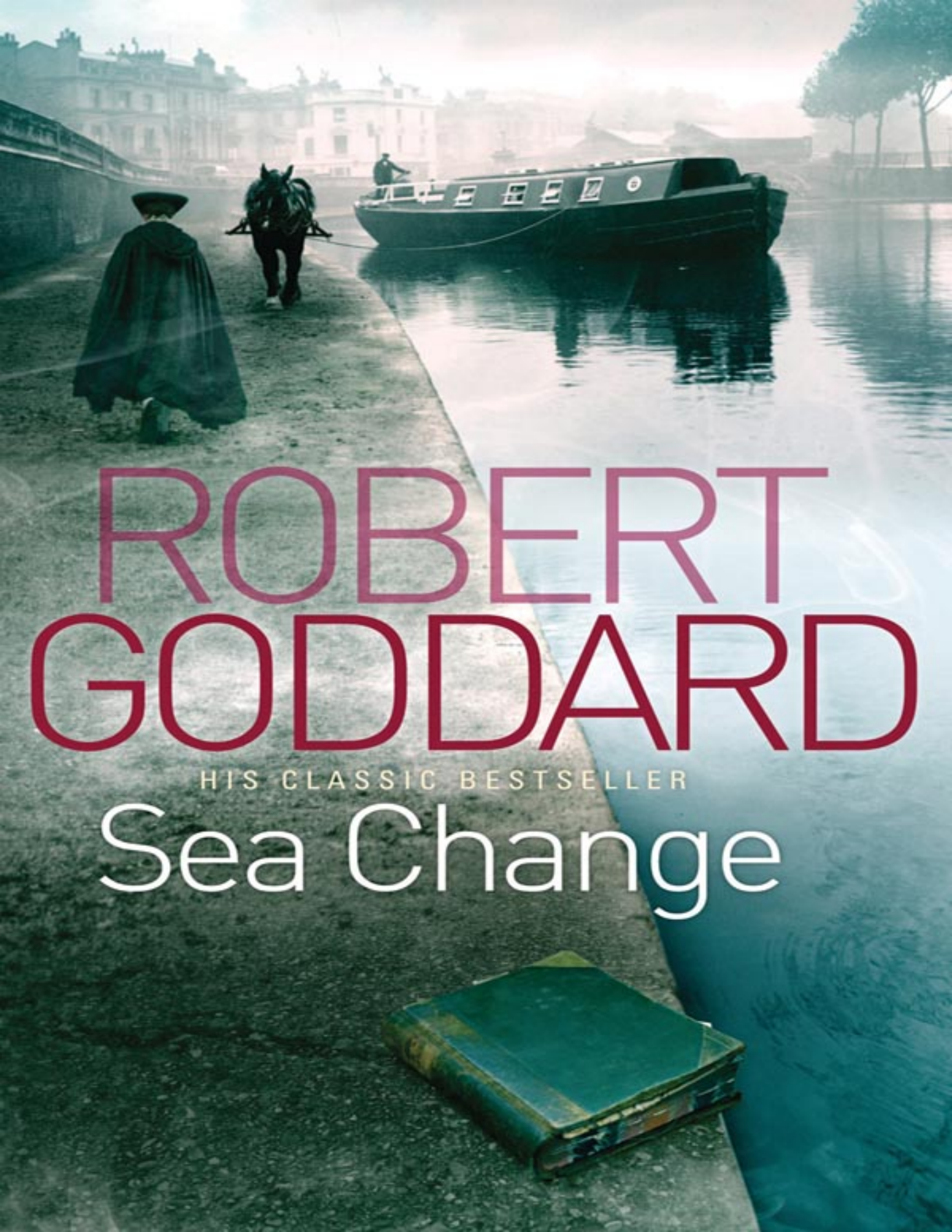




ROBERT GODDARD

HIS CLASSIC BESTSELLER

Sea Change



About the Book

January, 1721. London is reeling from the effects of the greatest financial scandal of the age - the collapse of the South Sea Bubble. William Spandrel, a penniless mapmaker, is offered a discharge of his debts by Sir Theodore Janssen, a director of the South Sea Company, on one condition: he must secretly convey an important package to Amsterdam.

