
Opening Extract from...

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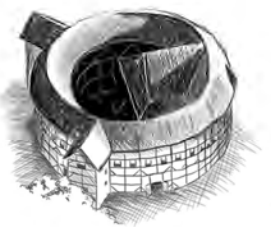

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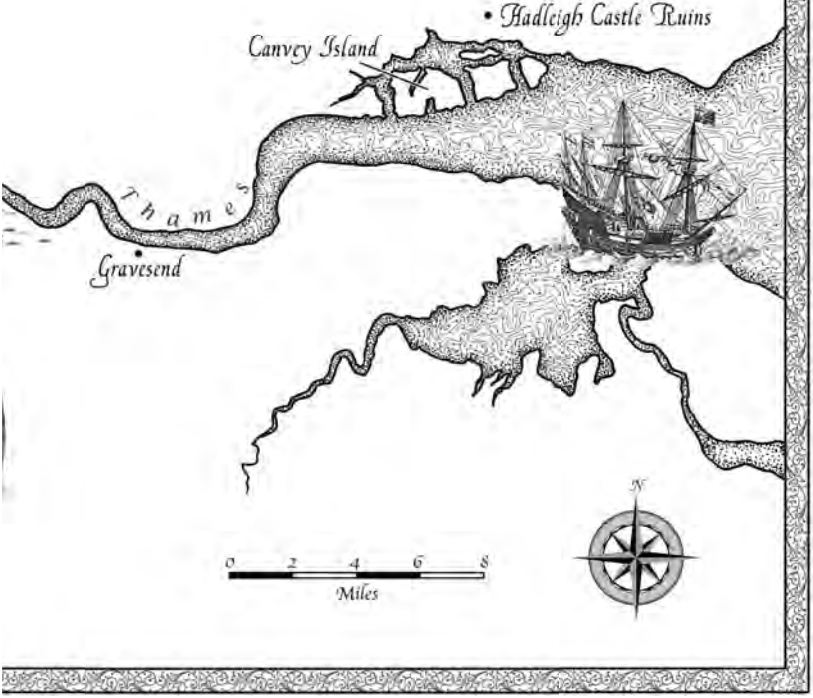
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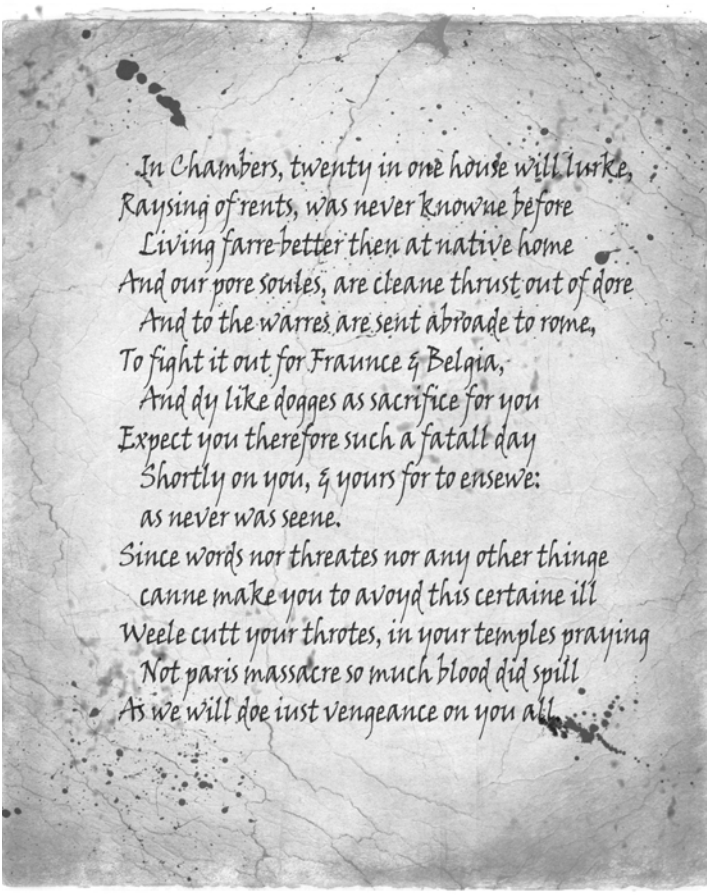
In Chambers, twenty in one house will lurke,
Raysing of rents, was never knowne before
Living farre better then at native home
And our pore soules, are cleane thrust out of dore
And to the warres are sent abroade to rome,
To fight it out for Fraunce & Belgia,
And dy like dogges as sacrifice for you
Expect you therefore such a fatall day
Shortly on you, & yours for to ensewe:
as never was seene.
Since words nor threates nor any other thinge
canne make you to avoyd this certaine ill
Weele cutt your throtes, in your temples praying
Not paris massacre so much blood did spill
As we will doe iust vengeance on you all.

