. She was being utterly wrong-headed.

Behind him in the courtyard, he heard unequal footsteps and turned to see his old friend and assistant Boltfoot Cooper shuffling towards him, dragging his club foot awkwardly on the cobbled stones. It occurred to Shakespeare that Boltfoot

was becoming slower in his movements as he neared the age of forty. Perhaps this quiet life as a school gatekeeper did not suit an old mariner and veteran of Drake's circumnavigation.

'Boltfoot?'

'You have a visitor, Mr Shakespeare. A Mr Charles McGunn would speak with you. He has a serving-man with him.'

'Do we know Mr McGunn? Is he the father of a prospective pupil?'

Boltfoot shook his head. 'He says he is sent by the Earl of Essex to treat with you.'

Shakespeare's furrowed brow betrayed his surprise. He laughed lightly. 'Well, I suppose I had better see him.'

'I shall show him through.'

'Not here, Boltfoot. I will go to the library. Show this McGunn and his servant to the anteroom and offer them refreshment, then bring them to me in five minutes.'

As Shakespeare climbed the oaken staircase to the high-windowed library, with its shelves of books collected by the founder of this school, Thomas Woode, and, latterly, by himself, he considered Essex. He was famed throughout the land as Queen Elizabeth's most favoured courtier, a gallant blessed with high birth, dashing looks, courage in battle, sporting prowess and the charm to enchant a princess. It was said he had even supplanted Sir Walter Ralegh in the Queen's affections. What interest could the Earl of Essex have in an obscure schoolmaster like Shakespeare, a man so far from the centre of public life that he doubted anyone at court even knew his name?

McGunn was a surprise. Shakespeare had half expected a livery-clad bluecoat to appear; but McGunn looked like no flunkey Shakespeare had ever seen. He was of middle height, thick-set, with the fearless, belligerent aspect of a bull terrier. He had big, knotted hands. His face and head were bare and bald, save for two greying eyebrows beneath a gnarled

and pulpy forehead. A heavy gold hoop was pierced into the lobe of his left ear. He smiled with good humour and held out a firm, meaty hand to John Shakespeare.

'Mr Shakespeare, it is a pleasure to meet you,' he said.

'Mr McGunn?'

'Indeed.'

Shakespeare guessed his accent to be Irish, but from which part or class of that dark, forbidding island he had no way of knowing. His attire struck him as incongruous; a wide, starched ruff circled his thick neck, a doublet finely braided with thread of gold girded his trunk and he wore hose of good-quality blue serge and netherstocks the colour of corn. It seemed to Shakespeare that he had a working man's face and body in a gentleman's clothing.

His serving-man at his side was introduced merely as Slyguff. He looked no more the bluecoat of a great house than did McGunn, though he was less richly dressed, in the buff jerkin of a smithy or a carter. Slyguff was smaller and thinner than his master. He was wiry like the taut cable of a ship's anchor, with a narrow face and a sharp, gristly nose. Though smaller, he looked every bit as formidable as McGunn. One of Slyguff's eyes, the left one, was dead and the other betrayed no emotion at all.

'I hope that Mr Cooper has offered you some ale. It is another hot day.'

'Indeed, it is and indeed, he has, Mr Shakespeare,' McGunn said, smiling warmly. 'For which we are both grateful. To tell you true I could have drunk the Irish Sea dry this day.'

'How may I help you, Mr McGunn?'

'Well, you could start by giving us yet more ale. No, no, I jest. We are here because we are sent by my lord of Essex to escort you to him at Essex House. He wishes to speak with you.'

'The Earl of Essex wishes to speak with *me*?'

'That is correct, Mr Shakespeare.'

'Why should he wish to speak to an unknown schoolmaster, Mr McGunn?'

'Perchance, he wants lessons in Latin, or a little learning in counting. Could you help him with that, now? Or maybe you could show him how to command his temper, for certain he is as moody as the weather.'

'Mr McGunn, I fear you jest again.'