The package safely delivered, Spandrel barely survives an attempt on his life, only to discover the recipient has been murdered, and Spandrel is the prime suspect. Spandrel quickly realises that he has become a pawn in several people's games - British Government agents, and others, are on his trail, believing that the mysterious package contains secrets that could spark a revolution in England.

Spandrel's only chance of survival is to recover the package and place its contents in the right hands. But what are the contents and whose exactly are the right hands?

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SEA CHANGE

Robert Goddard

It has been very judiciously observed that a commercial country has more to dread from the golden baits of avarice, the airy hopes of projectors and the wild enthusiastic dreams of speculators than from any external dangers.

John Millar, *An Authentic Account of the South Sea Scheme* (1845)

‘I have made a profit of a thousand per cent – and I am satisfied.’

Robert Walpole (1720)

Book One

January-March 1721

Chapter One

Stags at Bay

IT WAS DISMAL weather for a dismal time. The night was damp and clammy, clinging to London like a cold sweat. A fire burned in the grate, but Sir Theodore Janssen stood on the far side of the drawing-room from it, one arm propped on the sill of the open window, the other raised to his chest, his hand splayed across his brocaded waistcoat. He glanced out into Hanover Square and seemed to see in the drizzle-smearred gloom the deepening shadow of his future.

Until so very recently, he had been a man of high repute as well as substance. A baronet at the 'special request' of the Prince of Wales, a Member of Parliament, a director of the Bank of England, a landed gentleman, a financier of almost legendary acumen, he had been able to look forward to an old age of comfort and esteem. He had transformed himself from a friendless young Flemish émigré into a pioneer of a new era of commercial freedom. Yet now, here he stood, on the brink of ruin, a self-unmade man too close to the biblical term of life to delude himself with hopes of recouping what he was surely about to lose.

The South Sea Company was his mistake, of course, as it had been many men's. If he had resigned his directorship twelve months ago, or better still never accepted it in the first place, he would be free of this. Not of all financial loss, naturally. No doubt he would have gambled on the stock continuing to rise, like everyone else. But he could have borne that. His wealth was such that he would scarcely

have noticed. This was different, however. This was a shameful and unavoidable acknowledgement of his own greed and stupidity. And it would come with a price, one even he might be unable to pay.

To make matters bleaker still, on the other side of the room, warming himself before the well-stacked fire, stood the man who had lured him onto the board two years before: Robert Knight, chief cashier of the company, keeper of its accounts and guardian of its secrets. Knight too faced ruin, but did so with a blithe smile and an unfurrowed brow. He still looked ten years younger than he had any right to and retained a twinkle in his eye that owed nothing to the candlelight.

‘Why are you here, Mr Knight?’ Sir Theodore asked, turning from the window and coughing to clear the gruffness from his throat.

‘Because I am to appear before the committee the day after tomorrow, Sir Theodore.’ The committee to which Knight referred was the House of Commons Secret Committee of Inquiry into the South Sea scandal. It had been sitting like an army of occupation in South Sea House all week, interrogating whomever it pleased, appropriating whatever documents it deemed likely to lead it to the truth. But the truth was in essence already known. The South Sea scheme had always been an impossible dream, sustained only by a universal determination to believe in it. Now was the winter of cruel disillusionment, of frozen credit and frost-shattered fortunes. The search was on, not so much for truth as for culprits. Everyone was a victim. But not everyone could be a villain. ‘I will be hard pressed, I think,’ Knight continued. ‘Do you not agree?’

‘Very hard,’ said Sir Theodore with a nod. ‘I have no doubt of it.’

‘What should I tell them?’

‘You have come here for my advice?’

‘Your advice – and your assistance.’

Sir Theodore frowned. 'Assistance with what?'

'The disposal – if I may so phrase it – of the contents of my valise.' Knight stooped to pick up the bag he had brought with him and advanced to a table halfway across the room. 'May I?'

With the faintest inclination of his head, Sir Theodore consented. Knight opened the valise and slid a thick leather-spined book out onto the table. The edges of its pages were marbled and well turned. Its cover was green.

'You look surprised, Sir Theodore.'

'I am.'

'You know what it is?'

'How should I?'

'How should you not? Unless—' Knight moved round the table and leaned back against it, trailing one hand behind him that came to rest on the cover of the book. 'Perhaps it is your intention to plead ignorance. And perhaps this is a rehearsal for such a plea. If so, let me spare you the effort. You know what this is. And I know that you know. You may fool others. I wish you luck in the endeavour. But you cannot fool me.'

