

VICTORIA LAMB

Shakespeare's
muse, in love and
in peril...

His
Dark
Lady



About the Book

London, 1583.

When young, aspiring playwright William Shakespeare encounters **Lucy Morgan**, one of Queen Elizabeth I's ladies-in-waiting, the two fall passionately in love. He declares Lucy the inspiration for his work, but what secret is Will hiding from his muse?

Meanwhile, Lucy has her own secret - one that could destroy her world if exposed. No longer the chaste maid so valued by the Virgin Queen, she also bore witness to the clandestine wedding of Lettice Knollys and Robert Dudley, a match forbidden by the monarch.

England is in peril. Queen Elizabeth's health is deteriorating, her throne under siege from Catholic plotters and threats of war with Spain. Faced with deciding the fate of her long-term prisoner, Mary, Queen of Scots, she needs a trusted circle of advisors around her now more than ever. But who can she turn to when those closest to her have proved disloyal?

And how secure is Lucy's position at court, now that she has learned the dangerous art of keeping secrets?

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Epigraph

Prologue

Part One

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Part Two

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty

Part Three

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten

Epilogue

Author's Note

Bibliography
Acknowledgements
About the Author
Also by Victoria Lamb
Copyright

His Dark Lady

Victoria Lamb

For A

'Presume not that I am the thing I was.'

William Shakespeare,
Henry IV, Part Two, Act 5, Scene v

'How far that little candle throws his beams!
So shines a good deed in a naughty world.'

William Shakespeare,
Merchant of Venice: Act 5, Scene i

Prologue



Kenilworth Castle, Warwickshire, April 1578

HANDS CLASPED IN prayer, Lucy bent her head, watching a stag-horned beetle crawl across the rushes. Her knees hurt on the stone floor, its cold striking into her bones through the thin embroidered cushion on which she knelt. They would not have much longer to wait, she told herself. Her mind drifted to the past and she struggled to drag it back to prayer, to the present moment, to this small draughty room high up in the castle keep. Her back ached as well as her knees; her sleep had been disturbed last night. Too many unhappy memories in this place. Perhaps she should not have agreed to return to Kenilworth.

The widowed Countess of Essex knelt a few feet away, her lips moving in more fervent prayer. Her cushion was larger and plumper, Lucy noticed.

A pack of raucous men passed below their window with torches and bawdy shouts. The countess jerked in shock, her hair hidden demurely beneath an embroidered cap and veil. She stared across at Lucy, her only companion during these difficult hours. Her eyes shone in the candlelight. Were those tears?

The long wait was over. A moment later there was a hammering at the outer door of the countess's apartments, followed by a hubbub of raised voices. This time Lettice gave a little gasp and crossed herself, shaking her head as though to deny that the moment had finally arrived. Not so

calm as she would like to appear, then. Lucy shifted uncomfortably on her cushion. Would she be allowed to rise now?

Lady Mary Herbert, the fair-haired Countess of Pembroke, came to the bedchamber door looking flustered and unsure. 'My lady?'

'What is it?'

Behind the girl's shoulder, Lucy could see as many as a dozen men in livery filling the outer chamber, their faces flushed and intent; she smelt the acrid smoke from their blazing torches.

Lady Mary stammered, 'Th ... the men are here for you, my lady. They say the hour has come. That you must descend with them and make no delay.'

'Don't fret, Mary,' Lettice Knollys replied calmly, having got herself back in hand. 'You may tell them I am ready and prepared, and must finish my prayers.'

Lady Mary looked nervous, but nodded and withdrew. The thick oak door closed behind her, shutting out the noise and smoking torchlight.

Poor child, over-sensitive and scared of her own shadow. Lady Mary Herbert was only here at the request of her uncle Robert, and was clearly not happy to have been placed in such a dangerous situation. Sometimes the Earl of Leicester failed to appreciate how his plans might affect those around him, thinking only of his own desires. The Queen's favourite, he had always been wilful and head-strong; yet Lucy had never felt able to dislike him for it, such was the force of Robert's charm. No doubt he had also charmed his niece into attending tonight.

Lucy watched the Countess of Essex with curiosity. How could she seem so calm? The widow was skilled at hiding her emotions, clearly. She had spent most of her life in high places, after all, and must be accustomed to lying to save her neck. Though tonight would mark an end to her greatest lie of all.