'I do, I do. The truth is he wishes your advice on a particular matter of interest. But for certain you don't do yourself credit when you call yourself an *unknown schoolmaster.* Who has not heard of the brilliant exploits of John Shakespeare on behalf of Queen and country?'

'Mr McGunn, that is ancient history.'

'Not in the Earl's eyes, it's not. He is mighty impressed by the tale of your fierce courage in the face of an implacable foe. As am I, may I add. You have done admirable work, sir.'

Shakespeare accepted the compliment with good grace and bowed with a slight smile on his lips. 'And what sort of advice is the Earl of Essex seeking, Mr McGunn? He must know I am retired from my work as an intelligencer.'

'That is for him to say, Mr Shakespeare. I am merely his humble servant.'

McGunn did not look at all humble, thought Shakespeare. Were it not for the fine clothes, he and Slyguff were the kind of duo an honest subject of Her Majesty might well cross the road to avoid. Yet for all his brutish appearance, McGunn seemed a good-humoured fellow and Shakespeare had to admit that he was intrigued. Who would not wish to meet the renowned Essex? 'Well, then, let us make an appointment, and I will be there.'

'No, Mr Shakespeare, we are to accompany you to him *now*. My lord of Essex does not wait on appointments.'

'Well, I am afraid he will *have* to wait. I have a lesson to conduct within the hour.'

McGunn smiled and clapped Shakespeare on the shoulder with a hand the size of a kitchen wife's sieve. 'Come now, Mr Shakespeare, are you not High Master of this school? Delegate one of your lesser masters to take over your tutoring for the morning. The earl is a busy man and I know he will make it worth your while to take the time to meet him. Here.' McGunn took a gold coin from his purse and spun it in the air. He caught it and held it between thumb and forefinger in front of Shakespeare's eyes. 'That's for starters. Take it. There's plenty more where that came from.'

Shakespeare did not take the gold coin. He stared McGunn in the eye and saw only gently mocking humour. 'Very well,' he said. 'I will come with you. But give me a few minutes to arrange my lesson and let my wife know where I am going.'

As he spoke the words, he experienced a sense of dread; the battle with Catherine was far from done.

Chapter 3

Rumsey Blade, a small man with a pinched, unlovable face and thinning hair, was not happy about taking on Shakespeare's lesson. He was in the yard, swishing his birch cane in preparation for flogging Pimlock, who was awaiting his punishment, hose about his knees and bent forward over the low wall where Shakespeare had recently been sitting.

'I am called away on urgent business, Mr Blade. You will take my lesson.'

Blade frowned. 'Indeed, Mr Shakespeare?'

'Indeed, Mr Blade.'

'Well, I cannot allow you to make a habit of such things. It is a bad example to the boys when masters fail to keep to the roster.'

Shakespeare did not have time to argue. 'Mr Blade, you are forgetting who is the High Master here, to speak to me thus.' He looked at the boy. 'And I would suggest you go easy with Pimlock.'

'Would you so, Mr Shakespeare? And what use do you think a flogging would be if it did not draw blood?'

'It is of little or no use, whether blood be drawn or not.'

'At Winchester, Friday was always flogging day and a failure to stripe them with blood was considered not at all acceptable. Do you consider yourself superior to Winchester, sir?'

'Good day, Mr Blade.'

As Shakespeare turned away, Blade went rigid. His birch rod ceased swishing. 'And have you discussed this matter with the Bishop? He will not be happy with such a lax attitude to discipline and the good governance of boys.'

Shakespeare walked away.

McGunn and Slyguff were waiting for him in Dowgate, mounted on their horses. Boltfoot held the grey mare, saddled and ready. Out here, in the full blaze of the late morning sun, the heat of the day hit Shakespeare like the blaze of a Smithfield pyre. He swung up into the saddle, then pulled his cap down on his head to shield his brow and neck. McGunn had already removed his ruff and opened the front of his fine doublet in an attempt to cool off.

'Let's ride,' McGunn said.

