

Whoever, wherever, *whenever* you are.
Time is running out . . .



THE WATCHMAN of ETERNITY

Paul Witcover

ABOUT THE BOOK

In the seventh year of its war against France, England faces threats from at home and abroad, from above – and from below.

Buoyed by a series of military victories, the French gather for their final push across the Channel. In Scotland, Jacobites loyal to Bonnie Prince Charlie plot to restore the Stuart dynasty to the throne. Beneath the bustling streets of London, a subterranean people prepares to rise. And in the realm known as the Otherwhere – home to dragons, demons and gods – civil war has erupted, causing a terrifying weapon to be cast out into our world. It is a clock – a watch, to be precise, of a size to fit comfortably in a man's hand: a watch with a taste for blood – a mechanism that contains the doom of all that lives.

And so Daniel Quare, of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers, was sent by his masters to find that deadly time-piece. Only he wasn't alone in his pursuit: the mysterious thief Grimalkin and a deadly French spy were on its trail. With the help of Lord Wichcote – an aristocrat of many talents and more disguises – Quare succeeded in seizing the watch. But not for long: the Frenchman took it from him – and with it, Quare's hand.

Now the spy is returning to his masters, Lord Wichcote lies gravely wounded and Daniel Quare has vanished . . . is all hope for the world lost?

This dazzling melding of the historical and the fantastic is the work of a magical storyteller.

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Copyright

THE WATCHMAN OF ETERNITY

Book 2 of
The Productions of Time



PAUL WITCOVER

To Cynthia,
My tick and my tock

The Crossing

THE LUGGER LURCHED and groaned. Aylesford followed suit, rolling to the side to spew into the bucket that had been the trustworthy receptacle of his sickness until now. But the bucket, too, had lurched aside, and the depleted contents of his stomach spattered in a thin gruel over the wooden slats of the floor. The lantern swinging madly from the low ceiling flung its meagre light across the cabin in a haphazard manner that made him feel as if the vessel had already come apart, shaken to pieces by the squall that had struck midway across the Channel.

The glass of the single porthole threw back shards of light but admitted none from without. All was darkness there. The sounds of wind and wave, like a constant battlefield roar, drowned out everything save the creaking yet somehow defiant protests of the *Pierre's* tortured frame and Aylesford's groans and whimpers, which he could not silence, though they filled him with shame, as if he had been reduced to the state of a child, or, worse, a mere animal. And like an animal, he longed to strike at what tormented him. He would have torn the throat out of the storm if he could. Give him an enemy, and Aylesford was not slow to strike – as a gaggle of London lordlings might attest, were they still alive to do so, and many more besides, all cut down without mercy: whether from behind, in skulking fashion, as he'd dispatched Daniel Quare that same night in the bed of a blowsy barmaid whose name he'd forgotten upon hearing it, or face to face across

blades, made no matter. But lacking a target of flesh and blood, he could only suffer. He rolled back, squeezing his eyes shut as though blindness were a refuge, and wiped his mouth with the damp sleeve of his coat. The cot bucked beneath him like a drifting gig at the mercy of the storm.

He wished he'd never set foot aboard this ship, with its unlucky name. He'd been told it had been christened after Captain Bagot's eldest son, but the instant he'd heard the name he'd crossed himself, for *pierre* meant 'stone' as well, and now the smugglers' craft seemed certain to sink like one. Only the French would tempt fate so frivolously, as if good fortune were their birthright and the elements themselves must bow to their every whim. They were a different breed of human, he sometimes thought, a fairy-touched race whose follies were inseparable from their glories. He both admired and resented them, always conscious of how completely his suppliant nation relied upon the support of a people by nature capricious and not to be trusted, save in one thing only: their implacable hatred of England.

He'd lived among the French for years, part of the court surrounding the Bonnie Prince, yet they had never accepted him, though he spoke French with scarcely an accent by now. Neither had his own people fully accepted him, for he had come late – by their measure – to the cause, dispatched across the water by his foster father when already a young man. But he had won some measure of respect since then, thanks to his talents with a sword, and his eagerness to put those talents to use on behalf of king and country as a courier and, not to put too fine a point on it, or rather to do precisely that, an assassin. In that capacity, he had killed for the Bonnie Prince but also, in the name of harmony and mutual self-interest, for King Louis himself – as if each thrust of his blade were a needle stitching Scotland and France together.

Yet though blood and sentiment alike might bind two countries for a time in a commonality of interests, only a fool would put faith in an edifice erected upon such unstable ground. And Aylesford was no fool. French policy was determined not in the council chambers but in the boudoirs of Versailles, where the whore Pompadour pulled the strings – and prick – of her puppet king. There the gravest decisions, upon which the fate of the Jacobite cause must rise or fall, were made on the basis of petty resentments and airy enthusiasms taken up and cast aside like the most ephemeral of fashions. There was much to be said for hatred, Aylesford reflected. But in the end, it only got you so far. It might crown a king, but it could not steer a kingdom. Or, for that matter, float a stone, he thought as the ship plummeted, eliciting a fresh surge of nausea.

The cabin door banged open with a report like a gunshot, and the voice of his travelling companion boomed out as Aylesford bent over the bucket that had by some miracle slid back to its former place. ‘What, still mewlin’ and pukin’ are yer? It won’t do, me lad. It won’t do at all.’