'No.' Sir Theodore scowled. 'Of course not. It is quite the other way about, when all's said and done.'

'You were aware of the risks attendant upon our enterprise, Sir Theodore. Do not pretend otherwise.'

'Was I? I wonder now that I thought it could ever have succeeded.'

Sir Theodore was unlikely to be alone in that. All over England, the great and the good, the newly poor and the no longer rich, were asking the same question, if not of others then of themselves. How could they have supposed it would work? To snap one's fingers and convert thirty million pounds of the National Debt into the booming stock of a company whose hard commercial assets amounted to vastly less, but whose *potential* profits from the South Sea trade were surely limitless, had seemed magically appealing. And

the smooth-tongued Mr Knight had swayed every doubter, if not with words then with ... more tangible methods of persuasion. Now, however, the magician was exposed as a trickster. And those associated with him were left with the stark choice of proclaiming themselves either his dupes or his accomplices.

'I had hopes of more than my personal enrichment, Mr Knight,' Sir Theodore continued. 'I saw this as the beginning of a glorious new world for all. I believed we were engaged in the practice of philanthropy.'

'I should not recommend you to present that argument to the committee.'

'It is not an argument. It is the truth.'

'But will it keep you from prison? I think not.'

'Will anything?'

'Perhaps.' Knight's fingers drummed on the cover of the book. 'A harder kind of truth may save us.'

'Us?'

'You and me, Sir Theodore. You and me and your fellow directors and all their friends in high places. So many friends. So very high. Too high to be allowed to fall, I think. But the fear of falling will work wonders. And it is wonders we need.'

'I thought what you needed was assistance.'

'Precisely. A small thing to a great end.' His fingers stopped drumming. 'This book represents our salvation. But only so long as it remains safe, both from our friends, who would destroy it, and from our enemies, who would shout its secrets from the rooftops.'

'Then I suggest you keep it safe, Mr Knight.'

'How can I? There is no safe place left at South Sea House. Mr Brodrick has sent his ferrets down every hole.' Thomas Brodrick was chairman of the Committee of Inquiry, a sworn opponent of the South Sea Company and all its works. Sir Theodore did not need to be told that he

had set about his task with relish as well as dedication. It went without saying. 'If I stay, they will find it.'

'If you stay?'

'Or if I flee, like as not.'

'Do you propose to flee?'

'I did not say so.' Knight smiled. 'Now did I?'

Sir Theodore's eyes narrowed. He pulled the window shut behind him with sudden and excessive force. Then he said, as if tiring of their mutual prevarication, 'What do you want of me?'

'I want you to take charge of the book.'

'Why me?'

'Because you are the most eminent member of the board. Also the most reliable. And, I would judge, the least inclined to panic. Caswall and Master fell to blows in the street today outside South Sea House. It was not an edifying spectacle.'

'You flatter me, Mr Knight.'

'Not at all. I present you with the simple facts. You are the things I have said you are.'

'Supposing that to be so, why should my hands be safer than yours?'

'Because they are not the hands into which I might be expected to surrender such a document. And because you have acquaintances of long standing in your native land to whom it could be entrusted. In that event, I would not know where it was. The information could not be wrung out of me. And no-one would think to try to wring it out of you. While the book remains abroad, so to speak, there would be limits to the action that could be taken against us. It would be an insurance policy for both of us. And for our colleagues.'

'You are thinking of them?'

'No.' Knight grinned. 'I mention them in case you are.'

'If it became known that you had handed it to me, it might be supposed that I was familiar with its contents.'

‘Which you are not, of course.’ Knight’s grin broadened, then abruptly vanished. ‘But it would not become known. Why should it? I have confidence in your choice both of recipient and of courier. I have confidence in you altogether.’

‘I think you have as little of that in me as I have in you, Mr Knight.’

Knight looked genuinely hurt. ‘How can you say so?’

‘But confidence is no longer the issue, is it? If it were, we would all still be riding high.’

‘What then is the issue?’

‘Desperation.’ Sir Theodore gave a heavy sigh and walked slowly to the table, where he halted and stared down at the green-covered book. ‘Sheer desperation.’

‘Perhaps so. I’ll not argue the point. The question is a simple one. Will you do it?’

‘I would be mad to.’