Her prayers finished, still kneeling beside the bed with a Breton lace shawl over her shoulders to keep out the draught, Lettice Knollys rose gracefully to her feet.

‘Well,’ she muttered. ‘It’s time.’

She shrugged off the shawl and shook out the heavy skirts of her gown.

‘How do I look, child?’

Lucy examined her ladyship with an experienced eye. Even in the dull glow of candlelight the Countess of Essex looked magnificent. The finery of the dress, all silver lace and gold satin, was topped by a stiff white ruff sprinkled with diamonds and pearls. Her slippers were embroidered silver, peeping out from beneath the swaying gown. Her reddish hair shone with a gold net of jewels. There was no sign that this transformation had taken five hours and as many women, pushing and coaxing the widowed countess’s too-rounded figure into the costly gown.

‘Beautiful as a queen,’ Lucy told her, and was rewarded by the countess’s smile, her face aglow with triumph.

The Countess of Essex took her hands and kissed Lucy on both cheeks. Her lips felt cool, her kiss somehow perfunctory, yet Lucy was still surprised by the gesture. Lettice had never showed her this courtesy before, much less friendship. But then her ladyship had never stood in such danger before.

‘I have not thanked you for agreeing to attend to me tonight, Lucy. I know how much this loyalty will cost you if the Queen should ever hear of it.’

Lucy lowered her gaze, saying nothing. Had she been given any true choice in the matter she would not have come at all. But it had been presented to her as a summons, not a request. Two hooded servants had accompanied the note, ready to sweep her secretly from court and on to a covered wagon that had trundled and lurched along the roads to Warwickshire with little care for her comfort. She could have refused, of course. But where

was the sense in making an enemy by refusing when she might make a friend by agreeing?

Lettice snapped her fingers and Lucy hurried to open the door. They were not friends yet, and she knew her place.

'I have my own women to dress me,' Lettice continued, fiddling distractedly with her silver belt-chain as she stepped outside, 'and Robert's niece to sit beside us at the bridal dinner. Mary is a pretty girl, but only recently married, and still a child for all that she bears the title of countess. I need at least one court lady at my side tonight who knows how things must be done. And who can I trust more than you?'

'You do me great honour, my lady,' Lucy murmured.

She stooped and lifted the heavy silver train of Lettice's gown off the rushes where it was already soiling. The jewels prickled under her fingers; the countess's gown was almost as extravagant and richly made as anything from Elizabeth's own wardrobe.

'Strange to think that in another few minutes I will have stolen the Queen's most prized possession.' Although Lettice laughed, Lucy detected a hint of fear in her voice. 'What will my royal cousin say when she discovers she is too late, that I am already Robert's wife?'

'Best not to think on it, my lady.'

'It is all I have thought on for months.' The countess's expression grew suddenly defiant. Lettice Knollys was only beautiful when she was calm, Lucy realized, and hurriedly lowered her gaze in case the unkind thought showed in her eyes. 'Yet what can Elizabeth do? Throw us both in the Tower for marrying without her consent? She'd never do it. Not to her darling Robert. And as for me, she would not dare such an outrage against her own cousin.'

Lucy thought the Queen capable of any outrage when it came to keeping Robert Dudley close to her. Yes, Elizabeth might balk at locking up her favourite, but Lettice would

be foolish to consider herself safe from the Queen's anger on his account, given how much the two cousins loathed each other. Lucy only hoped the Queen would overlook her part in all this when she did discover what had taken place so secretly here at Kenilworth.

'Come,' Lettice ordered her. 'My bridesmen are impatient for a nuptial, it seems. Let us give them one to remember.'

The countess and her rowdy entourage of bridesmen and women moved in a torchlit procession through Kenilworth Castle, with the rest of her servants following behind. Negotiating the narrow, low-roofed passages and stairways of the keep, they at last reached the grand staircase illuminated by great flaming torches and guarded at intervals by Leicester's men in their smart blue livery. It was a warm spring evening as they crossed the courtyard under the looming gaze of the banqueting hall windows, the torches of the bridesmen casting vast dancing shadows about them. One of the great state apartments in the new block above, built in honour of Queen Elizabeth's visit there three years before, had been swept out the previous day, the rushes renewed and the white marbled mantels dressed with flowers newly cut from the earl's gardens.

One of the castle guards was staring at Lucy, his eyes bloodshot from the smoking torches. He glanced away when their eyes met. No doubt the foolish man thought her a heathen with her black skin, come here like one of the devil's own to cast a curse on the company. If only she had some bones to rattle at him, she thought, and suppressed the urge to stick her tongue out.

