

A SPECTACLE OF CORRUPTION

A Novel

David Liss



R A N D O M H O U S E

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of
CORRUPTION

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RANDOM HOUSE
NEW YORK

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HISTORICAL NOTE

In the course of writing this novel, I've taken considerable pains to try to convey clearly the relevant terms and concerns of early eighteenth-century British politics, but I've provided the following information for readers who may want a quick review or some historical context.

Time Line of Significant Events Leading Up to the 1722 General Election

- 1642–49** England's civil wars are fought between the Royalists in support of Charles I and the Parliamentarians, who rebelled against the king's Catholic leanings and sought to install a government based on radical Protestant ideals.
- 1649** King Charles I is executed.
- 1649–60** During the Interregnum, Oliver Cromwell and later his son, Richard, lead the nation, along with Parliament.
- 1660** The Restoration of the Monarchy, the army supports the return of Charles's son, Charles II. The new king is a declared Protestant but is suspected of having Catholic leanings.
- 1685** Upon Charles II's death, his openly Catholic brother, James II, becomes king. James has two Protestant daughters from a previous marriage but is now married to Mary of Modena, a Catholic.
- 1688** Mary of Modena gives birth to a son, also named James. Parliament, fearing the beginnings of a new Catholic dynasty, invites William of Orange, husband of Mary, the king's eldest daughter, to take the crown jointly with his wife. James II flees, and Parliament declares that he has abdicated.
- 1702** Anne, James II's younger daughter, becomes queen.
- 1714** In accordance with Parliament's Act of Settlement, on the death of Anne the crown passes to the Elector of Hanover, Anne's distant German cousin, who becomes George I.
- 1715** The first significant Jacobite uprising, headed by James Stuart, son of James II and now known as the Pretender.
- 1720** The South Sea Bubble collapses, causing the first stock market crash in England. As a result of

corporate greed and Parliamentary complicity, the country falls into a deep economic depression. Jacobite sympathy grows.

1722 The first general election since George became king takes place and is widely viewed as a referendum on his kingship.

Key Political Terms

Tories The Tories were one of the two key political parties. They were associated with old money, the landed wealth, a strong Church, and a strong monarchy. They vigorously opposed changes to the law that would aid non-Church of England Protestants, and especially Catholics and Jews. Following the accession of George I, the Tories were effectively barred from power.

Whigs The second important political party, the Whigs, were associated with new landless wealth, the stock market, nonconformist Protestantism, divesting power from the Church, and Parliamentary power over royal power.

Jacobites Those who believed that the crown should be restored to the deposed James II—and, later, his heirs—were called Jacobites (from *Jacobus*, Latin for James). Jacobites often masqueraded as Tories, and Tories were often suspected of having Jacobite sympathies. Scotland and Ireland were strong centers of Jacobite support.

Pretenders The deposed James II—and, later, his heirs—were known as Pretenders. The Pretender in this novel is James Stuart, the would-be James III, son of James II. He was also known as the Chevalier.

Franchise Who was permitted to vote in eighteenth-century Britain and who was not can seem like a very complicated issue to modern readers. Election districts were composed of two units: boroughs and counties. To vote in one of the counties, a person needed an annual income from property equaling forty shillings or more a year (an amount that had seemed like significant wealth when the law had been written three hundred years before the events of this novel). Conditions for election varied from borough to borough. Some had wide franchises, some were composed of a small body of men who met in private and voted among themselves. In rural communities, farmers were generally expected to vote as directed by the landlords.

CHAPTER 1

SINCE THE PUBLICATION of the first volume of my memoirs, I have found myself the subject of more notoriety than I had ever known or might have anticipated. I cannot register a complaint or a lament for any man who chooses to place himself in public sight has no reason to regret such attention. Rather, he must be grateful if the public chooses to cast its fickle gaze in his direction, a truth which the countless volumes languishing in the scribbler's perdition of obscurity can testify.

I will be frank and say that I have been gratified by the warmth with which readers responded to the accounts of my early years, yet I have been surprised too—surprised by people who read a few lines of my thoughts and consider themselves near friends, free to speak their minds to me. And while I shall not find fault with someone who has read my words so closely that he wishes to make observations on them, I confess I have been confounded by the number of people who believe they may comment with impunity on any aspect of my life without a moment's regard to custom or propriety.

Some months after publishing my little volume I sat at a supper gathering, speaking of a particularly noxious criminal I intended to bring to justice. A young spark, on whom I had never before set eyes, turned to me and said that this fellow had better be careful, lest he meet the same end as *Walter Yate*. Here he simpered, as though he and I shared a secret.

My amazement was such that I did not say a word. I had not thought about *Walter Yate* in some time, and I had no idea that his name had retained any currency after so many years. But I was to discover that, while I had not contemplated this poor fellow, others had. Not a fortnight later another man, also a stranger, commented on a difficulty I faced by saying I should manage that affair in the same fashion that I had managed my business with *Walter Yate*. He said the name with a sly nod and a wink, as though, because he had uttered this shibboleth, he and I were now jolly co-conspirators.

It does not offend me that these men chose to reference incidents from my past. It does, however, perplex me that they should feel at liberty to speak of something they do not understand. I cannot fully express my bewilderment that such people, believing what they do about this incident, should mention it to me at all, let alone with more than a dash of good cheer. Does one go to a raree show and make light with the tigers regarding their fangs?