Chapter 1

Four men stared down at the body of Christopher Marlowe. A last trickle of bright gore oozed from the deep wound over his right eye. His face and hair and upper torso were all thick with blood. One of the four men, Ingram Frizer, held the dripping dagger in his hand.

Frizer looked across at Robert Poley and grinned foolishly. 'He came at me.'

'Boar's balls, Mr Frizer, give me the dagger,' Poley said angrily.

Frizer held out the dagger. All the living eyes in the room followed the tentative movement of the blood-red blade. A sliver of brain hung like a grey-pink rat's tail from its tip. Poley took the weapon and wiped it on the dead poet's white hose. Suddenly, he struck out with the hilt and caught Frizer a hard blow on the side of his head. Frizer lurched backwards. Poley pushed him to the floor and jumped on him, knees on chest, hitting his head again, harder, pounding him until Nick Skeres tried to pull him away.

Poley stood back, shook off Skeres's hands and brushed down his doublet with sharp irritation. He was not a tall man, but he was strongly built and the veins in his muscled forearms and temples bulged out and pulsed. He kicked Frizer in the ribs. 'You were only supposed to gag him and

apply the fingerscrew, you dung-witted dawcock. Not kill him.'

The afternoon sunlight of late May slanted in through the single, west-facing window. The presence of the men and the body made the room feel smaller than it really was. It was cleanly furnished; a well-turned settle made of fine-grained elm, a day bed where the body now lay, a table of polished walnut with benches either side and half-drunk jugs of ale atop it. The dusty floorboards were scuffed by the men's shoes; there was, too, a lot of blood and a few splashes of ale on the wood between the table and the day bed.

'And you . . .' Poley turned to Skeres. 'You were supposed to hold him. He was out of his mind with drink and you couldn't keep a grip.'

Ingram Frizer pulled himself painfully to his feet. He was doubled over, clutching his side where Poley's boot had connected.

Poley handed him the dagger. 'Here, take it. And listen well: it was *his* dagger – Marlowe's dagger. He came at you, pummelled your head with it. You fought back. In the struggle, the blade pierced his eye. You were defending yourself – it was an accident.'

Frizer took the dagger. He was slender with a lopsided face, the left eye half an inch higher than the right. The skin had been cut from the side of his head by Poley's beating. There was a livid gash, almost to the bone. His head and ribs throbbed, but he understood Poley's plan well enough. 'I liked this dagger,' he said, turning the weapon over in his hands and examining the ornate hilt and narrow, sharp-pointed blade. 'Cost me half a mark.' He tried to laugh.

'Well, it'll be Crown property now. Marlowe was always fighting. He was going to kill you. It's a simple story; remember it.' Poley turned to the third man, Skeres. 'And you, Mr Skeres.'

Skeres nodded. His bulbous face was sweating heavily. He mopped a kerchief across his brow. His gaze kept flicking towards the body, and then across to the fourth man, who stood close by the door. So far he had said nothing.

'No, let's change that,' Poley said, shaking his head slowly. 'Someone might recall that dagger. Say it was yours, Mr Frizer, but Marlowe snatched it off you, then you wrenched it away from him as he battered you. You struck backwards wildly, didn't know what you had done. Got that? And the knife didn't cost you half a mark, it cost you a shilling. The rest of the story holds.' Poley suddenly slammed his fist down on the table. 'Where's the screw?'

Ingram Frizer pointed to the floor beneath the window, to where a five-inch by four-inch vice of iron lay. It was designed to crush the fingers of a hand, slowly and painfully.

'Do I have to think for both of you? Pick it up!'

Frizer scurried across the room and brought the device back to Poley, who thrust it inside his doublet.