Nobody in the castle was supposed to know why this room had been prepared. But of course there could be no such thing as a secret wedding when so many servants and villagers had been involved in fetching up armfuls of white spring blossom to decorate the mantels, clearing out the state apartments to make way for the company, and

preparing a rich array of dishes for the feast that would follow.

The procession paused outside the open door to the magnificent state apartments. One of Lettice's women fumbled with the countess's gown, shaking out the heavily jewelled skirts so they would catch the candlelight to better advantage.

The groom stood by the vast marbled fireplace with his back to them, talking earnestly with the lean-faced Anglican priest who had ridden over from Coventry to marry them.

Lord Leicester looked almost regal tonight, Lucy thought. She sensed the countess's pleasure as she too paused on the threshold to stare at her husband-to-be. Lucy could hardly believe what she had heard about him, that once he had merely been Robert Dudley, Master of the Queen's Horse; that night he was every inch the wealthy, landowning Earl of Leicester. For his wedding suit, he had chosen a fashionable red doublet and hose of French design, a fine woollen cloak hanging from one shoulder, a gold-hilted sword by his side, his velvet cap feathered and set at an angle on silvering hair.

From within the apartments came the sound of music: a single tabor holding a rhythmic beat against the sweet notes of hautboys and horns. Lucy listened to the slow dignified music of the pavane and let it fill her, suddenly overjoyed for the couple, so very much in love that they would dare the Queen's fury like this.

'I've won,' Lettice muttered, feeding on her bridegroom with her eyes. Her knuckles turned white as she clutched a spray of fresh spring flowers. 'It's happening at last, Lucy. There's nothing the Queen can do to stop us now.'

Lettice swept in and Lord Leicester turned eagerly, only to fall silent at the sight of his bride-to-be in her wedding gown.

Holding up the countess's train, Lucy followed at the same pace, dressed soberly in a gown of russet taffeta. She curtsied to Lord Leicester and the robed cleric from Coventry, then stepped back into place behind Lettice as the couple spoke quietly together for a moment.

The room had been splendidly dressed for the ceremony, the white and yellow blossoms set about with candles, and hanging silks to soften the castle walls. On the sideboard under the window stood the bride cup, dwarfed by two large silver branches of candles. It would be Lucy's duty after the ceremony to fill the heavily ornate gold chalice with spiced wine, handing it to the newly married couple to drink each other's health. A dozen tiny bridal cakes had been stacked up delicately beside the cup, sweetly fragrant and oozing honey. A young pageboy had been set to wave away any flies or moths attracted by the candle flames. The boy looked quite awed by the splendour of the occasion, staring back wide-eyed when Lucy winked at him.

Abruptly, the laughter and talk in the crowded chamber became subdued. The music swelled to a finish. A space was cleared before the stone-flanked hearth, where a low fire burned steadily. The countess turned her head and Lucy gathered up the silver train of her gown. She followed the countess slowly forward to where two velvet cushions had been set for the couple to kneel on, then knelt behind them on the wooden floor.

On either side of their small party stood the bridesmen and women in the countess's colours of scarlet and gold, some smiling with approval, others solemn. Liveried yeomen stood shoulder to shoulder in front of the door as though to guard them from interruption, and against the walls she could see the servants staring, hands clasped in prayer as the priest turned from blessing the wine and took up his book.

Lucy was smiling too, though inwardly she felt uneasy. She tried not to dwell on what might happen if the earl's

niece spilled this news to the Queen and court. Lady Mary would never betray her own blood, she told herself. Besides, it was too late to do anything about it now. More was the pity. The Queen's temper, always violent and uncertain, had grown ever more unpredictable as she had entered her middle years. Surely she would never harm Robert Dudley, her favourite? But what of the rest of us who dared to witness this wedding and not prevent it?

The priest was looking nervous, too. His hands shook as he began to read, 'Dearly beloved friends, we are gathered together here in the sight of God and in the face of this congregation.'

Greenwich Palace, London, late April 1578

Fresh buds on the trees, the love-dance of the peacock shaking the 'eyes' on his splendid blue-green tail, a weak April sunshine on the grassy lawns. These were some of her favourite sights in spring. Yet Elizabeth could hardly bear to stop and admire them as she paced the neatly kept paths and gardens at Greenwich Palace. She bit her lip, rubbed and clapped her gloved hands together, now walking briskly, now standing in a daze like a moonstruck calf. Where had Robert gone? What was he doing that was so important it must keep him from court? She had thought they were growing closer again, this past year. Why would he cause her this new grief?