‘Go tae the devil, Starkey,’ he growled without raising his head.

‘Like enough I’ll end up a pensioner o’ that gentleman,’ replied the tall, pallid, whippet-thin man in a Cockney accent so thick it had struck Aylesford at first as another language entirely. He slammed the door behind him. ‘But that don’t mean I’m eager ter make ’is acquaintance. Let ’im seek me out. I’ll shake ’is ’and when the time comes, but till then I shall spit in ’is eye.’

‘What are ye on about now?’ Looking up through a tangle of matted coppery hair, he watched Starkey fumble at the bolts of the door before shooting them loudly home.

‘I’m about savin’ yer miserable ’ide, that’s what. And me own.’ Starkey turned from the door, one hand on the pommel of the rapier belted at his side. His glittering eyes darted like those of a trapped rat over the close confines of

the cabin. His pale, pinched face, with its long, narrow nose and receding, dark-stubbled chin, down which water streamed and dripped, made him look all the more ratlike, as did the stoop of his shoulders, as if he had bumped his head upon so many low ceilings that he went about in constant apprehension of a fresh collision. His clothes were drenched. His greatcoat hung from his spare frame in a sodden, colourless mass, and the tricorne he had jammed onto his head upon leaving the cabin some time ago was gone, no doubt swept overboard; his long brown hair, which had been pulled back in a tight queue, now suggested a bedraggled snarl of seaweed tossed up by the tides. Indeed, so pale was he, from a lifetime spent underground, that he looked half drowned, as though he had followed his hat into the sea before somehow managing to claw his way back aboard the *Pierre*.

‘What news from Bagot?’ Aylesford inquired, for Starkey had left the cabin in search of the captain, despite that gentleman having ordered them to remain below.

‘Gone,’ said Starkey simply as he rushed to the travelling chest that contained his belongings, unbattered it with a few kicks of his boot heel, and began to drag it across the floor, evidently with the intention of using it to block the door. ‘Give us a ’and, Aylesford.’

But Aylesford made no move to assist, though he did, with prodigious effort, prop himself on one elbow. ‘Gone? What d’ye mean gone?’

Starkey shot him an exasperated glance, hunched over the chest like a resurrection man interrupted in his business. ‘I mean no longer aboard this vessel. I mean clasped ter the bosom o’ Davy Jones. Full fathom five our captain lies. Is that not clear? Gone overboard is my meanin’. Drownded like a cat. And we are like ter join ’im.’

As he spoke, he resumed tugging the chest across the floor, positioning it in front of the door. He then flung the lid open and rummaged inside.

Aylesford was too wrapped up in his own sufferings to immediately make sense of this information. *So Bagot is gone*, he thought, wishing that Starkey would leave him in peace or at least move about in a less unpleasantly energetic manner. *What o' it? What is that tae do with me?* But at last a glimmer of understanding penetrated his sickly self-absorption. 'Who then is in command?'

'No one,' said Starkey, surfacing from the interior of the chest with a mahogany case that Aylesford knew from prior acquaintance held a pistol and accessories. This, more than Starkey's words, had the effect of focusing his attention.

'Why are ye arming yourself?'

'I suggest yer do likewise,' Starkey said. He closed the flat top of the chest and laid the pistol case upon it, holding it steady with one hand while, with the other, he flicked open the metal clasp and raised the lid. All the while, his widespread legs balanced him almost insouciantly against the yawing of the ship. It did not seem fair to Aylesford that he, a veteran of numerous Channel crossings, should suffer the torments and indignities of the damned each time he ventured upon the wet part of the world while Starkey, who, if his own testimony were to be credited, had never before set foot aboard a seagoing vessel, had taken to it like a duck to water.

'What has happened?' he demanded. 'Is it the English? Are we boarded?'

'Mutiny,' Starkey answered, practically spitting the word, his lips drawn back in a snarl that also had something of a grin about it. 'It were no wave what 'eaved Bagot overboard, poor sod, but the 'ands o' 'is own traitorous crew.'

Aylesford sat up at that, swinging his feet – still wearing their boots – down to the hard floor. He stood, only to find himself propelled, as said floor abruptly tilted like a wagon going over a cliff, into Starkey, who dropped the pistol he

was in the process of loading. It struck the top of the chest and bounced to the floor, skidding off into shadows.

'Damn yer for a clumsy oaf!' he cried, and shoved Aylesford away.

This impetus, added to that imparted by the movement of the ship, which at the same instant swung back like a pendulum, sent Aylesford stumbling and sliding across the cabin into his own battened-down travelling chest. He collapsed heavily upon it, his insides slithering about like a basket of eels pulled from the Thames, and fought his rising gorge.

What came to his aid then, as it had so often before, was rage. White-hot fury took possession of him. The storm was forgotten. His sickness was forgotten. All was forgotten but the burning need to repay the wrong that had been done him. When he stood again, he did so with the grace of a seasoned sailor. No hint of unsteadiness marred his stance. Neither did his arm tremble ... nor the blade now extended at the end of it, a rapier which a moment ago had hung from a hook in the wall, safely tucked into its scabbard. He had no memory of pulling it.

'Oaf, am I? Ye'll want to rephrase that,' he suggested in an icy tone, his brogue thickening as it always did at such moments.