At last the fourth man spoke. He was heavy-set with a wispy beard. 'I'm going now. Wait two hours, drink some ale, then call the constable and the coroner. None of this comes back to me or my master. I was never here.'

'No,' Poley agreed. He understood well enough. There must only ever have been four men in this room, not five.

The man took one last look around the room and met the eyes of Poley, Skeres and Frizer. 'Not one word.' He lifted the latch and silently left the room.

The other three watched him go. A seagull landed on the sill of the open window, defecated, then flew off. 'There's a problem,' Skeres said, shaking the sweat out of his eyes.

'The only problem,' Poley said, 'is *you*. You're a flaccid prick of a man, Skeres.'

'We've got to say what they were fighting about, haven't we?'

'It was the bill, of course. The reckoning. Frizer said Marlowe had drunk more so should pay more. Mr Marlowe wanted to quarter the bill evenly.'

'The coroner will never believe it.'

Poley laughed. 'Pour the ale, Mr Skeres, then light me a pipe. How has a coney like you ever lived this long? Hear that, Mr Frizer? Mr Skeres says the coroner will never believe it.' Poley laughed again, louder this time, and Frizer and Skeres laughed nervously with him.

Chapter 2

John Shakespeare spoke briefly to the constable standing guard, before entering the room. He was a tall man, about six foot, and had to stoop to get through the door. He glanced around, taking in the furnishings, the window, the body. It was a fair-kept room. He stepped closer to the bloody remains of Christopher Marlowe and stared intently into his eyes. One was open and opaque, the other a black-brown scab of dried gore and brain. He remembered those clever eyes as they had been in the old days when he had performed certain secret tasks for Mr Secretary Walsingham. Marlowe had been clever and dangerous. Well, he'd met someone more dangerous.

The other three men in the room stood quietly by the table. Shakespeare caught Poley's gaze. They knew each other well. There had been times when they worked together, back in the mid eighties. It had never been a comfortable experience for Shakespeare. Now he lifted his chin in acknowledgement, if not exactly in greeting.

'Who did this, Poley? Who killed him?'

'Mr Frizer here. Ingram Frizer. It was self-defence. You know what Kit Marlowe was like.'

Indeed he did. Marlowe had been a fighter, a drinker, a poet, a character in the drama of his own life. He was Tamburlaine, Dr Faustus and any other number of Bedlam loons and

Shoreditch roarers, all rolled into one. He had been trouble; uncontrollable. Yes, self-defence seemed likely enough, knowing what Marlowe was like, with or without strong ale in his belly. The nagging doubt was the presence of Rob Poley. Very little was accidental when he was in the vicinity. Shakespeare turned to the others. 'Which one of you is Frizer?'

Frizer took two steps forward. He held the cleaned dagger in front of him, laid across both palms. Shakespeare did not take it from him; instead he gestured with his head to the table. 'Put it down over there.'

From outside, the bellman called nine of the clock. The room was still light. 'When did this happen?' Shakespeare demanded.

'Six,' Poley said. 'He was cup-shotten from a surfeit of ale. Wouldn't pay his portion of the bill. Attacked Mr Frizer here – and Mr Frizer defended himself.'

Shakespeare nodded. It sounded reasonable enough. But he didn't believe a word of it. 'What were you doing here?' He addressed the question to Ingram Frizer.

'Playing at cards,' Poley said. 'Smoking sotweed and drinking good ale.' He nodded towards the now empty ale jugs. 'Eating, too. Ellie Bull roasts a fine head of young pig and most excellent sweetmeats.'

'Do you speak for all, Mr Poley? The question was for Mr Frizer.'

'We were all here – I was just answering your question.'

'Well, don't, unless a question is asked of you.' He turned once more to Frizer. 'So where, pray, are the playing cards?'

Frizer looked blankly at Shakespeare, then nervously towards Poley. 'I – they—'

'I have them here,' Poley said, fetching a pack from his doublet. 'If I am permitted to speak, that is.'

'Put them over there, by the dagger.'

Poley ambled over to the table and fanned the cards out with a final, crisp flick for the last one. He smiled at Shakespeare. 'Might I know your interest in this sorry affair, Mr Shakespeare? It is naught but an everyday manslaughter and we were told to wait for coroner Danby. We have all stayed here in the proper way of things; none has attempted flight. What possible interest can this occurrence, tragical though it be, have for such an eminent a servant of the Crown as Mr John Shakespeare, senior secretary to Sir Robert Cecil?'