‘And madder still not to. There is a great deal at stake. More than just our personal circumstances. Far more. But it so happens’ – Knight’s voice took on the syrupy tone he had used to persuade so many in days gone by that the South Sea project could not, would not, fail – ‘that our interests and those of the nation coincide. Our salvation is the salvation of all.’

‘How gratifying.’

‘Will you do it?’ Knight repeated.

Sir Theodore looked at him long and hard, then said, ‘Let me not detain you, Mr Knight.’

‘May I leave what I brought?’

‘You brought nothing.’ Sir Theodore cocked one eyebrow. ‘I trust that is understood.’

Knight nodded. ‘Very clearly.’

‘Then there is no more to be said.’ Sir Theodore picked up the book and carried it to a bureau in a corner of the room. He slid it into one of the drawers, turned a key in the

lock and dropped the key into his waistcoat pocket. 'Is there?'

An hour later, with Knight long gone, Sir Theodore rose from his seat at the bureau in which the green-covered book was still locked. He drained his glass of port and looked down at the letter it had taken him the better part of that hour to write. Yes, on balance, it seemed to him, he had disclosed as much and as little as he needed to. And the precaution he had urged on his oldest and most trusted friend, though extreme, was undoubtedly necessary. He sealed the letter, crossed to the bell-pull and tugged at it.

A few minutes passed, during which Sir Theodore gazed into the dying fire. With the thumb and index finger of his right hand, he slowly revolved the gold and diamond ring that sat fatly on the little finger of his other hand. It had been a gift from the Prince of Wales, presented at the King's birthday party at St James's eight months before, when riches seemed to rain from the clear spring sky and no-one doubted, for no-one dared to, that a pound of South Sea stock would be worth ten tomorrow and a hundred the day after. His own holding must have amounted to a million then. A million pounds and a billion delusions. They were nothing now, nothing but ashes in his mouth.

There was a tap at the door. Nicodemus Jupe, Sir Theodore's valet and loyal factotum, entered the room. A lean, grave-faced, hawk-nosed fellow of forty or so, Jupe had about him the air of one who never over-estimated his importance in the world and yet never underestimated it either. He was humble without being obsequious, perceptive without being presumptuous. He had always been utterly reliable, yet the cold edge of efficiency in his soul that was the essence of his reliability was also the key to the understanding that subsisted between him and his master. He expected Sir Theodore to extricate himself from the difficulties that had overtaken them both. Indeed, he

required it of him. And he himself would do anything he could to bring that about. That was the measure of his loyalty. It ran far. But it did not run to the ends of the Earth.

‘There is a letter on the bureau,’ said Sir Theodore. ‘It must be on its way tonight.’

Jupe fetched it and glanced at the address. His face betrayed no reaction.

‘I am sorry to ask you to turn out at such an hour. But it is a matter of the utmost urgency.’

‘I understand, sir. I’ll leave at once.’

‘Before you do, there is one other thing.’

‘Yes, sir?’

‘The indigent mapmaker. Spandrel. We still have our eye on him?’

‘Indeed, sir. I don’t doubt he’ll stray eventually. Then we’ll have him. But for the present—’

‘He adheres to the rules.’

‘He does.’

‘I wish to see him.’

Jupe’s eyes widened faintly in surprise. ‘And is that also ... a matter of the utmost urgency?’

‘It is, Jupe. Yes.’

Chapter Two

The Idle Waywiser

DAWN CAME SLOWLY and grudgingly to the ill-lit room William Spandrel shared with his mother beneath the eaves of a lodging-house in Cat and Dog Yard. Spandrel did not welcome its arrival. The grey, soot-filtered light only made the cracks in the plaster and the crumbling condition of the brickwork beneath more obvious. As he shaved himself with a blunt razor through a thumb's-smear worth of soap, he studied his fractured reflection in a shard of mirror, noting the ever hollower cheekbones, the charcoal-shadowed eyes and the cringing look of defeat that tried to hide itself behind them. Who could welcome dawn when darkness was at least a kind of refuge?