Starkey, who had retrieved his fallen pistol and resumed his preparations, rolled his eyes, an expression of annoyance flitting across his sharp features. He made no move to draw his own blade. 'Rephrase it? Oh, aye, I'll rephrase it. Did I say oaf? Bloody lunatic is more like it! 'As that infernal pride o' yers not caused us trouble enough? Will yer run me through and face the mutineers down wif naught but a pigsticker against the lot o' 'em?'

Before Aylesford could reply, a clamour of angry voices arose from outside the cabin. Starkey stepped aside with alacrity as the knob rattled uselessly. This was followed by

a heavy thump, as of a stout shoulder slamming into the door.

'*Ouvrez la porte!*' cried a voice. And another: 'Let us in!'

'Not by the 'air o' me chinny-chin-chin,' replied Starkey, accompanying these words with a wink in Aylesford's direction. With elbow crooked, he held his primed and loaded pistol at shoulder height, the barrel pointed upward, his stance that of a duellist awaiting the command to fire.

A chorus of curses and threats in French and English erupted, along with renewed efforts to batter down the door, as ineffective as the first. Then came the heavy thud of an axe.

This noise did not diminish Aylesford's rage but did serve to redirect it. 'The damned disloyal devils,' he swore. 'I'll see 'em in hell.' As if only now becoming aware of the sword he was holding, he tossed it onto the cot and opened his travelling chest. What was stowed there would be more useful now than any blade. 'Why did they murder Bagot?' he asked, shouting to be heard above the din.

'A difference o' opinion,' Starkey answered, 'in the matter o' the storm. The captain wished ter ride it out and see the mission through. The crew 'ad other ideas. Said the blow were unnatural like. A curse brought down upon the ship on account o' some evil she carried. I reckon yer can guess what that might be.'

Starkey's words were punctuated by axe blows and the sounds of splintering wood, not all of the latter coming from the door. The intensity of the storm had increased. The winds shrieked like a brace of banshees, and the *Pierre* surged and wallowed and heeled in a drunken dance, threatening at every instant, or so it seemed, to founder, but always righting herself somehow, tripping gracelessly along the razor's edge of disaster. The flame of the lantern likewise guttered but stubbornly held, though the lantern itself appeared to be swinging not merely with the movements of the ship but actively against them, invested

with a frantic impetus of its own, like a prisoner clapped in irons who suddenly perceives, in the dank gloom of the hold, that the restraints to which he had submitted as an unavoidable indignity of transport now bid fair to become the ornaments of his tomb. What was not nailed down or otherwise fixed in place had come loose and gathered into a motley mass, a mob of objects that seemed afflicted with indecisive panic, rushing back and forth across the floor, first one way, then another, always moving yet getting nowhere. Starkey's trunk had joined the general ebb and flow, ponderous as a pachyderm. The very shadows seemed to have been torn loose from what cast them. Despite his sea legs, Starkey was now in some distress and clung fiercely, with his free hand, to the lines affixed to the cabin wall. But to Aylesford this chaos was no more than the outward manifestation of his rage. He was the eye at the centre of the storm, a calm, still point that radiated pure destruction. He was in his element now.

'Didn't I warn yer?' Starkey continued peevishly. 'Didn't I tell yer ter keep it 'id away? But no. Yer came swaggerin' on board, boastin' o' what were supposed ter be a secret known only ter the two o' us. 'Ow yer carryin' a weapon what will change the course o' the war and restore the rightful king ter England. That weren't so bad o' itself. What's another big mouth more or less in the world? But yer 'ad ter take offence. At what? God only knows! Not five minutes after we're aboard, yer challenge the captain ter a duel!'

'No man may call me a liar without answerin' for it.'

'E never said nuffink o' the sort!' exploded Starkey.

'He didnae need to,' Aylesford answered, digging deeper into the open chest. Where was the damn thing? 'I could see it in his eyes.'

'Could yer now? I saw no such fink. It were dark as 'ades on deck. Yer must 'ave a owl's eyes.'

'I heard it in his voice.'

'An' the ears as well! Why, 'tis a wonder yer need a ship at all. Could yer not just flap yer wings and fly ter Frog Land?'

This sally was ignored by Aylesford, whose whole attention was focused on the interior of the chest. A riot of clothes and objects flew up from inside as he rummaged about.

"'Welcome aboard the *Pierre*, gentlemen,'" was the captain's words as best I recall 'em,' Starkey went on. "'I anticipate no difficulties with the crossin'," said 'e. Then invited us ter make ourselves at ease below decks, where 'e would come speak wif us as 'is duties permitted. Oh, aye, what man wif a shred o' 'ealthy self-regard could not but take offence at such a rank insult?'

By now, the shouts from outside the door had quieted, but the axe continued to fall. Indeed, it seemed a second axe had been added, and the blows came in quick succession, like a drum beating the crew to quarters. An ominous crack had appeared in the door, lengthening and widening with each blow.

'I dinnae expect ye tae understand,' Aylesford said loftily, looking up from the chest.

"'Course not! What could a lowly Morecockneyan like meself know about such things as 'onour? That's the birthright o' those what cling like ticks ter the topside o' the world. So yer challenge Bagot, bold as yer please. And when 'e larfs, thinkin' yer 'avin' 'im on - as what sane man wouldn't - yer strike him!'