The Earl of Leicester had come back to court from the country on her summons, then kept mysteriously to his own suite of rooms, claiming to be ill. Now he had vanished entirely, and without asking her permission to leave court. It seemed the earl had been ferried back across the river with his servants to sit out a fever at Leicester House, her spies had told her apologetically. But Elizabeth could tell they were unsure of their information. Shuffling feet, downcast eyes. Hurriedly penned notes that spoke of

indecision. *Might be there, Your Majesty. May lately have been seen in the vicinity.*

Idiots! And they dared to call themselves her spies. She should have them all strung up as fools and knaves. Except, as her spymaster, Sir Francis Walsingham, was fond of reminding her, she would then get no information out of them at all, let alone this embarrassed throat-clearing over Robert's whereabouts. What were they trying to hide from her?

It had once again become her custom to walk out with her ladies in the early mornings. It had been another bitter winter, ice remaining on the ground long after it should have thawed, and the stiff green tips of spring flowers frozen where they grew. But now it was late April, and at last Elizabeth was able to enjoy the sweet breeze and the birds calling to each other in the spring sunshine. Such a relief, she thought, to leave behind the choking air of chambers where night pots had not yet been emptied nor soiled rushes swept away. They had been in residence several months now, and it was becoming impossible to mask the stench of the privies with burned herbs or sweeten the odour of unwashed flesh with pomanders.

She turned back towards the palace. 'Speak, what is it?' she asked brusquely, seeing one of her stewards hurrying towards her.

'The Spanish ambassador awaits you in the Presence Chamber, Your Majesty.'

Signor Mendoza! She had forgotten their meeting this morning. She thought of his watchful eyes and the dark oily sheen of his hair, but could not quite find it in herself to dislike the man. He might be reporting every movement she made back to Spain, but at least he understood how to entertain a bored queen with gossip.

'What's that?' she demanded. Something had fluttered slowly down from an open window above their heads. Elizabeth stared upwards, but it was impossible to make

anything out against the sunlight. 'Pick it up, man, and give it to me. Is it a letter? From whose window did it fall?'

'Window?' the steward repeated blankly, but craned his neck upwards at her command. 'I cannot tell, Your Majesty. I see no one.'

The letter was not addressed to anyone; it merely held a few lines in a bold hand. Her blood chilled as she read them.

'I do not believe it,' she choked, then crumpled the letter up tight in her gloved hand.

God's blood, could it be true?

Remain calm, she told herself, aware of her women staring. Remember that you are a queen. Reveal nothing.

'Send for Lord Leicester. I would speak with him at once.'

'But, Your Majesty, he ... his lordship is not at court at present.'

'Then send to Leicester House and tell him I will brook no delay, but must see him this very day.' Elizabeth stared at the trees swaying gently in the spring breeze. How dared he? How dared he? The blood thrummed in her temples. 'No, wait! I shall go myself. Have my barge readied.'

The steward stared at his queen as though she had turned mad as old King Canute. Perhaps she was mad. Yes, that would explain her look: as if she would snap his neck like a twig if he did not at once carry out her command.

'Your b ... barge, Your Majesty?'

'Out of my way, fool,' she snapped, sweeping past him in such a rage that she was barely able to make herself understood to her women as she fumed at them to change her walking gown.

She stood impatiently while women fussed about her, stepping out of her petticoats and holding up her arms for the sleeves to be unlaced. She did not stop to wonder who would have thrown down such a letter for her to find.

Walsingham could discover that later. For now she must simply determine whether or not it held the truth. Though in her heart she knew it was no lie.

Damn him, damn him!

Elizabeth rode towards the river in the breezy spring sunshine, surrounded by guards and her flustered-looking women, a light wind whipping up sand on the pathway. Was that genuine confusion on the faces of her ladies-in-waiting or had she been the last to know again? Bad enough his flagrant affair with Lettice three years ago, that Elizabeth knew had slowly rekindled after Lettice's husband had died, but this ...

In the royal barge, she straightened out the crumpled note and read it once more, her heart lacerated by its contents.