Fragrant summer flowers and herbs – lavender, rosemary, bay and a hundred other species – grew in profusion in the city's many gardens, yet they did little to counter the overpowering stench of the dung-and-slop-strewn roads as Shakespeare and his companions trotted their horses slowly along Thames Street then up to the City Wall. Rats scurried brazenly, picking at the discarded bones from kitchens. Kites circled overhead or perched on walls, feeding at will from the bodies of slaughtered cats. 'Makes you long for the fresh air of the countryside, does it not, Mr Shakespeare,' McGunn said. 'They say the plague will come hard this year.'

Shakespeare nodded. He had already wondered whether they should close the school while summer lasted and head for Warwickshire to escape the pestilence. It would be good to visit his family. It might also be good for the health of his marriage.

At Ludgate a team of dog-catchers was rounding up strays to slit their throats, a sure sign that the City Aldermen were

worried about the possibility of the sickness blowing up into a general plague. It was a terrifying thought.

All along the way beggars and rag-clad doxies stretched out thin, bony hands and stumps, hoping in vain for coins from those driving the heavy midday traffic of farm wagons and timber carts. It was a dismal sight, a sign of what England was coming to as crops failed and the demands of the war chest ate into treasury funds. As they approached Essex House, Shakespeare saw a group of a dozen or so vagabonds surrounding the open gateway. McGunn stopped by them and handed out alms liberally, for which many of them thanked him by name and doffed their caps. 'They may be only beggars, but they are *our* beggars,' McGunn said by way of explanation to Shakespeare, and then roared with laughter and kicked on through the gates.

Essex House stood on a large plot of land between the Thames and The Strand. Its gardens swept down to the riverbank, where there was a high wall with a gated opening to some water-steps, a landing stage for boats and barges.

Shakespeare and his companions dismounted in the forecourt under the watchful eye of a troop of halberdiers, their axe-pike lances held stock still at their sides. The house was a hive of bees, so energetic were the comings and goings. An ostler quickly came forth and took their horses. 'This is the Essex hovel, Mr Shakespeare, how do you think it?' McGunn asked, standing back to admire the enormous stone-built house.

Shakespeare looked up at its towering frontage.

'Forty-two chambers, one hundred and sixty servants and retainers, but day-by-day you will find twice that number and more entering and leaving. Kitchens large enough to cook a feast fit for a monarch and a banqueting house great enough to entertain one. All built by his mother's late husband, the Earl of Leicester.' McGunn strode towards the steps to the main

doorway, his bull neck seeming to lead the way with the rest of him following. A halberdier stood either side of the doorway, shoulders back and unmoving. They clearly knew McGunn well for he was not required to ask leave to pass. 'Let us go in. You will be meeting my lord of Essex in the Picture Gallery.'

Essex stood in the middle of the high-ceilinged, intricately plastered gallery. To his right, casting him in a half-shade that accentuated his fine features, were four south-facing windows that stretched almost the full depth of the walls. The room was bathed in brilliant light by the high midday sun and the windows were opened at every available casement to allow in what breeze was to be had.

The earl looked magnificent. He stood tall in a rich costume of white silk and mother-of-pearl, his curled hair combed back from his wide forehead, his full-length red beard tumbling over his ruff. He had a slight upward tilt to his chin, his gaze fixed on a small volume that he held at arm's length in his left hand as if he were a man of letters, not war. Lest anyone forget his cannon reputation, however, his right hand nonchalantly cupped the hilt of his ceremonial sword.

All around him the room was hung with portraits: Essex in military armour with wheel-lock, sword and poniard; his beautiful mother, Lettice Knollys, in a baudekin gown of bejewelled glory; Essex's sisters, Dorothy and Penelope, reckoned by many to be the match of their mother in beauty . . . and in wildness of spirit; his father, the late Walter Devereux, first Earl of Essex, who died a mysterious death in Ireland, some said of poisoning; Lettice's new husband, Sir Christopher Blount, a handsome man with what John Shakespeare took to be an untrustworthy eye; and dominating them all, Essex's late stepfather, Leicester, the man who first won Queen Elizabeth's heart but betrayed her by marrying Lettice (and, some said, was guilty of poisoning her husband Walter in order to do so).