I have therefore decided that I must pen another volume of memoirs, if for no other reason than to disabuse the world of its ideas concerning this chapter of my history. I wish no more to hear the name *Walter Yate* spoken in naughty and secretive tones. This man, to the best of my knowledge, did nothing to deserve becoming the subject of a private titter. Therefore, I shall say now, truthfully and definitively, that I did not act violently upon Mr. Yate—let alone with the most definitive violence—something which, I have discovered, the world generally believes. Further, if I may disabuse the

public of another misconception, I did not escape the most terrible of punishments for his murder by calling upon the influence of friends in the government. Neither of those tales is true. I had never known of these rumors because no one had ever spoken them to me before. But now, having published a few words of my life, I am every man's friend. Let me then do the friendly service of revealing the facts about the incident, if for no other reason than that it might be spoken of no more.

Walter Yate died, beaten in the head with an iron bar, only six days before the meeting of the King's Bench, so I had mercifully little time after my arrest to reflect on my condition while awaiting trial. I will be honest: I might have put that time to better use, but not once did I believe, truly believe, that I would be convicted for a crime I had not committed—the murder of a man of whom I had scarcely heard before his death. I ought to have believed it, but I did not.

So great was my confidence that I often found myself hardly even listening to the words spoken at my own trial. Instead, I looked out at the mob packed into the open-air courtroom. It rained a fine mist that day, and there was a considerable chill in the February air, but the crowds came anyway, crammed onto the rough and splintering benches, hunched against the wet, to watch the proceedings, which had attracted some attention in the newspapers. The spectators sat eating their oranges and apples and little mutton pastries, smoking their pipes and taking snuff. They pissed in pots in the corners and threw their oyster shells at the feet of the jury. They murmured and cheered and shook their heads as though it were all an enormous puppet show staged for their amusement.

I suppose I might have been pleased to be the subject of such a broad public curiosity, but I found no gratification in notoriety. Not when *she* was not there, the woman I most wanted to look upon in my time of sorrows. If I were to be convicted, I thought (only in the most romantical way, since I more anticipated a conviction than that I should be elected Lord Mayor), I should only want her to come and cry at my feet, tell me of her regrets. I wanted her teary kisses on my face. I wanted her hands, raw and coarse with wringing, to take mine as she begged my forgiveness and pleaded to hear my vows of love repeated a hundred times. These were, I knew, mere fantasies of an overwrought imagination. She would not come to my trial, and she would not come to visit me before my fanciful execution. She could not.

My cousin's widow, Miriam, whom I had sought to marry, had wedded herself six months before to a man named Griffin Melbury, who at the moment of my trial busied himself with preparations for standing as the Tory candidate in the election soon to commence in Westminster. Now a convert to the Church of England and the wife of a man who hoped to rise as a prominent opposition politician, Miriam Melbury could ill afford to attend the trial of a Jewish ruffian-for-hire, one to whom she was no longer attached by the bonds of kinship. Kneeling at my feet or covering my face with tear-wet kisses was hardly the sort of behavior to which she was inclined under any circumstances. It would surely not happen now that she had given herself to another man.

Thus, in my hour of crisis, I dwelled less on the possibility of impending doom than I did on Miriam. I blamed her, as though she could be held accountable for this absurd trial—after all, had she

married me, I might have abandoned thieftaking and would not have brought myself into the circumstances that had led to this disaster. I blamed myself for not pursuing her more vigorously—though three marriage proposals ought to meet any man's definition of *vigor*.

So, while the lawyer for the Crown attempted to convince the jury to convict me, I thought of Miriam. And, because even as I dwell with longing and melancholy I remain a man, I also thought about the woman with yellow hair.

It must be seen as no surprise that my mind wandered to other women. In the half year since Miriam had married, I had distracted myself—not with the intent of forgetting, you must understand, but with the aim of making my sense of loss more exquisite—largely by indulging in vices, and those vices consisted principally of women and drink. I regretted that I was not of a gambling disposition, for most men I knew found that vice to be as distracting as the two I favored, if not more so. But in the past, having paid the high price of money lost at game, I could not quite grasp the entertainment of viewing a pair of greedy hands collecting a pile of silver that had once been my own.

Drink and women: Those were vices on which I could depend. Neither needed to be of particularly fine quality; I was of no temper to be overly choosy. Yet, here was a woman, sitting at the edge of one of the benches, who absorbed my attention as nearly as anything could in those dark times. She had pale yellow hair and eyes the color of the sun itself. She was not beautiful, but she was pretty and had a kind of pert demeanor, with her pointy nose and sharp chin. Though no great lady, she dressed like a woman of the middling ranks, neatly, but without flair or much of a nod to fashion. Rather, she let nature do what her tailor could not, and exposed to the world in a deeply cut bodice the expanse of her dazzling bosom. There was, in short, nothing that would have kept me from finding her a delight in an alehouse or tavern, but no particular reason why she should command my attention while I sat on trial for my life.

Except that she did not once take her eyes from me. Not for a moment.

Others looked at me, of course—my uncle and aunt with pity and perhaps with admonition, my friends with fear, my enemies with glee, strangers with unpitiful curiosity—but this woman fixed on me a desperate, hungry gaze. When our eyes locked, she neither smiled nor frowned but only met my look as though we had shared a lifetime together and no word need be spoken between us. Anyone observing would have thought us married or sweethearts, but I had never to my recollection—none the best during those six months of hearty drinking—seen her before. The enigma of her gaze monopolized my thoughts far more than the enigma of how I came to stand trial for the death of a dockworker I'd never heard of two days before my arrest.