Shakespeare ignored the question. He was here because this was most decidedly his business. He had been investigating Marlowe on the orders of Cecil and a special Privy Council commission of inquiry. Marlowe had been suspected of involvement in an unsavoury episode – a vicious written attack on the many foreigners now living in London. A placard posted outside the Dutch church in Broad Street insulted England's Protestant friends from the Low Countries and France who had sought refuge here. Marlowe's style seemed to be writ all over the poster: fifty-three lines of seditious doggerel – and not just insults and threats to slit the incomers' throats, but strong criticism of the Queen and her government for allowing them to come here.

And why, specifically, was Marlowe a suspect? Because the placard was signed *Tamburlaine* – the heathen warrior king of his most celebrated play.

Yes, thought Shakespeare, this death was most certainly of interest.

'You,' he said brusquely, turning to Skeres. 'Who else was here?'

Unlike Frizer, Skeres had enough presence of mind not to glance towards Poley for guidance. But he was sweating heavily, even though the warmth of the day was long since turned to evening chill. 'Us three and Marlowe. That's all.'

'What is your name?'

'Skeres. Nick Skeres.'

'Who is your master?'

'I am my own man. I have property. My family is in the cloth trade – drapers, tailors.'

Shakespeare had heard the name Skeres before. Like Poley, he had worked for Walsingham occasionally. His presence in this room stank of rancid fat.

'Sweat pours from you like a heavy rainfall, Mr Skeres. Are you afraid of something?'

'A man has died here. What Christian would not be shaken, sir?'

'Indeed.'

'Would you like me to tell you exactly what happened, Mr Shakespeare?' Poley asked, his face a guileless mask.

'Save it for the coroner, Mr Poley. I am sure you have it well rehearsed . . .'

The door creaked open. All eyes turned to see the slim figure of Joshua Peace entering the room. Shakespeare smiled in greeting and stepped forward to clasp his hand. 'Thank you for coming, Joshua. It is good to see you.'

'What's *he* doing here?' Poley burst out.

'Mr Peace? He is here to examine the body and the scene of the crime – if there was a crime, of course. We must not prejudge these matters, Mr Poley.' Shakespeare studied Poley's face, but the man had recovered himself.

Peace strode towards the corpse, barely acknowledging the three witnesses. For a few moments he stood and stared at the dead face. 'Marlowe, eh? A fair playmaker in his day. Smells like a taproom in here.' Peace, the Searcher of the Dead, was a man in his mid to late thirties. His eyes shone with wit and humour, yet you would pass him in the street and not note him. He was almost bald save for a thin circle

of brown hair that always reminded Shakespeare of a monk's tonsure.

The Searcher rolled back his sleeve, then slid his right hand and forearm inside Marlowe's bloody doublet. He held it there against the dead man's still chest, the tips of his fingers in the armpit, for a full minute. At last he withdrew his hand. 'How long do you think he's been dead, John?'

'This crew of villains say he died at six – so that's three hours.'

Peace shook his head. 'No, five at least. Perhaps even six hours gone. He died between three and four of the clock.'

'Well, Mr Skeres, what do you say to that?'

'It's all lies—' Poley broke in.

Shakespeare thrust the palm of his hand into Poley's face, smacking his head against the wall to stop his mouth. 'Learn some manners, Mr Poley. Speak when you are spoken to.' He held Poley there, pinioned. 'Now, Mr Skeres, if you please.'

'Six of the clock. He died at six hours.'

Peace picked up the dagger and examined it. He held its tip to the wound over the eye, then slipped it slowly through the gore, four inches into the depths of Marlowe's head without resistance. 'Well, this is most certainly the weapon that inflicted the wound. A common enough assassin's strike, I would say.'

'It was an accident!' Poley shouted, wrenching his mouth from Shakespeare's grasp. 'It was a brabble. God's wounds, look at Mr Frizer's head. Look what Marlowe did to him first.'

Shakespeare pushed Poley's head back against the wall. 'Speak again unbidden and I will relieve you of your teeth, Mr Poley,' he said, then released his grip. Poley wiped his sleeve across his mouth.