He had nailed the mirror to the south-facing wall within the dormer-window, reckoning that would at least ensure enough light to cut his throat by, should he ever need to do so. It seemed likely enough that the need would one day arise, considering the intractability of his plight. If he glanced out of the window, he could see, looming beyond the sagging roof-tree of the Punch Bowl Tavern, the palisaded wall of the Fleet Prison, where he had been confined for ten purgatorial days last autumn, an unconsidered victim of the sudden tightening of credit following the bursting of the South Sea Bubble and several thousand fond dreams of wealth along with it. His own dream, strictly speaking, had not been among them, but commercial catastrophe on the scale of the South Sea runs

deep and hard, afflicting even those who believe themselves immune from it.

His immunity, Spandrel now realized, had been imaginary, based as it was on the slender truth that he had not himself dabbled in South Sea stock. He had been far too busy assisting his father in the painstaking survey work for what was to have been their proudest achievement – An Exact and Definitive Map of the City and Environs of London in the Reign of His Britannic Majesty King George the First – to engage in stock market speculation, even supposing he had possessed any capital with which to speculate. But the world and his wife *had* speculated, at first successfully, at length disastrously. Those fine gentlemen who had assured William Spandrel senior that they would buy a copy of his map with which to adorn their soon-to-be-gold-leafed drawing-room walls had eagerly lent him the funds for his enterprise. But they had become equally eager to retrieve those funds when a financial chasm opened beneath their feet. The map was tantalizingly close to completion, but what use was that? Suddenly, there had been no customers, only creditors. William senior had fallen ill with the worry of it. William junior assumed responsibility for his debts to spare him a spell in prison he was not well enough to survive. And the bailiffs duly came for the younger man. But the older man had died anyway. Spandrel's sacrifice had been in vain.

So sombre had his situation then been that his mother was able to persuade her normally tight-fisted brother to donate the five guineas that bought him the freedom to live in lodgings within the rules of the Prison, but outside its walls. It was freedom of a limited kind. And it was certainly preferable to the horrors of the Fleet. But as those horrors faded slowly from his mind, so new ones took their place. Would he ever be truly free again? Was he to pass the prime of his life as a fly in a jar? Was there no way out?

On this dank January morning there certainly did not appear to be one. In the corner, half-hidden by the washing Mrs Spandrel had hung in front of the fireplace, stood one of the waywisers he and his father had pushed round the streets of London, calculating distances to an obsessive nicety. Now, its wheel was limned with rust. Everything was corroding, even hope. The sheets that made up as much of the map as they had drawn were with the engraver and seemed likely to remain there, since the fellow had not so far been paid for the work he had done. And while Spandrel stayed cooped up in Cat and Dog Yard, as the rules of the Fleet demanded, there would be no more sheets. That much was certain.

Surveying was all he knew. He had been his father's loyal apprentice. But no-one had need of a surveyor at such a time. And the only thing he could survey from this rotting garret was the wasteland of his future. To think of what he had lost was too much to bear. Last summer, he had entertained hopes of marriage, to the beautiful Maria Chesney. And the map had seemed like the best idea his father had ever had. Now, there was nothing. Maria was lost to him. His father was dead. His mother had become a washerwoman. And he had become a washerwoman's assistant.

At a sound from the door, he turned, expecting to see his mother, though surprised she should be back so soon. But, strangely, it was not his mother.

A thin man in dark clothes and a grey-black wig stood in the doorway, stooping slightly to clear the lintel. His eyes, deep-set and darting, combined with his sharp-boned nose, gave him the look of some strange bird of prey, searching for carrion. And perhaps, it occurred to Spandrel, he thought he had found some.

'William Spandrel,' the man said. It was not a question. It had more the sound of an announcement intended to forestall any denial.

'Yes,' Spandrel cautiously admitted.

'My name is Jupe. I represent Sir Theodore Janssen.'

'You do? Well ...' Spandrel put down the razor and wiped the remaining soap from his jaw. 'As you can see, there's nothing I can do for Sir Theodore.'

'You owe him a great deal of money.'

That much was undeniable. Sir Theodore was, in fact, his principal creditor by some way. Spandrel's father had surveyed an estate at Wimbledon Sir Theodore had bought a few years previously and had turned to him for backing when the idea for the map came to him. Sir Theodore, awash with cash at the time, had happily obliged. As a director of the South Sea Company, he was now likely to be a desperate man. Spandrel had gleaned that much from borrowed newspapers and overheard conversations in the yard. But he was surely not so desperate as to apply to the most hapless of his many debtors for help.

'Sir Theodore would like the debt settled,' said Jupe, advancing into the room and gazing round at the sparse and shabby furnishings.