'He was a blackguard and a coward.'

"'E were captain o' this ship, which makes 'im like unto a king. Why, 'e would've been within 'is rights ter 'ave yer killed on the spot! Instead o' which, 'e apolergizes fer any offence 'e may 'ave given, like a gentleman.'

'Like a coward,' sneered Aylesford. 'How dare he take such an attitude with me, as though he were my better!'

‘And as if that weren’t bad enough,’ Starkey ploughed on, ‘yer pull out the ‘unter. In full view o’ ‘alf the crew, yer stand there on the deck like some demented conjurer wif that ‘orrible watch in yer ‘and, one gruesome relic in the grip o’ another, all aglow with witchy fire. Aye, there were a sight calculated ter win the devotion o’ sailors!’

Aylesford laughed heartily. He had quite recovered his good humour, for he had found the object of his search at last. ‘If I live tae be a hundred, I’ll never forget the look on Bagot’s face! He knew who he was dealing with then, I’ll warrant!’

‘I don’t doubt it. But now yer see the result o’ yer brash display. Bagot thrown ter the fishes and the crew eager ter send us after ‘im.’

‘Bah. I dinnae fear that rabble. Let ‘em come. I shall greet ‘em as they deserve.’

‘Too much sun, that’s what I fink,’ mused Starkey. ‘It’s boiled yer brains, made yer mad as March ‘ares. All o’ yer topsiders.’

The conversation was interrupted by a resounding crack. This was the door splitting down the middle as the busy axes accomplished their task. Before that sound had faded, Starkey’s pistol blazed – and misfired. He dropped it with an oath even as the first mutineers appeared in the doorway: three men, with more crowding behind them. Their pale, glistening faces wore expressions of grim determination, but their eyes shone glassily with fear. Some wore knit caps and tarred straw hats, while others were bareheaded like Starkey, with strands of wet hair plastered to cheeks and foreheads. The leader carried a pistol, while others were armed with daggers, belaying pins, and the hatchets used against the door. They squeezed in through the gap, shoving the sundered halves of the door aside, then, their object attained, hesitated, glancing about nervously, like children who have forced their way in among the grown-ups at a party, carried away by some

infectious enthusiasm of the playroom, and now, having outrun that impetus, which has proved insubstantial as a dream, are suddenly rendered timid and shy.

‘Come tae add tae your crimes, ye damned despicable dogs?’ demanded Aylesford. ‘Ye’ll not find me an easy victim!’ And he pulled a burlap sack out of the trunk.

Rather than cowing the intruders, this had the effect of stiffening their spines. The sailor with the pistol, a short, round-faced, pockmarked man wearing a Monmouth cap, whom Aylesford recognized as the first mate – though he could not put a name to that cratered face – said, in French-accented English, “And it over and live. I will not ask again.’

At this, Starkey drew his rapier. ‘Take it and die.’

The man shrugged, pointed his pistol at Aylesford, and pulled the trigger ... with no better effect than Starkey’s earlier attempt; indeed, a worse one, as not so much as a spark was struck. With a curse, he threw the pistol at Aylesford, who dodged it easily. Then, as Aylesford opened the sack with one hand while cradling it in the crook of his other arm – somehow balancing himself like an acrobat all the while – the moon-faced man reached behind his back and drew a long and wicked-looking dagger.

‘*Allons-y!*’ he cried. But rather than rushing forward, the clump of mutineers gathered itself still more tightly together, as if each individual was prepared to act, but only as part of something larger than himself, and that compound creature could not be willed or commanded into being by any of them alone but must arise in its own time and by the exercise of its own coalescent will.

Time stretched thin. The air of the cabin trembled like a sheet of glass with the flickering of light and shadow. Ship and storm seemed to hesitate, caught for an instant in an equipoise of opposing forces.

Then the *Pierre* gave a groan such as she had not yet produced. The note of defiance that Aylesford had heard

earlier, or that he'd convinced himself he was hearing, was gone. This was a cry of pain and despair, as if the wood were alive and suffering not only from the lash of the storm but from an awareness of the fate bearing down on it and an understanding that this fate could not be avoided. The sailors flinched, seeming not so much to hear the sound, or lamentation, rather, as to feel it in their bones. Some, at the back, turned and ran, dropping what they carried. But the men at the front, the moon-faced first mate and three others, rushed towards Aylesford.

He flung the sack into their faces. One man went down, but whether that was due to the sack or to the slick and cluttered floor, Aylesford did not know. In any case, that man fell heavily, knocking his head against the edge of Starkey's chest, and did not rise; the sack, meanwhile, wound up striking the lamp that hung from the low ceiling. The cabin was plunged into darkness.

But not for long. An icy blue light clung to Aylesford's clenched fist and what he held there. It perched like a tamed yet still malevolent will-o'-the-wisp.

'Diable!' gasped the first mate, who had stopped short, dagger upraised as though to ward off a blow. The ghastly light further ravaged his features, giving him a leprous look. He squinted against it as if half blinded. But it was not brightness that made the light painful to endure; it had the effect of bruising whatever it touched, so that everyone and everything in the cabin seemed not just illuminated but also infected by it, rendered as sick and unwholesome as what shone upon them.