For the next ten minutes the Searcher examined the body in silence, looking for other wounds or evidence of poisoning. He

opened Marlowe's mouth and peered inside, then spent some time over his right hand, which was clearly injured. After his examination of the corpse he turned his attention to the living men. He made Frizer stand still while he looked at the wounds on his head. He took notes on the spread of blood across the body of the corpse and the killer. He also examined the garments and heads of the other two men for signs of injury or blood drops. At last he stood back from his work and gazed at Shakespeare.

'Well, Joshua?'

'I have no doubt that the stab to the eye killed him, though from the stench of him you might surmise he had drowned in ale. The blade penetrated the brain and brought forth a great rush of blood. There is no evidence of any other lethal injury, nor poison. The blood on that man –' he nodded towards Frizer – 'makes it quite clear that he wielded the knife.'

'Could it have been self-defence?'

'Yes.'

'And could the injuries inflicted on the knifeman, Frizer, have been caused by an attack by Marlowe?'

'Again, yes. Or by anyone else who happened to be in the room. I would add, John, that Marlowe's finger is interesting. The middle one of the right hand has been injured in some way. The knuckle was torn at about the time of death.'

'From landing a punch, Joshua?'

Peace hesitated. 'Most likely, yes. Although . . .'

'Although what?'

'No, nothing. It's pointless to surmise.'

'But I would be glad if you would anyway.'

'Well, the injury is really quite severe. The bone is visible. One might think the knuckle and the forejoint of the finger had been scraped by a rough edge of iron. More than that I cannot say.'

Shakespeare stepped forward and examined Marlowe's fingers himself, then turned back. He held up the limp hand. 'Well, Mr Poley – how do you explain this injury?'

'Take a look at Mr Frizer's head. That's how Marlowe hurt himself.'

Shakespeare turned away and clapped Peace about the shoulder. 'I want you here at the inquest, Joshua.'

He shook his head. 'No. I'll write you a report. That'll be enough for Danby. It's straightforward.'

'Put in the time of death as you estimate it.'

'Oh yes, I'll do that. But Danby will pay it no heed.'

The witnesses did not leave the premises for a day and two nights. An obliging Mrs Bull, owner of the house, bustled about bringing them food and ale, and provided a bed for them in another room. Two of the men slept on the outer sides of the bed, heads against the wall, while the third, Skeres, slept in between them, his booted feet against their ears, his farting, snoring bulk hogging much of the mattress.

The body of Marlowe was as cold as earth by the time the sixteen-man jury of local Deptford yeomen was assembled in the room where he had died. The jurors stood along one wall, heads bowed and fearful, clutching their caps and looking anywhere but at the body. Then the coroner appeared, a dark and formal cape about his shoulders and a fur hat under his arm. He sat at the table and called the room to order for the Lord's Prayer. At the coroner's side, Richard Topcliffe, the Queen's servant, took a seat, his white hair and dread face caught in the morning light from the little window.

John Shakespeare stood close to the doorway. He glared at Topcliffe, who smirked back. What was Topcliffe doing here, close-coupled with the coroner? This inquest could be none of his concern.

The proceedings were as Shakespeare expected; there was no one to gainsay the testimony of Poley, Skeres and Frizer, who all knew their lines well. William Danby, coroner to the royal court, then attending on the Queen less than a mile away in Greenwich, listened impassively. His manner was grave. He read Joshua Peace's report, which had been placed on the table in front of him, then set it aside without commenting on it to the jury.

For a moment, Shakespeare considered interrupting the inquest to point out the discrepancy over the time of the killing. But it would have been a waste of breath. Danby would merely have instructed the jurors to discount the testimony of Mr Peace, as he himself had done, and might well have thrown Shakespeare out of the hearing. And anyway, the hour of death, in itself, proved nothing. It was the *manner* of the killing that counted for all in this room.

The verdict was a foregone conclusion: self-defence. The jurors – each of whom had been required to step forward in turn to view the body and the fatal wound at close quarters – had done the job required of them. Ingram Frizer was to be taken to the Marshalsea prison to see whether he should be charged or no. That was the prerogative of the Queen and her ministers.