It occurred to Shakespeare that this was the most formidable family of the age, a clan to match the Tudors themselves in power and majesty. Leicester, in particular, seemed to survey the scene from his portrait with supreme contempt.

A few yards in front of Essex stood a painter at his easel, paint-loaded brush in hand. Essex's eyes rose languidly from his book and drifted to Shakespeare and McGunn. He nodded to the painter, who wiped his brush on a rag and put it down on a coffer beside him, where he had his pigments and oils and other tools of his craft, then stood to one side.

Essex closed his book and stepped forward, his posture slumping slightly as he did so, making him now appear to have the ungainly stoop so often associated with extremely tall men.

McGunn, whose man Slyguff had remained outside the door, ambled forward, grinning. 'My lord . . .'

Essex smiled back and clasped him like an old friend. 'You are well met, Mr McGunn.'

McGunn turned towards Shakespeare, then swept his arm to introduce the guest. 'And this is Mr Shakespeare, whom you asked me to find.'

Shakespeare bowed to him in deference. 'It is an honour to meet you, my lord.'

'Mr Shakespeare,' Essex said, his eyes lighting up. 'What a pleasure to meet you. And the honour, may I say, is mine. Let me shake you by the hand.'

The grip almost crushed Shakespeare's knuckles.

'So, Mr Shakespeare, this is the hand that brought down Philip of Spain's hired assassin and saved Drake. You are welcome in my home.'

Shakespeare bowed. 'You do me too much honour, my lord.'

'Come, sit with me. Take some wine. It has been cooled in ice.

Your face betrays your surprise, Mr Shakespeare. Have you not heard? We have an ice cave here; it is a conceit of antiquity that I heard of from a correspondent in Italy. In the cold of winter, you collect ice and store it in the depths of the cellar, protected with straw and horsehair. Then in summer, even in a *furnace* summer such as this, it remains in its solid state to cool your wines and salads. It is an excellent device for keeping the freshness of fish, I am told.' Essex snapped his fingers and a servant stepped forward to take his order. 'Now, Mr Shakespeare,' he said. 'You must wish to know why I have asked you to come here.'

Shakespeare inclined his head, but said nothing.

'And in due course I shall reveal all to you. But first let me ask about your circumstances. I believe you have a grammar school for poor boys?'

Shakespeare explained about the Margaret Woode school. Essex was clearly bored. At last he shook his head slowly. 'This is all very well, Mr Shakespeare,' he said. 'But do you not miss the excitement of your former life?'

Shakespeare sometimes wondered this himself, but he would not admit as much here. 'It was of its time, my lord, and I am glad to have served; but now my life has taken a different turn.'

'But your career as an intelligencer ended in an unfortunate manner. I believe you fell foul of the late, much lamented Mr Secretary over the question of your wife's Catholicism. That is certainly the tale bruited about.'

Shakespeare stiffened. 'It is all a long time ago, my lord.'

'Yes, Mr Shakespeare, I do understand that quite well. But, I say again: is schoolmastering enough?'

'It is, my lord.'

McGunn and the painter listened in silence. Essex turned to them now. 'What say you, Mr McGunn? And you, Mr Segar? Can a tiger so lose his stripes that he become a household cat?'

Both men laughed. 'Quite impossible,' McGunn said. 'What man could turn from the art of war, even a war of secrets, to the world of dusty books? Impossible, I say.' The painter signalled his agreement with a slight bow of the head.

The bluecoat arrived with four glasses of sweet and light canary wine. As Shakespeare sipped he noted that the drink was indeed cold, a refreshing and remarkable indulgence on such a hot day.

'Now then,' Essex said. 'To the matter in hand. The reason I have asked you here. Does the word *Roanoke* mean anything to you, Mr Shakespeare?'