'Is this what ye're after?' demanded Aylesford with a sneer. 'Come on - take it!'

In his hand, brandished like a club, was another hand, which he held by the stub of its wrist. It had the look of having been sawn cleanly from the arm of a life-sized statue. The stark lines of bones and veins and tendons stood out in the sharp glow shed by the object caged in its

pale, frozen fingers: a pocket watch of the type known to horologists as a hunter. Flat, somewhat ovoid in shape, with a featureless lid closed over the face, this watch seemed part of the hand that held it, as if the two had been carved from a single piece of marble. Or bone.

‘God save us,’ cried one of the sailors.

‘The Lord ’elps them what ’elps themselves.’ Taking advantage of the fright that had paralysed the mutineers, Starkey dispatched one and then another with ugly punches of his blade that took each man in the side. That left two remaining: the man who had fallen to the floor, and still lay there, unconscious or dead (now joined by his two fellows who would not rise again), and the first mate.

This last, seeing that the odds had shifted, turned and fled the cabin, pursued by Aylesford’s mocking laughter. Starkey pursued him as well, and would have taken him in the back had his feet not become tangled in the sprawl of bodies on the floor, which he now joined with an oath.

Aylesford’s laughter choked off abruptly, but not due to the predicament of Starkey, who was engaged at close quarters in a life-or-death struggle with the last of the mutineers, who, as it developed, had only been feigning unconsciousness. This man was armed with a dagger such as common seamen carry, the tip blunted but the edges keen as razors. Starkey had dropped his rapier and now clung desperately to the man’s wrists. The two adversaries were locked in a savage striving punctuated with grunts and curses, kicking and snarling at each other as the *Pierre* threw them this way and that in her own, less equal, striving. The corpses of the men Starkey had killed, exacting revenge from beyond the grave, battered and bludgeoned him, their arms swinging like flails, their heads like clubs, though at least they did not discriminate, lashing out with the same dumb ferocity at their former comrade, as if imbued with hatred for everything alive.

‘Aylesford!’ Starkey gasped out. ‘A little ‘elp, fer God’s sake!’

But Aylesford was in no position to offer assistance. In fact, he required it. For what he clutched by the wrist was no longer a dead thing, hard and cold and stiff as the plaster cast of a partial limb. Lifeless no longer, it twisted and flexed in his grasp with a force and a will that filled him with fresh nausea. Yet he could not drop it. His fingers were fixed to the suddenly soft and warm skin as though the severed hand had fused itself to him and they now constituted a single flesh.

Only once in all the times he had held this dreadful trophy of his long and long-fruitless search had it been warm to the touch, and that had been when he’d first picked it up from the ground after his sword had cleaved it from the arm of Daniel Quare, that meddlesome, devilishly hard-to-kill agent of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers, who, Aylesford fervently hoped and fully expected, was as dead now as this fragment of him had seemed to be.

He hadn’t dared to touch it then, not flesh to flesh. It had been drenched in blood, the fingers locked as they still were about the hunter that Aylesford’s masters in Paris had sent him to London to acquire, this weapon that had the power, or so he had been assured, and did most readily believe, of winning the war for France and restoring the line of the Stuarts to the English throne. The Worshipful Company, on the other hand, whose secret remit went far beyond the mere manufacture and regulation of timepieces, would use its power to preserve and extend the reign of the Hanover upstarts.

There, deep beneath the streets of London, in the gloomy subterranean realm of the Morecockneyans, the watch had glowed in the dead grip of the severed hand like a fiery ruby set in a devil’s sceptre. Washed in its bloody light, Aylesford had known himself to be in the presence of

something more dangerous than he could understand. He'd removed his cloak and thrown it over the severed hand, muffling but not entirely hiding the light, then quickly raised the package in trembling fingers and dropped it into a burlap sack provided by Starkey. He'd held it in his hand, bundled in the wool of his cloak, for mere seconds. But even so, he'd felt the warmth of it, like a loaf of bread pulled fresh from the oven. A powerful pulse had passed through the thick fabric, as of a beating heart, and, more unsettling still, he'd sensed the regard of a cold and watchful intelligence, as if the hunter were aware of him. Indeed, in the space of those seconds he'd felt himself weighed and judged, as God might judge the souls of the dead. And though his heart had quailed at the penetration of that eyeless gaze, he'd also felt a thrill of something prideful, for he'd sensed that the hunter – whatever it might truly be – was not entirely displeased at what it had made of him. And might yet make of him.

He and Starkey had left the underground realm of the Morecockneyans almost immediately, after a brief audience with the King Beneath the Ground, as their young monarch styled himself, who had invested Starkey with the authority of an ambassador and provided him with letters for Charles Edward Stuart and the French king. So it hadn't been until some hours later, above ground again – 'topside', as Starkey called it – that an opportunity to examine the amputation more closely had presented itself to Aylesford.

He was alone in a private sitting room at the Red Lion, a Holborn inn secretly owned by the Morecockneyans, one of many such establishments scattered throughout the city that permitted easy, discreet intercourse between London and its self-effacing subterranean sister, and kept the coffers and larders of the King Beneath the Ground flush besides. Starkey was gone, readying the carriage that would take them south to Hastings: a day's journey along

winding, tortuous roads that could easily protract itself due to any one of the innumerable contingencies of travel, from bad weather to bad luck to bad men. Later this night or early the next morning – if all went according to schedule – they would be rowed out to meet the ship that would smuggle them across the Channel. That ship, or so Starkey had assured, would be waiting for their signal, as a man had already been dispatched to Hastings with news of their coming.