It was not the verdict which caused Shakespeare most consternation, it was the presence of the man who had sat at the coroner's side: Richard Topcliffe – killer, torturer, rapist, blood-lusting dog with the ear of the Queen.

The loathing between Shakespeare and Topcliffe ran deep. Their paths had crossed too many times over the years. Shakespeare had married a Catholic and Topcliffe wanted his blood. He wanted the blood of every Catholic in England. And who was to stop him when he had Elizabeth's licence to act as priest hunter and persecutor? No man could oppose

him, not even the Privy Council, because he was answerable only to her.

As the jury shuffled out, Shakespeare approached the table. Danby was collecting up his papers.

'You know, of course, Mr Danby, that they were all lying.'

The coroner looked up, eyes wide, as if he had not seen Shakespeare before. 'Mr Shakespeare?'

'Frizer, Poley, Skeres. They concocted that story. And the time of the killing. You had Mr Peace's note in front of you, yet you paid it no heed.'

Danby bridled, though his indignation would not have alarmed a mole. Indeed, he was much like a burrowing creature with his dark cape, nervous eyes and twitching whiskers. 'You presume much to speak to a royal officer so, Mr Shakespeare. In truth I would go further, sir; you presume a great deal to call in the Searcher of the Dead without my authority.'

'If I had waited on your pleasure, Mr Danby, it might have been too late. The body would have been as cold as winter. Mr Peace might not have been able to determine the time of death with such accuracy.'

'It is for me to say how accurate Mr Peace's conclusions are. And I say that he is a diabolical dabbler. He plays with dead bodies in a most unchristian way. I will have none of Mr Peace.' Danby swept past Shakespeare, then paused at the door. 'And mark me well: I will have words with my lord Burghley regarding your part in this.' With a final, puffed-up flourish, he departed.

Topcliffe bared his yellow teeth and chuckled. He prodded Shakespeare's chest with his silver-tipped blackthorn stick. 'That's told you, Shakespeare.'

Shakespeare brushed the stick aside with a sweep of his arm and glared into Topcliffe's gloating face. 'God blind you,' he said. 'You are a malign presence.' This whole business was

putting Shakespeare in an ill humour. He had not liked it from the start, when Cecil had ordered him to inquire into Marlowe's dealings. Anyone could have written those placards. And if it *had* been Marlowe, why would he have signed it *Tamburlaine*? Only a fool would draw attention to himself in such a way – and Marlowe, however hot-blooded and wild, had never been a fool.

'Now, now, Mr Shakespeare,' Topcliffe said, putting up his stick as if it were a rapier. 'Hear me out.'

'I want to hear nothing from you, Topcliffe. Have you not women or children to torment somewhere?'

'Wait, Shakespeare. I know we do not see eye to eye on much, but I have to tell you that I am with you on this. Marlowe was a dunghill of iniquity, but he had his fair parts. The verdict was wrong, I am certain. He was murdered.'

'Then why did you say nothing?'

'I had no evidence, Mr Shakespeare. Why did *you* say nothing?'

Shakespeare ignored the question. 'And what was Marlowe to you, anyway? Why are you here?'

Topcliffe took a smouldering pipe from the pocket of his fine doublet and thrust it in his mouth. He sucked hard and blew out two thin streams of smoke from his nostrils. 'Marlowe? I would happily have drawn out his entrails and hacked off his pizzle like a Papist girl-boy for his godless ways and playmaking. And yet –' Topcliffe's menacing growl almost softened for a moment. 'And yet I will admit, in other things his heart was right. His denunciation of the foreign incomers was something that should gladden all English hearts, for who can stomach these strangers overrunning our land, taking bread from stout English tables? Five years ago, Drake sank the strangers who tried to invade our shores. Now the Council welcomes so many ragtag beggars from France and the Low Countries that you

scarce hear an English voice in London. Marlowe was right and I am with him. I would push every last one of them back into the narrow seas and cheer their drowning.'

The pall-bearers entered the room and lifted the body of Christopher Marlowe from the day bed to carry him away for burial.

Shakespeare turned away. Topcliffe understood nothing. This was not about Marlowe's views, this was about murder. The trouble was that in these days of famine and rising prices, when many men could not find a day's work, there were plenty who thought like Topcliffe, plenty who would do evil to the incomers and their wives and children, Catholic or Protestant. Their only crime? Not being English.