Roanoke. Who had *not* heard of Roanoke? The mere word conjured up an image in Shakespeare's mind of a far-distant, exotic shore, of strange plants, venomous creatures and yet more dangerous men. Roanoke: the lost colony. One of the most mysterious tales of the age.

Shakespeare let a second draught of the cool drink slip down his throat. 'Roanoke. Why, yes, my lord. I have heard the tale, and a curious one it is.'

Essex gestured Shakespeare to come and sit with him on a wooden settle beside the window. 'Before we proceed, let me tell you the story as I know it. I am sure that much has been said about Roanoke in the taverns and ordinaries of London, and most of it probably embellished for the sort of gulls who buy the penny broadsheets. Few people know the plain facts, so I shall rehearse them for you. Roanoke is a small island off the Virginia coast of the New World, reckoned to be some five hundred sea miles north and east of the Spanish colony of St Augustine. Sheltered by sandbanks, it had been thought so well favoured that it would do well as the site for England's first colony in the New World. It seemed to offer natural protection from the Spanish, who would dearly love to see it done away with, and to offer a base for English privateers.'

'That is much as I had heard it, my lord.'

'Five years ago, the first permanent English colony was founded there: about one hundred and ten men, women and children – and two babies, I believe – left to fend for themselves, hopefully to prosper and grow. But even before the ships had set sail, leaving them there, it was clear things were not running smoothly. There were disagreements with the savages. And there were shortages of supplies. Because of this, the governor of the colony, John White, came back to England with the ships. His mission was to assemble supply vessels to return the following year, 1588. But, as the world knows, he was unable to do so.'

'Because of the Armada.'

'Quite so. It wasn't until three years after the colonists were left that an expedition was mounted to help those one hundred and ten souls. But when the ships arrived they found no trace of them or their belongings.'

Shakespeare ran his finger around the cool rim of the elegant wine glass and looked closely at Essex. How could this story possibly involve him? 'Was there not some clue as to their disappearance, my lord? Some mark on a tree indicating that they might have gone to live with the savages? Or is that a tavern tale?'

'No, you are correct about that, Mr Shakespeare. There were three letters carved on a tree – *CRO*. And on a fence there was carved the word *Croatoan*. That is the name of a tribe of savages living at that time on an island to the south of Roanoke. It is said they had been helpful to the colonists in the past, but that they were losing patience with the white man's demand for food. Would the colonists have gone there under such circumstances? Perhaps they were starving and did so, and perhaps they are all alive and well and living happy, productive lives in harmony with their hosts. That is certainly the most

comforting explanation. For my own part, I do not believe it. Had they made an orderly departure, they would have had time to leave a more comprehensive message for those who came to find them. So there we have it, Mr Shakespeare. There is, of course, much more to it than I have told you, but before we move on I wish to be sure you have a clear understanding.'

'I believe I do, my lord. But I confess that I am less certain how it affects me.'

'Which is what we are now coming to.' Essex rose from the elm-wood settle, took Shakespeare by the elbow and stood with him gazing out of the high window. Shakespeare was a tall man, six foot by anyone's reckoning, yet Essex overtopped him by a good three inches. For a few moments they looked out at the Thames together. It teemed with the traffic of barges and tilt-boats, blanched sails dazzling in the midday sun, oars clipping splashes from the surface that burst in iridescent plumes. On the opposite shore, among verdant pasture land, stood the palace of Lambeth, residence of the Archbishop of Canterbury. Not far off, they could hear the cries and sounds of the City. 'What would you think, Mr Shakespeare,' Essex said, 'if I told you that somewhere out there, walking the streets of London, is one of the lost colonists.'

Shakespeare was not sure he had heard the question aright. 'What are you asking me, my lord? Forgive me, but I fear I do not understand what you wish of me.'

Essex let out a loud snort of laughter and then turned back to McGunn and Segar. 'You see, it is madness. No one will believe this.' And then he said slowly, directly to Shakespeare, 'What I am saying is that we have evidence that one of the so-called lost colonists is alive and well and is now here in London, thousands of miles from Roanoke. Now, how do you explain that?'