Dawn was just beginning to break outside the second-storey casement window, casting a pale and enervated light over a cobbled courtyard bestrewn with damp straw. Starkey and men unknown to Aylesford came in and out of view at unpredictable intervals below, their figures blurry in the latticed panes. A scruffy little black dog amused itself by tormenting a pair of bedraggled hens, harrying them about the courtyard with an air more of mischief than malice. The chickens responded to its sallies with every appearance of affronted dignity, and Aylesford imagined them as spinsters picking up their skirts and dashing about in clucking consternation at the interest of a man. Sometimes those were the juiciest hens of all.

He had not slept a wink, and there did not seem much prospect of sleep in his immediate future, with a bouncing, bumping carriage for a bed – not until they reached Hastings, in any case, and perhaps not until he was safely aboard ship. Yet he was not tired. On the contrary, he was filled with feverish energy.

After fortifying himself with a meal of cold roast beef, bread, cheese, and small beer, Aylesford had turned his attention to the sack, which lay on the floor to one side of the table where he'd broken his fast. He leaned down in his chair and pulled it closer, the dead weight sending an instinctive shudder through his frame. His intention was to prise the hunter from the frozen grip of Quare's hand. He would retain the former and throw the latter into the sewer,

which was all the burial it deserved, though at the same time he smiled to think of the impression such a memento would make in Paris. Perhaps it would launch a new fashion. Well, he would leave that honour to another.

He did not relish the prospect of having to break the fingers, which he felt certain would be locked in rigor, or of having to wash away the blood and gore, though he had procured a basin of water and towels for the purpose. Even in death, Quare was proving to be a damnable nuisance. But this was the last time the man – or a portion of him, rather – would trouble him.

Yet Aylesford hesitated, the sack unopened at his feet. It was neither squeamishness nor fastidiousness that made him take another swallow of beer but the memory – or not memory, for doubt fostered by the passage of time had undermined his certainty of what had happened back in the cavern beneath the guild hall; say impression, rather – the very strong impression that he'd been subjected to an examination of sorts, as if the hunter were an eye, and the garish light it shed the visible manifestation of a gaze from which, like the workings of a guilty conscience, there could be no hiding. Not that he had ever known those workings himself. His conscience was clear. What he'd done had been done for a great and sacred cause, and as such, even if crimes had been committed, which he did not for an instant concede, he had, as it were, been absolved in advance and in perpetuity. This was war. He had shed blood and would no doubt shed more of it before he was done. He did not flinch from the necessity; indeed, he welcomed it and would wear the stains like badges of honour.

Setting his jaw, Aylesford opened the sack and pulled out the bundle within. This he wasted no time in laying upon the table, elbowing his pewter plate aside. He had expected his cloak to be sodden with blood, but it was dry to the touch and, like his conscience, unmarked by any stain as far as he could see. And no warmer than a wool cloak

should be. Gingerly, and with no little anticipation, he drew back the folds of the cloak to expose what lay within.

Quare's hand reposed palm up, still holding the pocket watch in its nerveless grasp. This object had lost its cherry glow and resembled any ordinary, undistinguished timepiece of its kind. The plain, unmarked case, which had the look of oft-handled silver, shone dully in the early morning light. There was no trace of blood. Not so much as a drop or even the faintest stain. It was as if both appendage and watch had been methodically licked clean by a cat. But that was not the strangest thing.

The hand was white and smooth as marble. The stump of the wrist, where Aylesford's blade had cleaved flesh and bone, was solid, the ragged wound sealed without scar or blemish. He was drawn and repelled in equal measure; the impossibility of what he was seeing stimulated his curiosity even as it raised the hairs at the back of his neck. He picked up the knife he had used on the joint of beef and, after wiping the greasy blade negligently on his sleeve, touched the tip tentatively to the wrist, where he could see a raised ridge of tendon, like a slender root running just below the surface of the ground. He might have been tapping stone. He saw to his amazement that the fine hairs along the wrist had turned translucent as glass, like the tentacles of tiny anemones. Probed by the knife, they proved to be as if carved into the stone, or affixed to it. He could not insert any portion of the blade's edge between the hairs and whatever substance, stone or bone or something else entirely, lay beneath them.

He paused to wash the dryness from his mouth with another swallow of small beer. Then, still leery of touching the hand directly, he took the fork from atop his plate. With that implement in one hand, and the knife in the other, it occurred to him that he must look like a refined cannibal contemplating where best to begin carving. Deftly, as

though he had practised the manoeuvre dozens of times, he used fork and knife to flip the hand over.

The back presented a similar spectacle, save that the translucent hairs were present in greater profusion and the veins and tendons more vividly displayed. Curiosity outstripping caution at last, he set down the knife, which he had been holding in his right hand, and ever so gently brushed the tip of his index finger across the pale dorsum. A tingling thrill shot through him, as if some spark had passed from Quare's hand to his. He drew back with a gasp, the fork dropping to clatter on the floor. The minute hairs had seemed to prick mildly at his skin. When he examined his fingertip, he saw that a sort of rash had sprung up ... a cluster of tiny red dots. Why, the damned thing had stung him like a jellyfish!