R. has been secretly married these past three weeks to Essex's widow, who now holds court with him in queenly estate at Leicester House. A Friend.

Holds court? That was a cunning phrase, right enough, but what did it signify? Did Lettice now presume to become queen in her place? Elizabeth ground her teeth in rage and frustration. She would have this out with Robert today, even if it meant outright war between them. At least surprise would be on her side.

But on arriving at Leicester House, Robert's extensive London residence that opened its gates on to the Strand, Elizabeth found to her great annoyance that a messenger must have ridden hard ahead of their company. The doors to the great house stood open, all the servants down on their knees outside as the cavalcade approached, a litter bearing her from the river.

'His lordship is unwell,' his steward babbled as Elizabeth was helped from her litter, 'and begs for a little more time to prepare himself for your honoured visit, Your Majesty.'

Ignoring the man, Elizabeth strode into the house, past staring servants, and up the grand staircase. Her women began to follow her in whispering disorder, but she barked, 'Wait for me below!', sending them back outside in disarray. Let them stare and make baleful predictions there, she thought. This was one interview they would not be allowed to overhear.

Elizabeth found Robert in the doorway to his bedchamber, wrapped in a house coat, looking very pale - and in truth unwell.

'Your Majesty,' he croaked, then knelt, head bowed, as she met his gaze with utter fury and contempt. 'Forgive me.'

His servant bolted when she turned to glare at him.

'Is it true?' she managed after a threadbare silence, looking down at Robert's bent head. 'Are you and my cousin Lettice wed?'

He looked up then, and she knew the letter had not lied. His dark eyes watched her, eyes that made it impossible for her to order his death. 'Yes, it is true.'

The blood beat in her ears so loud she thought she would faint. Married, married, married. She would kill him. No, she would kill her. Rip her throat out. Toss her liver to the dogs. Stick her bloodied head on a pike for all to see.

Elizabeth counted silently to ten. Better that than launch herself at him with a scream, all claws like a shrew.

'And where is this she-wolf?'

Why did her voice have to sound so shrill? It angered her that she cared what Robert did after all these years. They were not promised to each other, had never been in any way the Council would recognize. This jealous rage demeaned her, lowered her to the status of a fishwife. He was her subject. Nothing more. What did it matter with whom he coupled, so long as he served her? Except this union could weaken her hold on the English crown. Lettice was of royal blood, had some claim to the throne, and

Robert might no longer be young, but he was a nobleman now, an earl with vast resources at his command. Resources she had put in his path. Elizabeth cursed herself again for a trusting fool.

'Not here,' he told her. 'I sent her home.'

'Home?'

'To her children.'

She waited. 'You did not seek my permission to wed.' It was a statement, not a question.

'Would it have been given, Your Majesty?'

'That is not the point.'

Her voice nagged at him. Yet she was somewhat mollified by his penitent tone. She liked that Robert was still on his knees, looking up at her like a supplicant. That was his place, that was where he belonged. On his knees to her, his queen.

'My cousin Lettice is the widow of an earl, not a washerwoman. Her remarriage required my signature, as well you know. I should have you both arrested.'

'Arrest me, Your Majesty, not your cousin. The fault is mine. I insisted that we wed without waiting for your permission.' He was sweating and shivering, his discomfort obvious. Hard to counterfeit a fever. 'Lettice is guiltless in this.'

She would have laughed but her anger forbade it. Lettice guiltless? One day, she thought. One day I will make her suffer for this insolence.

'You are fortunate that I am a forgiving queen,' she told him, then hated herself for such female weakness. Arrest them both. Give Lettice a taste of the Tower that would leave her knock-kneed in fear for the rest of her life. Do not let their disobedience pass without right and proper punishment. Yet she found herself saying instead, 'However, you will not return to court. You and your bride are no longer welcome there. Not for any reason, not on pain of death. Am I understood?'

Her favourite nodded, clearly relieved to have escaped a stay in the Tower. He knew what horrors that grim place held. They both did.

‘Yes, Your Majesty. I thank you for your mercy.’

He must think her a fool. And with good reason. She struck at him with the only thing she had left. Not her pride. Sweet Jesu, that had gone years ago between them. ‘If all goes well, you may yet be permitted to return to court to celebrate my nuptials. Though your wife will never be invited.’

His eyes had narrowed as he watched her face. Elizabeth smiled, knowing that word had slipped between his ribs like eight inches of Italian steel.