'So would I. But I've better things to do than torment myself with thoughts of what I'd *like*.'

'So has Sir Theodore.'

'Then why are you here?'

'To present you with an opportunity to settle the debt - and your other debts along with it - by rendering Sir Theodore a small but significant service.'

'Is this some sort of joke?'

'Do I look like a man who makes jokes, Mr Spandrel?' That he assuredly did not. 'What you should be considering is whether you can afford to ignore the chance I am offering of extricating yourself - and your mother - from the life you are leading here.' Jupe peered curiously at a sagging flap of plaster. 'If it can be called a life, that is.'

'Your pardon, sir.' Spandrel forced himself to smile. Perhaps, he told himself, Sir Theodore had decided to be

generous to those his own malpractices had helped to bankrupt. Stranger things had been known, though he could not for the moment think of any. If it was true, maybe there really was a way out of his troubles. 'There's naturally no service I'd not be willing to render Sir Theodore in exchange for a remittal of the debt.'

'Naturally.' Jupe smiled back at him with thinly veiled superciliousness. 'As you say.'

'What would he require of me?'

'He will explain that to you himself, Mr Spandrel. When you meet.'

'He's coming here?'

'Certainly not.' Jupe beetled his brow to let Spandrel know how absurd the suggestion was. 'You are going to him.'

'But I can't.'

'You must.'

'Do you take me for a fool, Mr Jupe?' The outline of a crude but effective trap was forming in Spandrel's mind. 'If I set foot outside the rules, I'll be arrested.' And that, perhaps, was the sole object of the exercise.

'Not on Sunday.'

It was a valid point. No debtor could be arrested on the sabbath. It was Spandrel's weekly breath of liberty, when he walked the streets of London a free if penniless man. Occasion ally, he would stray further, into the countryside, though never so far that he could not return within the day. There was an invisible leash around his neck and always it tugged him back.

'Sir Theodore will see you then.'

'Very well.'

'Nine o'clock, Sunday morning. At his house in Hanover Square.'

'I'll be there.'

'Be sure you are, Mr Spandrel. And be on time. Sir Theodore values promptness.'

‘Is there anything ... I should bring with me?’

‘Bring yourself. That is all Sir Theodore requires.’

‘But ... why? What can I—’

‘No more questions.’ Jupe’s raised voice had suddenly filled the room. Now it dropped once more to its normal pitch. ‘You will have your answers on Sunday. And I wish you well of them.’

Spandrel did not know whether to feel elated or perturbed by his summons to the presence of Sir Theodore Janssen. Just when he had least expected it, an escape route from all his difficulties had opened before him. But it might lead him into yet worse difficulties. There was the rub. The likes of Sir Theodore Janssen did not shower benefactions on the likes of him. It was not in the nature of things; not, at any rate, in the nature of merchant princes.

Folly and overconfidence had plunged Spandrel’s father into debt. He had insisted on the most expensive equipment available for their project: brand-new theodolites, waywisers and measuring chains, of which none remained, the waywiser beside the fireplace being so old even the bailiffs had turned their noses up at it. He had lavished entertainment on potential customers, stinting them little in the way of food and drink while he explained the glory and precision of their map. He had thrown money around like a farmer sowing seed. But all he had reaped was broken promises and unpaid bills. And all Spandrel had inherited from him was a mapmaker’s turn of mind and debts ratcheted up by interest to several hundred pounds.

Spandrel might as well have dreamed of flying through the window and mapping the city from the sky as of earning such a sum. Yet a way of earning it was what Sir Theodore had apparently decided to offer him. Why? And what did he have to do for it? What service could he render that was worth so much? It made no sense.

Yet he would go to Hanover Square on Sunday morning, of course. He would go and, like as not, he would agree to do whatever Sir Theodore asked of him. He had no choice. But that did not mean he had no doubt. Hope had been reborn. But doubt kept it company.

When Margaret Spandrel returned to Cat and Dog Yard later that morning, laden with dirty washing, she found her son staring out of the window of their room at a view so familiar to both of them that contemplation of it was surely futile. Already weary, she was at once irritated by his apparent listlessness.

‘No tea brewed to welcome me back?’ she snapped. ‘Have you done nothing but sit there like a moon-calf while I’ve been gone?’