Returning his attention to the appendage, he observed a faint blush colouring the hairs. It faded as he watched, until they were translucent again. No, he realized queasily, he had not been stung but *bitten*. His blood sucked into the severed hand. A moment ago he had smiled at the conceit of himself as a cannibal preparing to dine. But the figure had been apropos. Only *he* had been the meal.

The hand had drunk his blood. For what purpose?

And how was such a thing possible?

He had known that the hunter was no ordinary timepiece. His masters had told him that, though they had not been able – or, at any rate, willing – to delve into the specifics of its unique qualities, on which they placed so much importance. He had assumed that what made it so valuable was some abstruse technological innovation that could be put to a more practical use in warfare. His knowledge of horology was superficial, consisting of assorted details and techniques committed to memory in the course of a fortnight's study in Paris under the exacting tutelage of masters from *la Corporation des maîtres horlogers* – the French clockmakers' guild – in order to masquerade as a

Scottish journeyman of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers freshly arrived in London. Of course, any close examination of his supposed skills would have unmasked him immediately as a fraud, but for once the casual English prejudice against his country had worked in his favour: Englishmen found it sufficiently miraculous that a Scotsman might wear a coat and breeches and speak English, however barbarously, to inquire too deeply into any other civilized accomplishments he might lay claim to.

But Aylesford had heard and seen enough in his pursuit of the timepiece, from the strange circumstances of Master Magnus's death to Quare's emergence from the lowest levels of the guild hall with the watch upraised in his hand and shedding a ghastly crimson glow as if in anticipation of the blood about to be spilled, to know that what set the hunter apart had little to do with natural science.

Little? There was nothing natural about it. Mere contact had worked this incomprehensible change upon Quare's flesh and bone. What other changes might it not work in time? Perhaps prolonged contact was not even necessary. A single touch might suffice. Indeed, for all he knew, proximity alone rendered one subject to its baleful influence. He had touched it. Had carried it close to him for hours now. It might already be changing him, working upon him in ways too subtle for his senses to perceive.

It occurred to him that Quare's uncanny resilience had its explanation at last. For on the night of the massacre at the Pig and Rooster, as Quare lay in a drugged stupor in the barmaid's bed, he had stabbed him in the back, the dagger angling precisely down, right through the heart, yet the man had shown himself no worse for the injury. Aylesford had told himself that his thrust must have gone astray in the dark, but now he realized that the watch had been protecting Quare somehow, shielding him from death, though he knew with certainty that Quare had not had it in his possession at the time. No, the watch had been in the

hands of Master Magnus that night: the very night, in fact, that the misshapen genius – head of the Most Secret and Exalted Order of Regulators, the Worshipful Company's cadre of spies and special agents, of which Quare had been a member – had perished in his guild hall workshop, the watch clutched in his hand ... just as it was now clutched in Quare's hand.

Were the two events, Magnus's death and Quare's unlikely, not to say impossible, avoidance of that fate, separated though they had been by distance, linked through some arcane agency? Had the hunter killed one man while interceding to spare another? To ask the questions was to answer them. Though reason might rebel against the conclusion, preferring to take refuge in coincidence, Aylesford would not allow himself that consolation. His own experience argued too forcefully against it. The watch had worked its will upon both men. Upon the world. But by what means, and to what end, he did not know nor could even begin to imagine, save that there was more than a stench of brimstone about it.

And why would the watch, or whatever demonic force or spirit inhabited it, having protected Quare once, lift its protection now and allow Aylesford's sword to sever the hand that held it?

Could it be that the watch had *wanted* him to have it? Again he recalled how, lifting the bloody amputation from the ground, he had felt himself come under scrutiny, as if the watch were an eye that was staring back at him unblinking – or, rather, staring into him, piercing him to the heart with its gaze just as he had pierced Quare's heart with his dagger, but to greater effect. Was that gaze fixed upon him even now?

As these thoughts and questions arose in his mind, Aylesford sat like a man who has received some piece of news too shattering to take in all at once. Then, as if some inner coil had come unsprung, he bolted upright, sending

his chair crashing to the floor. He snatched the knife and stood ready to fend off any attack from the object on the table. He was aware of the absurdity of his pose – he could practically hear Starkey’s mocking laughter – but he felt himself to be in mortal peril and meant to defend his life as he would against any flesh-and-blood adversary.

The hand, however, lay motionless as ever. It appeared just as it had when he’d first unwrapped it. No hint of colour remained.

Hurriedly, taking care not to inadvertently touch it again, and keeping the knife near by all the while, he wrapped it back in his cloak and returned the package to the sack. Then, keeping the sack in view, he crossed the room and sat in a chair as far away from it as possible.

Sweat ran down his forehead and back. His finger, his whole hand, was tingling. Was the sensation moving up his arm? He couldn’t be sure. It might be his fancy at work, or rather his fear. But it might not. His heart felt strange, as if it were not beating but rather clenching and unclenching. As if it were not a heart but a hand. A hand that held an unholy watch.