The rain had begun to fall harder and turn frozen when the prosecuting lawyer, an old fellow named Lionel Antsy, called Jonathan Wild to the stand. In that year, 1722, this notorious criminal was still widely believed to be the only true bulwark against the marauding armies of thieves and brigands that plagued the metropolis. He and I had long been rivals in our thieftaking efforts, for our methods were none too similar. I believed that if I helped honest folk to recover their lost goods, I should receive a handsome reward for my labors. Granted, my work was not always quite so principled. I was willing to track down elusive debtors, to use the skills I'd gained in the pugilist's ring to teach lessons to rascals (provided they deserved such treatment in my eyes), to intimidate and frighten and scare men

who required such usage. I would not, however, inflict harm on those I believed undeserving of rough treatment, and I'd even been known to let a debtor or two escape my capture—always with an apologetic lie to my employer—if I heard a credible tale of a starving wife or sick children.

Wild, however, was a ruthless rogue. He would send forth his thieves to steal goods and then send the same items back to their owners, all the while pretending to be the lone voice of London's victims. These methods, I admit, were far more profitable than mine. Hardly a cutpurse in London lined his pockets without Wild taking his share. No murderer could hide his bloodstained hands from Wild's scrutiny, even if the great thieftaker had ordered the murder himself. He owned smuggling ships that visited every port in the kingdom and had agents in every nation in Europe. The stockjobbers of Change Alley hardly dared to buy and sell without his nod. He was, in short, a remarkably dangerous man, and he bore me no love.

In our incompatible efforts, we had clashed more than once, though our clashes tended toward the cool rather than the hot. We circled around each other, like dogs more eager to bark than fight. Nevertheless, I could not doubt that Wild would relish this opportunity to see me destroyed. As he had made a career out of perjuring himself before any jury that would listen, I now only waited to discover the severity of his condemnation and the verve with which he delivered it.

Mr. Antsy hobbled toward the witness, hunched over to keep the frozen rain from his face. He looked to be anywhere between fifty and one hundred years of age—gaunt as death itself, with his skin hanging loose about his face like an empty wine bladder, and his head bobbing above the mass of his greatcoat. His peruke, limp from the rain, hung askew and was of such a horrible condition I could only suppose he had purchased it at the dip in Holborn, where a man might pay threepence for the chance to blindly pull a used wig from a box. Not having bothered to shave that morning, and perhaps the morning before, his face was fertile with strands of weedy white hair that poked from out the rugged earth of his face.

“Now, Mr. Wild,” he said, in his shrill and quivering voice, “you have been called here to testify to the character of Mr. Weaver because you are widely regarded as something of an expert in criminal matters—a student of the philosophy of crime, if you will.”

“I like to think so of myself,” he said, his country accent so thick that the jury leaned in closer, though proximity might help them to understand better. Wild, on whom the rain hardly dared to fall, held himself erect and smiled almost pityingly at Mr. Antsy. How could an old pettifogger like Antsy inspire anything but contempt in a man who routinely sent his own thieves to hang that he might retrieve the forty-pound bounty offered by the state?

“You are widely regarded, sir, as the metropolis's most effective agent in the sphere of thieftaking—is that not right?”

“It is,” Wild said, with an easy pride. He was advancing into his middle years then, but he appeared nonetheless handsome and vibrant in his trim suit and wig. He had a deceptively kind face, too, with large eyes, rounded cheeks, and a warm and avuncular smile that made people like him and trust him at once. “I am known as the Thieftaker General, and it is a title I bear with both pride and honor.”

“And in this capacity, you have come to know the many aspects of the criminal world, yes?”

“Precisely, Mr. Antsy. Most people understand that if they should lose an article of some importance, or wish to track down the perpetrator of a crime, no matter how heinous, I am the man to seek.”

There was never a poor opportunity to enhance one’s reputation, I thought. Wild intended to see me hang *and* get a few puffs in the newspapers at the same time.

“Then you think yourself privy to the criminal doings in our metropolis?” Antsy asked.

“I have applied myself to this trade for many years now,” Wild answered. “There are few matters of criminality that escape my notice.”

He neglected to mention that he noticed these matters of criminality because, in general, he and his agents orchestrated them.

“Tell us, if you will,” Antsy said, “of Mr. Weaver’s connection to the death of Walter Yate.”

Wild paused for a moment. I glared at him. I did my utmost to say with silent words that he must know I would never be convicted, and if he crossed me in this I would not let the matter go. Proceeding told him with my eyes, and you will be proceeding toward your own doom. Wild met my stare for a moment and nodded ever so slightly, conveying a significance I could not fathom. He then turned to Antsy.

“I can tell you almost nothing of that,” he said.

Antsy opened his mouth, but it seemed to take him a moment to realize the answer he received was not the one he had been anticipating. He pressed the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger as though trying to squeeze Wild’s answer from his flesh the way a cider maker wrings juice from an apple. “What do you mean, sir?” he asked, in a quivering voice more shrill than its usual.

Wild smiled slightly. “Only that I have no knowledge of the matters surrounding Yate’s death or of Weaver’s supposed involvement—only what I have read in the newspapers. It is my goal to discover the truth behind all horrific crimes, but I cannot learn everything. Though I do try, I promise you.”

Every spectator at the King’s Bench could see from the slackening of Antsy’s face that the lawyer had expected something quite different from Wild. A lecture on the danger I posed to London, perhaps. A recounting of my former crimes. A list of atrocities in which he had long suspected my involvement. But Wild had a different game in mind—one that baffled me entirely.

Antsy looked up and grimaced. He took a deep breath that puffed out his chest nearly to the size of a normal man’s and gritted his teeth into a deathly smile. “Do you not think Weaver a vicious man quite capable of killing anyone, even a total stranger, without cause? And, accordingly, quite capable of killing Walter Yate? Is it not correct to say that you know with certainty that he *did* kill Walter Yate?”