‘Yes, my *nuptials*,’ she repeated, gloating over his dismay. ‘For you should know, I have recently been reconsidering Alençon’s interesting proposal of marriage, and find we may suit after all. I could not take him seriously as a spotty youth, but now that he is grown to manhood and been made Duke of Anjou ...’

‘Marry a Frenchman?’ Robert seemed to be choking.

‘You have often said I should marry, so why not a French noble? Besides, a union with France pleases me more each time I think of it.’ Oh, the steel was in him now, she thought. His eyes were suffering. ‘Alençon is still young, yes, but that will have its advantages in the marriage bed. Or so the doctors tell me.’

Excellent, she thought, now he’s sweating for quite another reason. As she turned to leave Robert to his feverish imaginings, Elizabeth permitted herself a further sharp thrust, just to make sure her favourite knew she meant it.

‘These things always take so long, though, if left to diplomacy alone. I will arrange for Alençon to visit me once he is free of his military duties, and then we shall see if any ... intimacy develops. I am still angry with you, Robert, but we have been friends such a long time.’ One more should

do the trick. 'Wish me well with my young French suitor,
won't you?'

Part One



One



The Cross Keys Inn, London, autumn 1583

‘OUT THE WAY!’

At the hoarse cry, Will Shakespeare flattened himself against the wall of the passageway. Late for his cue again, William Kempe squeezed past in his tattered fool’s costume, gripping the wooden neck of a hobby horse. As he dashed on to the makeshift stage, the theatre erupted in cheers and whistles, those seated in the galleries drumming their feet on the wooden boards with a sound like thunder.

‘How now?’ Kempe called across the heads of the groundlings, then whirled into a crouch with teeth bared and arms wide.

The house fell silent and breathless, waiting for his next line.

Someone came up behind Will, muttering in his ear: ‘They were ready to tear the place apart a minute ago. Now they’re meek as lambs. How does he do it?’

It was James Burbage.

‘He makes them laugh and cry at the same time,’ Will whispered, watching Kempe as he effortlessly dominated the scene, ‘and they love him for it.’

‘Another full house.’ Burbage jingled a bag of coins at his belt. His voice held satisfaction. ‘God preserve us from

the plague and the city magistrates, and we'll be rich men in another year.'

Will looked at the heavy pocket-bag. 'I owe a month's rent.'

Burbage clapped him cheerfully on the shoulder. 'All in good time, Shakespeare. Never let it be said I allow even my apprentices to go short. But think, if I were to pay you now, how much of it would go on saving your family's reputation?'

Will frowned. 'What do you mean?'

'Have you not heard of the fall of the mighty Ardens? Why, man, it's all they were talking about in the Tabard last night.'

'I was busy last night. Making a fresh assault on *The Troublesome Reign of King John*.'

'Excellent. Is the play finished yet?'

'Not quite. It is proving more troublesome than I expected. But if you will give me these ancient plays to rewrite ...' Will glanced out as another roar of laughter went up from the groundlings: Kempe galloping about with a woman's petticoat over his face. 'So what tale is this about the Ardens? They're not close family of mine, you know. Distant cousins.'

'Aye, that's it, best to disown them.' Burbage tucked his purse out of sight under the folds of his jacket. 'No amount of money could save Edward Arden anyhow. They say his head will be decorating London Bridge soon enough. Yes, and with the rest of the family to follow by Christmas.'

Will stared. 'Traitors? The Ardens?'

'If you poked your head out of your pit more often, Master Shakespeare, you might hear something of the world's doings. Yes, the Arden family were arrested as traitors a week or more ago. It's a rare old tale. Arden's son-in-law is John Somerville. You know of him, surely? Poor fool, they say he was born with his brain cracked.'

Well, good John sets off for London, ranting at every inn along the way that he plans to shoot the Queen.'

'What?'

Burbage grinned, warming to his story. 'Somerville was seized before he even reached the city, of course, and Edward Arden and his wife and daughter were taken soon after, as equal conspirators against the throne. The whole family rests now in the Tower, they say, with Edward Arden himself in Little Ease.'

'Good God.'

Burbage laughed. 'Who would have thought it, eh? Your sleepy Warwickshire risen against the Queen before the North. It seems the Catholic roots run deep there.'

Edward Arden, head of the family, in the grim Tower cell they called Little Ease, where it was said a man could neither lie down nor sit? Will thought of his mother and father back in Stratford, not far from the Arden estate.