Shakespeare had no idea what he was supposed to say. The question seemed moon-mad. 'Well, I really don't know. But if

he is here, then I imagine others are, too, and that they have been brought here. Somehow they must have sailed here.'

'It is not a *he*, Mr Shakespeare. It is a *she*. And we have her name. She is Eleanor Dare – and she is a woman of great interest on two counts. Firstly, she was born Eleanor White and is the daughter of John White, the colony's leader who came back to England to secure supply vessels. And secondly, she is the mother of the first-ever English baby born in the New World, a girl aptly christened Virginia. As to the suggestion that all the colonists have come back, I hardly think that is feasible. I cannot believe a hundred or more people have somehow slipped into England unnoticed. One, yes, perchance two, but a hundred, no.'

'Perhaps Eleanor Dare returned with her father five years ago when he came for the supply vessels.'

'Impossible. The other colonists would not have let her or her child leave. She was their hostage, if you like. She it was that made certain their governor – her father – would move heaven and earth to secure supply ships and return. No, if it is indeed Eleanor Dare who has been sighted here in London, then she has somehow found her way across the ocean alone. Mr Segar, please, *your* tale if you will . . .'

The artist rose from his bench. He was a man of middling height and breadth with a tight mouth and lips like a woman's, half hidden behind a wide moustache that closely resembled a cat's whiskers. He wore a long painter's smock from neck to heel to protect his valuable court attire from paint splashes. He took a deep breath. 'I have little to add to the story as told by my lord of Essex, save to say that the tale emanates from a maid in my own household, Agnes Hardy, who swears to me, hand on Bible, that she saw Eleanor Dare in London no more than a week since . . .'

'People can make mistakes,' Shakespeare suggested.

'Of course. And that is what we must find out,' Essex said. 'Now, Mr Segar, tell Mr Shakespeare where your housemaid saw this woman.'

'She was outside the theatre in Southwark, dressed as a strumpet touting for business. It was certainly in the area where the whores gather. Agnes told me she was so taken aback to see Eleanor, knowing her of old and knowing her to be lost in the New World, that for a moment she merely stood there open-mouthed in astonishment. By the time she had gathered her wits to approach her, the woman had joined arms with a man and they had gone, vanished into the theatre crowd. That was the last she saw of her.'

'What time of day was this?' Shakespeare asked.

'Mid-afternoon, I believe. You would do best to ask her such details yourself.'

It was the sort of question Shakespeare would have asked in his days as an intelligencer, to determine how much daylight there was and how clearly this Agnes Hardy might have seen this woman she took to be Eleanor Dare. But what had any of this to do with him now? McGunn read his thoughts.

'So, Mr Shakespeare, why have we brought you here? That's what you want to know.'

'Well, of course any man would be curious about this strange tale – but it really has nothing to do with me.'

Essex clapped his hands. 'But you are *just* the man for the job, Mr Shakespeare. The perfect intelligencer, a man used to digging in the most putrid of middens to find bright red rubies of betrayal. Everything I know of you suggests to me that you are the man to find this woman.'

Shakespeare set his face very determinedly. 'Oh, no . . .'

'Oh, yes, Mr Shakespeare. A thousand times yes. And you will be paid well for your troubles. I am sure that a handsome sum of gold would help your school, would it not?'

Indeed, who did not need gold in these straitened times? 'But *why*, my lord of Essex, are you so concerned about the supposed sighting of this woman, especially when she is most unlikely to be the person identified?'

Essex looked at Shakespeare as if he had lost his wit. He sighed with great exaggeration and turned to McGunn. 'You talk to him, Mr McGunn. Answer all Mr Shakespeare's questions. Knock sense into him. I have other matters to attend to. Come, Mr Segar.'

Without another word he strode with proud yet ungainly gait towards the entrance door, Segar following in his wake. And then they were gone.