“On the contrary,” Wild answered blithely, like an anatomy instructor asked to discuss the mysteries of respiration. “I believe Weaver to be a man of honor. He and I are not friends; in truth, we often find ourselves opposed. If I may be so bold, I think Weaver to be a rather miserable sort of thieftaker, who does the state and those who pay him a disservice. But being miserable in his trade does not make him necessarily a wicked man any more than a cobbler should be called wicked for making pinching shoes. I have no more reason to think Weaver guilty of this crime than I do any other man. To my knowing, you might be as guilty as he.”

Antsy spun toward the judge, Piers Rowley, who stared at Wild with an astonishment equal to the lawyer’s. “M’lord,” Antsy complained, “this is not the testimony I had expected. Mr. Wild was to have spoken of Weaver’s crimes and cruelties.”

The judge turned to the witness. Like Antsy, he was well into his later years, but with his large face and ruddy complexion he wore his age far more comfortably than the lawyer. Antsy appeared starved for all nourishment, but the judge looked to receive more than his share. His enormous jowls were bunched with beer and roast beef and puffed like a fat infant’s.

“Mr. Wild,” Rowley said to the witness, “you will provide Mr. Antsy with the testimony he wishes.”

I had not quite expected this reply. I did not know him well by any means, but I had observed Rowley in the past—when called to testify against men I had helped bring to justice—and I had always found in him as much fairness and honesty as one could hope for in a man of his profession. He took bribes sparingly, and then only to secure a ruling he had intended to make without financial incentive. I had ever noted that he took his role as protector of the defendant seriously, and I had felt a measure of relief when I learned he was to preside over my trial. Now it appeared that my optimism had been misplaced.

“Begging your pardon, m’lord,” Wild answered, “but I cannot answer for his expectations. Having sworn an oath to speak the truth, I must do so.”

Here was something comical. Wild had no more loyalty to oaths than a Frenchman does to clean linen. Still, he sat there, incurring the anger of the prosecuting lawyer and the judge, rather than speaking ill of me. Wild, who spent far more time in the courts than I, surely knew Rowley’s temperament. I could not but have known that the judge was a man who held himself with more than his share of gravity and would not let an insult to his authority pass lightly. By defending me as he did, Wild risked great injury to himself and his trade, for he must now expose himself to Rowley’s hostility during future trials. As perjuring himself was among his most important sources of income, an adversarial judge could make his life most uncomfortable.

Antsy understood the situation no better than I. He brushed the rain off his face. “Given his reluctance to speak the truth, I have nothing more to hear from this witness,” the old lawyer said. “You may go, Mr. Wild.”

I rose to my feet. “Begging your pardon, m’lord, but I have not yet had a chance to cross-examine.

“No more questions to this witness.” Rowley banged his gavel.

Wild stepped down and winked in my direction. I only stared blankly in return.

My pretty yellow-haired admirer wept into the sleeve of her coat, and she was not alone in her dismay. The spectators quickly answered with catcalls and hisses, and a few apple cores flew toward us. I was not such a popular figure with the mob that they would brook no insult to me, but they knew injustice when they saw it, and no rabble of this city will stand idly by while a fellow is mistreated by the law. Not in those days, when there was such little work to be had and bread was so dear. Rowley, however, had years of experience with such outbursts, and he banged his gavel once more, this time with an authority that brought down a veil of silence.

I was not so easily calmed. In our system of law, a defendant does not have a lawyer because it is presumed that the judge will act as his advocate. Often as not, however, a defendant finds himself with an unkind judge and thus with no protection whatsoever. I had never before had cause to lament the inequities of this system, for I was used to being in the position of wishing to see men convicted, that they might collect a bounty—and see justice served, of course. But now I found I could not call my own witnesses, question as I liked, or defend myself adequately. Judge Piers Rowley, a man I knew only from a distance, seemed intent upon destroying me.

Antsy next called Spirit Spicer, a fellow of whom I had never heard—how should I forget so colorful a name? He was young, only a working lad, and clearly of the lower ranks. Spicer had dressed himself to the best of his ability, but his blouse was torn in several places and his breeches stained in a way that any man of a respectable station would find embarrassing, to say the least. He had cut his hair short for the trial, using, I would suspect, a dull blade, and he looked as though he had caught his head in a grain mill.

Through a needlessly protracted line of questioning (no doubt to help him regain his sense of order after the unfortunate business with Wild), Antsy revealed that Spicer had been upon the quays the day of Yate’s death and claimed to have witnessed the mayhem of that afternoon and the murder itself. “I saw that man there,” Spicer said, pointing to me. “He killed the fellow, Yate. He struck him, he did. And then he killed him. By striking him.”

“You are sure of this?” Antsy asked. His voice rang with triumph. His witness spoke as he wished. The rain had now let up somewhat. All was well in the world.

“I have never been so sure of very many things in some long while,” Spicer assured him. “Weaver done it. That’s for certain. I was close enough to see everything, and to hear it too. I heard what Weaver said before he done it. Heard his malicious and damning words, I did.”

The old lawyer squinted in evident confusion but proceeded all the same. “And what did Mr. Weaver say?”

“He said, ‘This is what happens to those who anger the man they call Johnson.’ That’s what he said. Clear as day. *Johnson*. That’s the name he said.”

I had no notion of who this Johnson was and neither, apparently, did Antsy. He opened his mouth to say something but then thought better of it and turned away, announcing that he had no more questions as he took his seat.

“Johnson,” Spicer repeated.

Judge Rowley turned to me. “Mr. Weaver, would you care to ask the witness a question or two?”

“I’m delighted to learn that Mr. Spicer is on the list of witnesses that I may, indeed, question,” said. I regretted my words the instant I spoke them, but they drew a laugh from the gallery, and I took some comfort in that. Rowley had shown himself biased against me, but I was still foolish enough to believe his position would soon change. During my week in prison, I had been given little opportunity to inquire into Yate’s death, but I had sent my good friend Elias Gordon about town, asking questions for me, and I was fully confident that what we had discovered would soon end this farce.