'What of the rest of the family?' he demanded. 'How far do these accusations go?'

'Now, don't start dreaming you'll rush home to save your loved ones from the law. Write them to hide their catechisms and get themselves to a good Protestant Mass, and no one will hang for it. If the Queen killed all the Catholics, there'd be no one left to wind the clocks and run the towns. Jesu, man, you're as pale as a sack of flour.' Burbage nodded towards the stage. 'Hurry, now. Isn't that your cue?'

'Aye, aye.'

Blowing out his cheeks, Will stepped from the dark passageway into the draughty hall of the Cross Keys Inn. The floor was lit with chill November sunshine streaming through the unshuttered windows, with lanterns set in brackets on the walls to further light the small playing area before the crowd.

All eyes turned to him as he made his entrance. Will felt again the rush of blood that had so excited him the first

time he had ever spoken a line onstage. Then he had been a boy, beardless and still unmarried. It had seemed such a great adventure, playing to the city crowds at Coventry, walking home that night with the unaccustomed weight of coins in his purse. Now it was his work and he could not live without it. He was already up to his ears in debt, with a wife and child at home in Stratford expecting him to support them.

Yet there was still a tingle of excitement on treading the boards, knowing that when he opened his mouth to speak all these folk would stop and listen.

Kempe pretended to slip over, crossing the stage, and Will's first line was drowned out by a roar of laughter from the crowd.

Undeterred, Will raised his voice.

Kempe stumbled back to his feet, his expression rueful. He made a face, then rubbed his backside with both hands. The crowd roared again, delighted by the fool's antics.

Adopting an attitude at the front of the stage, Will folded his arms. He waited for the laughter to die away before attempting to deliver his next line. He suppressed a flicker of annoyance. It was all part of the act; Kempe loved to upstage the other players and raise the temperature of the house.

Will gazed across the laughing crowd of playgoers, those who could not afford seats pressed together near the stage. There was a cloaked woman among them, watching him intently. She was taller than the rest, her face half-hidden by a smoke-grey hood. There was something about the woman that drew Will's attention, and it was not just that her skin was as black as the night sky, and her eyes ...

A shock struck him, like a flaming arrow to the heart, and suddenly Will could not recall his next line.

'Lucy,' he whispered under his breath.

The woman stared back at him. Her dark gaze widened and locked to his.

He had been little more than a boy, a mere eleven years old, the summer he had met Lucy Morgan. Yet he had never forgotten her, nor the marvellous festivities laid on for the Queen's visit during those long hot weeks.

Had she recognized him?

Kempe launched into a foolish little song-and-dance routine, improvised to cover Will's silence.

'There was a man with half a head,' he began whimsically, and the audience laughed, waiting for the rest.

No doubt believing Will had forgotten it, the prompt called out his line from the side of the stage.

Faltering, Will gave his line, and the next lines too. But he performed them only to the Moorish woman in the hooded cloak, who did not smile at his attention but drew back cautiously into the shade of her hood.

That night at Kenilworth eight years ago, he had climbed the steep bank above the castle wall and seen Tom's bloodied body on the grass, men peering down at his corpse in a ring of flickering torches. It had been his first sight of a dead body. At the time he had assumed that Tom Black and Lucy Morgan had been lovers, and that they would have married if the Moor had lived. Certainly the two had been close.

His father John had dragged Will home before he could discover the full truth of what had happened that night. A plot against the Queen was all he had been told, with never a whisper spoken afterwards. Everyone in Stratford knew the Shakespeares were not the good Protestants they pretended to be, so to dwell on such things could be dangerous. Will had begged to be taken back to Kenilworth to see Lucy, to comfort her over Tom's death. Part of him had worried that he had been to blame, that he had not run for help quickly enough. But he had never seen Lucy again.

Now here she was, a few feet away in the crowd, no dream to vanish at daybreak but a flesh-and-blood woman.

A sudden shriek turned Will's head. A woman had risen from her seat and was screaming hysterically, pointing at a broad-shouldered man in a coarse suit. He had blood on his hands and was stooping over another man, who seemed to be slumped in his seat.

The broad-shouldered man vaulted the wooden rail of the gallery and forced his way through the jostling crowd to one of the side corridors.

Nobody tried to stop him, though several shouted 'Murderer!' as he disappeared into the inn courtyard beyond.

When Will turned back, Lucy Morgan was gone.