Aylesford sprang to his feet and began pacing the confines of the room. At that moment, despite his mission, despite his fervent allegiance to the inseparable if not entirely commensurate causes of Scottish independence and Jacobite restoration, for which he had sacrificed so much in his twenty-two years, despite everything he had worked for, hoped for, dreamed of, he would have pitched the sack and its contents into the nearest sewer, as he’d planned to do with Quare’s hand once he’d wrested the watch from its dead grasp, if only he could have done so from a safe distance. But he had no thought now of prising the watch free. No, let Quare keep his prize.

I will do my duty, he told himself. Take the timepiece tae France. But then I will wash my hands o’ it. There are things in this world a man should nae meddle with.

Isn't it a bit late for that? a voice seemed to whisper in reply. *Haven't you already meddled with it?*

And it has meddled with me, he thought grimly. *As it did with Quare before me.*

A mood of fatalism had settled over Aylesford by the time he and Starkey were on their way to Hastings. As the carriage rattled and bounced over the rough roads, Starkey, seated on the bench across from Aylesford, stretched out his legs, pulled his hat low over his face, and proceeded to drowse, for all the world as if he were in a soft – and stationary – bed.

Aylesford envied him his equipoise. He could not have slept here, or anywhere else. Not now. He had tried to get Starkey to take charge of the sack and its contents, but the man had refused, insisting that the relic – his word for the severed hand, as if it had belonged to a saint, not a spy – was Aylesford's responsibility. And so Aylesford, not without misgivings, had brought the sack into the carriage, concluding that his duty, in good conscience, required him to keep the damned thing close ... but not too close.

The carriage was comfortably appointed. The benches were cushioned and upholstered in maroon leather, and a sprung suspension system reduced the shocks of the road from bone-breaking to merely teeth-rattling. A netted pouch for small items of baggage was affixed to the ceiling above the benches, and there, over Starkey's nodding head, Aylesford had stowed the sack, where he could keep a gimlet eye upon it. If Starkey was at all apprehensive about sitting beneath this Damoclean object, he gave no sign of it.

The interior of the carriage was warm and close, smelling of sweat and old leather, and less savoury stinks emitted at intervals by the snoring Starkey, but Aylesford kept the window shut against unwholesome breezes, for the smells of the horses and the clouds of dust introduced by those breezes would, he knew, constitute a cure worse than the

original affliction. The hyacinth-scented handkerchief he pressed to his nose – one of the few French fashions he had adopted in his years there – did not eliminate these odours but provided a degree of distraction from them, as well as armouring him against the ague and other infirmities of the air. Alas, the bucolic charms of the English countryside unscrolling behind the grimy glass of the window proved less distracting, and he found his attention drawn back again and again to the lodestone opposite him.

Aylesford was simultaneously appalled and thrilled to think that he had in his possession a weapon that would win the war for France and restore the Stuart dynasty to Scotland. He did not give a fig for England and considered that all the troubles of his native land could be traced to the overweening ambition of James VI to achieve by peaceful succession what conquest had failed to deliver: the union of the two neighbouring kingdoms into a single entity, ruled by a single sovereign. But though successful at first, that strategy had proved an unmitigated disaster, as England, which James had thought to swallow, had instead, ogre-like, swallowed Scotland, spitting out, like so much gristle and bone, both James's posterity and what little had been left of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church after the depredations of Henry Tudor and his wicked daughter, the regicide Elizabeth.

England could go to the devil for all Aylesford cared – indeed, he would gladly help to send it there. He quite understood there could be no free and independent Scotland until England was brought to heel. But that was the extent of his interest. Unlike many of his compatriots – including, unfortunately, the Bonnie Prince himself – Aylesford had no wish to see his sovereign repeat the vainglorious mistakes of his predecessors by taking up a crown that, however glittering, had bent the neck of every Stuart who had worn it like a millstone ... bent it lower and

lower, until it was of a height to rest comfortably on the chopping block.

Still, as a loyal subject, Aylesford knew where his duty lay, and he was determined to perform it, regardless of his personal opinions. The important thing right now was to ensure that England *was* defeated. Without that, there was nothing. And now, thanks to him, victory was at hand – quite literally so.

Even considering the hunter's uncanny nature – which on the whole he preferred *not* to consider – it seemed incredible to Aylesford that this single small object could tip the balance in a war that had already dragged on for more than five years. How, he wondered, would victory come to pass? To what use would the watch be put by his masters? What powers did it possess that sober-minded men like the duc de Choiseul, the French minister orchestrating the present invasion, and Lieutenant-Colonel James Grant, military adviser to the prince – and Aylesford's patron – who had been with him since the prior invasion, that of 1745, when London itself had been so briefly within grasp, should set such store upon it, as though it were the equivalent of five hundred cannon? All Aylesford had seen and experienced of the watch had convinced him that it was an object to be respected and feared. He had no doubt that it could kill a man, and do worse than kill. But how it might defeat an army or humble a nation – much less an empire like England – he could not imagine. It was, in the end, just a small thing, after all. Perhaps it could be the weapon of an assassin – though even a dagger might serve for that purpose, as he well knew – but if so, surely he was bringing it in the wrong direction, away from any useful target.

It was fruitless to speculate, he told himself. The answers would become clear soon enough. When he had left France, five months ago at the height of summer, plans had been under way for a bold invasion of England and Scotland, and