I glanced over to the part of the galleries where Elias sat, and he nodded eagerly, his thin face flushed with pleasure. It was time to strike a fatal blow against this disgrace to justice.

I rose from my seat, brushed the ice off my coat, and approached the witness. “Tell me, Mr. Spicer. Have you ever met a man named Arthur Groston?”

Perhaps I anticipated that Spirit Spicer would blush or blanch or tremble. He might bear down and deny knowing Groston, in which case I would have to badger him until he confessed. But Spicer thought neither to resist nor, if his face was any indication of his heart, feel a jot of shame. For all the world, his easy and open grin suggested a fellow interested only in pleasing anyone who might be so kind as to ask him a question or two. “Aye, I’ve met Mr. Groston. More than once.”

The ease of this admission disoriented me, but I pressed on all the same. “In your time of knowing Mr. Groston, has he ever offered you any money to perform a service?”

“Aye, he has done so. Mr. Groston is extreme generous, he is, and he makes a point to look after me, on account of his cousin being a friend of my mother’s, sir. He believes in looking after family, sir, as does my family, which is why he helped me out.”

I smiled at the fellow. We were all friends here. “How would you describe the service that Mr. Groston asks of you?”

“I would describe it as generous and kind,” Spicer said. Here the crowd laughed and Spicer grinned broadly, imagining himself the mob’s darling rather than its clown.

“Allow me to ask that question another way,” I said.

Antsy rose slowly to his feet. “M’lord, Mr. Weaver is wasting the court’s time with this witness. I move you dismiss him.”

Rowley spent an instant considering Antsy's request, and I believe he would have complied, but the crowd, sensing a bias, began to hiss. It began softly but soon swelled, so that the King's Bench sounded as though it were a court of serpents. No apple cores this time; perhaps that was what agitated the judge. The noise held the menace of a storm not yet broke. Unwilling to risk a riot, Rowley said it might continue but advised that I cease my leisurely approach, for there were other men awaiting trial this day.

I began again. "Let me be plain," I said to Spicer, "that the judge may not grow restless. Does Mr. Groston ever, to your knowledge, pay people to testify at trials?"

"For certain. He is an evidence broker. What else should he do?"

I smiled. "And did Arthur Groston provide you with money to say that you had seen me strike and kill Walter Yate?"

"Yes, sir," Spicer said, nodding eagerly. "He paid me before to say suchlike things on suchlike occasions as this one, but he never before paid so much as the half crown he give me for saying as done just now."

The spectators murmured loudly. Here was drama they had never expected. In an instant I had completely devastated the prosecution. My aunt and uncle took each other's hands and nodded in triumph. Elias strained in his seat to avoid standing and taking a bow, for it was his dedication that had led us to this bit of knowledge. The woman with the yellow hair clapped her hands together with joy.

"So." I looked to the jury box, meeting the gaze of each man. "Do you now tell us, Mr. Spicer, that you never actually saw me harm Walter Yate, but that you said so only because you have been paid to say so by a notorious evidence broker?"

"That's it," Spicer said. "That's it on the oyster's shell, as they say."

I threw up my hands in mock exasperation. "Why," I demanded, "if you have been paid to say you saw me kill Mr. Yate, do you now admit that you never saw it at all?"

Spicer took a moment to puzzle over this question. "Well," he suggested, "I got paid to say I saw something, but I never got paid to say I didn't see it. So long as I said I saw it, I done what I wanted to have done."

Having spent some years performing for the public as a fighter, I knew a little about the rhythm of a spectacle, so I let his words hang in the air for a moment before commencing once more. "Tell me, Mr. Spicer," I said, after I sensed a sufficient pause, "have you never heard of perjury?"

"For certain," he said brightly, pointing to the jury box. "That's them right there."

"Perjury," I explained, once the laughter diminished, "is a crime. It is the crime of swearing to speak the truth at a trial and then knowingly speaking false. Do you not think yourself guilty of this crime?"

“Oh, no.” He waved a hand dismissively. “Mr. Groston explained it to me. He said it ain’t no more crime than it is blasphemy for an actor to speak out against God, if he do it while playing on the stage. That’s all it is.”

My having finished with the witness, Mr. Antsy moved to question Spicer once more. “Did you see Mr. Weaver kill Walter Yate?”

“Yes, I did!” he announced cheerfully. He then looked over to me, as though waiting for me to question him so he could tell me once more that he hadn’t.

Antsy next brought out another eyewitness, a man of middle years named Clark, who also said he had seen me commit this crime. When I had the chance to examine him, he resisted a bit more than young Mr. Spicer, but he at last admitted that he had been paid by the evidence broker, Arthur Groston, to say he had seen what he had not. I had every reason to regret that the law does not permit a defendant to call witnesses, for I would have liked very much to know who paid Mr. Groston to secure this evidence. But the information I had obtained, I believed, more than answered my purposes, and there would be time enough for Groston later. The Crown had no evidence against me but two eyewitnesses, men who had admitted that they had seen nothing at all but the coin in their hands.

And so, as I gazed at the yellow-haired woman, I thought myself safe. Mr. Antsy had done his job admirably, proving that age need be no impediment to any man who maintained a youthful ambition; but the evidence against me had been exploded. Nevertheless, when it came time for the judge to direct the jury, I realized I had been overly optimistic and had put perhaps too much confidence in the phantasm called *truth*.

“You have heard many things,” the honorable Piers Rowley told the jury, “and many things of a contradictory nature, too. You have heard witnesses say they have seen something and then, as though a trick done by Gypsy showman, you have heard them say they had not. You must decide how best to unravel this puzzle. As I cannot tell you which way to do so, I can only say that there is, perhaps, no more reason to believe a tale refuted than a tale spoken. You cannot know if these witnesses have been paid to say they saw something or paid to say they did not. I have no knowledge of evidence brokers, but I do know of villainous Jews and the tricks they will play to secure their freedom. I know that a race of liars might well pay honest coin to turn other men dishonest. I hope you will not be blinded by such petty cheats nor expose every Christian man, woman, and child in London to the ravages of a rapacious nation who might come to believe they can murder us with impunity.”

And so the jury went off to make its decision.

This august body returned not half an hour later.

“How do you find?” Judge Rowley asked.

The foreman arose slowly. He removed his hat and ran his fingers through damp and thinning hair. ~~“We find Mr. Weaver guilty of murder, just like you said, Your Honor.”~~ The man never once looked up.

The crowd let out a cry. I could not tell at first if it was of joy or outrage, but I soon saw to some small pleasure that the mob had taken my part. Rubbish once more took to the air. Men were on the feet in the back, shouting of injustice, popery, and absolutism.

“Have you anything to say before sentence is passed?” the judge asked me over the din. He appeared eager to press on with his business and depart as quickly as he could, without troubling himself to restore order. I must have thought on his question for an instant too long, for he banged his gavel and said, “Very well, then. Given the seriousness and cruelty of this crime, I can see no reason for leniency, not when there are so many Jews in this city. I cannot stand by and nod my approval, telling the members of your race that they may kill Christians as they see fit. I sentence you, Mr. Weaver, to be hanged for the most horrible crime of murder. This punishment shall be carried out on the next hanging day, six weeks hence.” He again banged the gavel, stood up, and exited the courtroom, flanked by a quartet of bailiffs.

In an instant a pair of these worthies were at my side to lead me back to Newgate prison. Though my death had just now been ordered, my first thoughts were not on the terrors of facing eternity but on the indignity of being carted off by these roughs.

And then, in a flash, the enormity of what had happened pressed itself on me. I had been convicted of murder and sentenced to die. I had committed crimes in my time—and hanging crimes too—but the unfairness of this conviction made me dizzy with rage. In the benches my friend Elias Gordon shouted that this injustice would not stand. My uncle called to me, telling me that he would use all the influence he could muster to intervene on my behalf. But their words buzzed distantly in my ears. I heard them but did not hear them.

I felt the bailiffs pull me away, a firm grip on either arm. My muscles began to tighten, and for a moment I thought of attempting to break free. Why should I not? I could overpower these men. Why should the rule had the law over me, now that it had so abused me?

But then there she was, directly in front of us, the woman with the yellow hair. Her pretty face was now red and raw. Tears poured from her eyes. “Oh, Benjamin,” she screamed, “don’t leave me! I’ll die without you!”

This outcome seemed to me unlikely, since she had lived her entire life thus far without me, and that condition had done nothing but leave her hale and healthy. Nevertheless, there could be no easy refutation of the force of her emotion. She threw herself at me, wrapped her hands around my neck, and covered my face with kisses.

I should have been delighted to receive the attentions of so fine a woman under other circumstances—circumstances, let us say, that did not involve my death having just been mandated by law—but here I could only stare in confusion. The woman, now pushed back by the bailiffs, began to wail a cry of injustice. And then she turned just so, a masterfully natural turn that any tumbler or posturer

Bartholomew Fair might envy. Now the creaminess of her breasts, exposed to no small degree by the cheerful cut of her bodice, brushed against the hands of one of my keepers.

Distracted and delighted and perhaps discomfited too, the bailiff paused in mid motion, turning round in the face. The woman appeared to pause as well. She leaned forward just enough to press her skin against his hand. The bailiff stared at his hand and the flesh it touched. His companion bailiff stared on well, envious that fate had ordained this less deserving hand to find favor with the lady's bosoms. In that moment of confusion, she, with the dexterity of a cutpurse, slipped something into my hand. Some things, I should say, for I could tell in an instant that there were two objects, and I heard the clean note of their music as they clanked together—cold hand hard and sharp.

I did not need to look at them to know what they were. I had felt such things and, indeed, used them most villainously in my greener years when I had plied my trade outside the law: a lockpick and a file.

Events of the past few days had happened so quickly and so strangely, I felt I understood almost nothing, but I now knew two things with absolute certainty. I knew that someone desperately wanted to see me convicted and sentenced to hang, to which end the law had been cruelly abused.

And, just as surely, someone wanted me free.

CHAPTER 2

HOW HAD I FOUND myself in so dire a condition? I could not even begin to fathom this upheaval, but I knew that my difficulties were in some way linked to the services I had engaged to render to Mr. Christopher Ufford, a priest of the Church of England, serving at St. John the Baptist Church Wapping.

In the melancholy that had settled upon me since Miriam wedded herself to a Christian gentleman, I had left my business in a state of neglect. I hardly worked at all for some months, preferring to pass my time in drink and debauchery—or else sullen contemplation—and sometimes a combination of the two. So when I received notice from this cleric the same day I received three urgent notes from my creditors, I thought it best to do as I had been promising myself I would do for some months—that is, to say, shake off my stupor and resume my business. I therefore dressed myself neatly in a dark suit with a clean shirt. I splashed the sleep off my face, bound up my hair, which I wore in the style of a topknot, and traveled by hackney coach to York Street, at which address Mr. Ufford desired me to call upon him.

I set off that morning little thinking that I would, more than thirty-five years later, commit my actions to paper, but had I been so aware, I might have taken some additional notice of the disorderly men who surrounded me as soon as I exited my hackney in Westminster. Here were four fellows made, unknown to them, to perform the literary act of foreshadowing. They took their positions at the four corners and sneered. I thought them nothing more than the countless thieves who haunted the streets since the South Sea Company had collapsed, taking the nation's wealth with it. But these were a different sort of criminal.

“Which be ye, Whig or Tory?” one of them, the largest—and very likely the drunkest—of the group snarled at me.

I knew that the six-week-long election season was nearly upon us, and candidates would often canvass in advance by hosting riotous parties at taverns in which lowly men such as these, men who surely did not possess the vote, might drink their fill. The reason for the politicians' generosity was quite plain: They hoped their uncouth guests might go forth and behave just as these fellows now behaved, coarse advocates of their cause.

As it was quite early in the morning, I could only presume that these men had not yet taken their sleep. I stared at them, with their unshaved faces and ragged clothes, and attempted to measure their capacity to do me harm.

“Which be ye?” I asked in return.

The leader barked a laugh. "Why should I tell you?"

I took from my pocket one of the brace of pistols I always carried about me and pointed the firearm in this man's face. "Because you began the conversation, and I wish only to understand the level of your interest."

"Begging your pardon, sire," he said, grossly overestimating my position. He removed his hat and placing it against his chest, began to bow like a Turk.

I'd have none of this groveling. "Which party are you?" I asked again.

"Whigs, if it please you, sir," another of the men said. "What should we be but Whigs, for we're only laboring men, you see, and not great lords, like your honor, to be Tories. We was at a tavern with drink paid for by Mr. Hertcomb, the Whig for Westminster. So we're Whigs now, and in his service. We meant you no harm."

I cared nothing, and knew less, for Whigs and Tories, though I understood enough to know that it was the Whigs, the party of new wealth and little church, that might be more willing to attract men such as these.

"Get gone," I said, waving my pistol. They ran off in one direction, I walked in the other. In an instant I had forgotten about the encounter, and my mind turned to my meeting with Mr. Ufford.

I have known very few priests in my day, but from my reading I harbored the idea of dignified little men living in neat but unremarkable cottages. I was surprised to see the lavish town house in which Mr. Ufford resided. Men who seek careers in the Church tend ever to be without prospects, either because their families have not much money or because they are younger brothers and excluded from inheritance by the strict laws and customs of the land. But here was a priest who had taken for himself the whole of a fine house on a fashionable street. I could not say how many rooms he possessed, or of what nature, but I soon found that the kitchen was of the finest quality. When I knocked upon the front door, a ruddy-faced manservant told me I could not enter thus.

"You must approach from the rear," he told me.

I rankled not a little at this treatment and thought to comment most unkindly on his orders, but his usage was, if not common, hardly unprecedented. Perhaps the excess of wine I'd consumed the night before inclined me to irritation. Nevertheless, I cast aside my annoyance and walked to the side entrance, where a stout woman with arms as thick as my calves directed me to a large table fixed to one corner. Sitting here already was a fellow of the meaner sort, not old but aging ungracefully, grizzled about the face, lacking a wig, with nothing on his balding and close-cut pate but a wide-brimmed straw hat. His clothes were of the plainer sort of undyed linens, though clearly new, and adorned only with his pewter porter's badge, which he wore pinned to his right breast. I could not say why, not knowing the man, but I had immediately the distinct impression that Mr. Ufford had bought the clothes for him, and recently too—perhaps for this very meeting.

Soon another man, wearing a black coat and a white cravat—a style I recognized as priestly—entered the kitchen tentatively, as though sneaking a look at a room in a house where he was a dinner

guest. On meeting my eyes, he simpered briefly. "Benjamin," he cried with great warmth, though we had never before met. "Come in, come in. I am glad you could meet me as I requested, and at such short notice too." He was tall, inclined to be plump if not fat, and with a sunken face that resembled a crescent moon. He wore a tie wig, new and carefully powdered.

I bristled a little, I admit, at the unexpected use of my name. I had never met the man before and had no reason to expect such familiarity. I suspected that if I were to address him as Christopher, or perhaps even Kit, he would not take it kindly.

"I am honored to be able to attend you, sir," I said, with a shallow bow.

He gestured toward the table. "Come, sit down. Sit down. Oh, yes. Where have my manners gone? Benjamin, this fellow is John Littleton. He lives in my parish and has benefited from the kindness of the Church. More than that, however, he knows the parish and the sort of men who inhabit it. I have made much use of him in recent days, and I thought you might as well."

I turned to offer the *fellow*, as the priest would have it, my hand in friendship.

He took it with eagerness, perhaps relieved to see I was of a somewhat more open nature than our host. "How do ye," he said cheerfully. "Benjamin Weaver, I seen you fight, me spark. More than once too. I seen you beat the tar out of that Irishman Fergus Doyle, and I seen you take out that French fellow too, but I don't recollect his name. But the best match I ever saw, let me tell you, sir, was the time you fought Elizabeth Stokes. Now, she was a great fighter of the female sort. They don't make the likes of her no more."

I sat next to Mr. Littleton. "The sad truth is that the art of pugilism has fallen on hard times among the ladies. Now it is all female sport, and they are made to hold coins in their fists when they fight so as to guarantee they don't scratch out each other's eyes. The first to unclench her fists so far as to drop the coin loses the match."

"A rotten thing. That Elizabeth Stokes, she could lay out a punch or two." He turned to Mr. Ufford. "A mean lass, she was—vicious as a legless rat and quick as an oiled Italian. I thought certain she would take Mr. Weaver here."

"She pummeled me something fierce," I told him cheerfully. "That's the difficulty I often felt when I asked to fight with a lady. Were I to lose, I would be humiliated, but when I won, there was no glory in it, for I had done naught but beat a woman. I should have refused to do it entire, but such fights always generated a hearty take at the door. Those who arranged the battles could hardly shun something so lucrative, and neither could we fighters."

"I only wish them girls were made to strip to the waist like the men. That would make for good sport, I think, with their bubbies flying here and yon. Begging your pardon, Mr. Ufford," he added.

Ufford's pink skin reddened. "Well," he said, rubbing his hands together as though preparing to move a pile of lumber, "how about some refreshment before we cut into the meat of the matter. What say you, Mr. Weaver? Can I offer you a hearty dark ale? It's just the sort favored by hardworking men."

~~“I have not been used to work so hard as I ought of late,” I told him, “but I should like an ale ju~~
the same.” As it happened, my head ached somewhat furious from the wine of the night before and
short of a bowl of saloop, ale might be just the thing.

“I thought he’d never ask,” Littleton told me quietly, as though passing along a secret. “I nearly
died of thirst more than once as we awaited you.”

Ufford rang the bell, and the serving girl with the massive arms entered the room. She was no more
than sixteen, somewhat stooped of stature, and of her face I could only say that nature had not been
her most generous. But she appeared a cheerful lass and smiled agreeably at all of us. She listened to
Mr. Ufford’s commands and then returned in an instant with pewter mugs filled with nearly foamless
ale.

“Now,” Mr. Ufford said, joining us at the table. He held out a fine-looking whalebone snuffbox.
“Either of you care for a pinch?” he asked.

Littleton shook his head. “I prefer my pipe.” He removed the mentioned device and began to pack
with weed from a small leather pouch.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to refrain in my presence,” Ufford said. “I cannot endure the smell
of burning tobacco. It is both noxious and like to cause fires.”

“Is it, now?” Littleton asked. “Well, I’ll put it away then.”

Perhaps to demonstrate his superiority, Ufford made an exaggerated show of his snuff-taking. He
took a pinch of the dust between his forefinger and thumb and then proceeded to sniff with a great
furor at each nostril. He then dabbed at his nose and sneezed three or four times. Finally he set his rags
aside and beamed at us, as if to show that he had not a speck of snuff left upon his face.

I had always found the ritualized process of snuff-taking exceedingly tedious. Men would make
great shows of who could sniff with the greatest strength, who could sneeze the most cleanly, who had
the best-formed nostrils. Ufford had clearly made a good showing, but he found his audience not fit to
appreciate his art.

He coughed nervously and then clutched a goblet of wine, its stem a shiny silver. “I suppose you are
curious to learn what task you will perform for me, yes?”

“I am eager to hear your needs, certainly,” I told him, trying mightily to demonstrate confidence.
Having spent some months now in shirking my responsibilities, the wheels of my thieftaking
mechanism were in need of grease.

I glanced over at Mr. Littleton. He had eyes only for his rapidly draining pot of ale, and his
concentration allowed me to study him freely. I thought I knew him from some previous encounter,
but I could not place the association, and that made me most uneasy.

“I fear I find myself in a bit of a situation, sir,” Ufford began. “A very uncomfortable one that

cannot resolve without help, and not help to be got just anywhere, as you will see. I have preached many times in my church— Oh, I forget myself. As a Hebrew you may not be familiar with the doing of a church interior. You see, during our worship, it is common for the priest to give a long talk—we not too long, I hope—in which he discourses on religious or moral issues he thinks relevant to his congregation.”

“I am familiar, Mr. Ufford, with the concept of the sermon.”

“Of course, of course,” he said, seeming a bit disappointed that I had diverted him from the task of definition. “I knew you would be. In any case, I have been used for the past months to preach on a subject very near to my heart, and very near to the hearts of my parish, for it is principally made up of hardworking men on the lowest echelon of the laboring ranks. Men, you understand, who live week by week on their wages and for whom the loss of even a few days’ pay, or an unanticipated sickness that requires payment to a medical man, could bring utter ruin. I have taken their cause as my own, sir, and I have spoken out for them. I have spoken out, I say, for the rights of the laboring men of this metropolis, to earn a decent wage and to make enough to support their families. I have spoken out against the cruelty of those who would keep their workers so impoverished that the allure of quick earnings in heinous crime, the sin of whoredom, and the oblivion of gin all conspire to undo their body and soul, yes, body and soul. I have spoken out against these things.”

“I daresay you are speaking out against them now,” I observed.

Again, Mr. Ufford surprised me by being so good-natured. He laughed and patted me amiably on the shoulder. “You must forgive me if I talk a bit much, Benjamin, but on the subject of the poor and their well-being I can hardly say enough.”

“You are surely admirable in that regard, sir.”

“It is only my Christian duty—and one that I should like to see others in my church embrace. But as I say, I have taken on the poor as my cause and spoken of the injustices they face. I thought myself doing things for the good and right, but I find there are those who don’t like my message, even among the lower orders, the very men whom I endeavor to aid.”

Here Ufford reached into the lining of his coat and produced a ragged piece of paper.

“Shall I read this to you, Benjamin?” he asked pointedly.

“I have letters,” I told him, as I concentrated with great intensity on concealing my irritation. I was not often thought to be quite so unschooled as to be illiterate.

“Of course. Your race is a very learned one, I know.”

He handed me the note, which was written in a rough and uneven hand.

Mr. Youfurd,

Dam you and dam you and double dam you twice you black gard bich. No won cares to heer any of yore drivell so dam you and be silent or you will find that there ar those who will no how to make you silent by burning yore house down around yore

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