‘I’ve been thinking,’ William replied.

‘Thinking?’ Mrs Spandrel was a warm-hearted woman, who had married for love and been rewarded with five children, only one of whom had lived beyond the cradle, early widowhood and greater poverty than she had ever imagined descending into. Thinking was, on the whole, something she preferred not to do. ‘I despair of you, boy, I really do.’

‘No you don’t, Ma.’

‘I come close, believe me. Now, do let’s have some tea before we set to scrubbing this load.’ She dropped the vast bundle of washing on the floor and lowered herself into the fireside chair with a sigh. ‘Then you can tell me who our mysterious visitor was.’

‘We’ve had no visitor,’ said William, as he threw some fragments of sea-coal onto the all but dead fire to warm the kettle by.

‘I met Annie Welsh downstairs. She said a stranger called here earlier. Neat and clean-looking, she reckoned.’

‘You know what a busybody that woman is.’

‘But not often wrong.’

‘Well, she is this time.’

‘Are you saying she made it up?’

‘No. He must have called on someone else, that’s all.’

William smiled at her, which was rare these days, and always cheered her. ‘What would a neat and clean-looking stranger want with me?’

Chapter Three

Knights Errant

IT IS DOUBTFUL if William Spandrel would have been able to guess the service Sir Theodore Janssen required of him, even had he been a fly on the wall of the board-room at South Sea House that Saturday, when, with candles lit against the gloom and rain drumming on the windows, the Secret Committee of Inquiry began its examination of Robert Knight. With his fluent tongue and agile mind, Knight was more than a match for his interrogators, but even he could be worn down eventually. That must have been Chairman Brodrick's calculation, at any rate. As the questions grew more specific and the answers more evasive, the crux of the scandal would inevitably emerge. Time was on the committee's side, after all. When they adjourned that evening, they had still not hacked a path through Knight's artfully cultivated thicket of obfuscations. But, on Monday, they surely would.

Sunday dawned grey and chill, the rain spent, the city silent. Spandrel had left his mother sleeping, but knew she would not worry when she woke to find him absent. His sabbath wanderings were familiar to her. But he was not wandering this sabbath morning. He had both a purpose and a destination. He strode along High Holborn with the vigour of a man refreshed by the knowledge that he had business to attend to, even though he did not know what that business was.

The map he and his father had expended so much time and effort on might no longer be in his possession, but it was still in his mind, the great rats' maze of London printed indelibly on his memory. Few could know it as well as he did: the yards, the courts, the squares, the alleys. He could have chosen half a dozen circuitous routes to Hanover Square and negotiated them unerringly. It was not caution but urgency that prompted him to press on along the most direct route, following the southward curve of Broad Street past St Giles. He literally could not afford to be late.

Soon, he was on the Tyburn Road, with elegant modern houses to his left and open fields, alternating with building sites, to his right. This was the very edge of the city, where new money had pushed out its tendrils into old land. But the South Sea disaster had cut those tendrils. Building had stopped. The half-built houses he saw to the north might never be finished now. His father had been assured by several potential customers that there would soon be a labyrinth of streets for them to map as far west as Hyde Park. But horses and cattle still grazed the pastures beyond Bond Street and surely would for many years yet.

Hanover Square was both the limit and the apogee of this abruptly halted surge of building. Here many of the favoured servants of the new monarchy had chosen to reside in Germanically ornate splendour, Sir Theodore Janssen among them. Whether the dukes and generals still wanted him as a neighbour was a moot point. The distinct possibility that he had become an embarrassment to them gave Spandrel some comfort as he approached the great man's door and rapped the knocker.

It was Jupe who answered, so swiftly that he must have been waiting close at hand. He said nothing at first, merely looking Spandrel up and down as if wondering whether his clothes were the best he could find for a visit to such a distinguished person. (They were, in truth, the best he could find for a visit to anyone.) Then a clock began

striking nine in the hall behind him and a flicker of something like surprised approval crossed Jupe's face.

He stood back, gesturing for Spandrel to enter, and closed the door behind him, then said simply, 'This way,' and led him along the hall and up the stairs. Spandrel's immediate impression was of great wealth, evident in gilded friezework and oil paintings as big as banqueting tables, weighed down by a pervading silence that magnified the striking of the clock into an ominous toll.

A door on the first floor opened and they were in a drawing-room, whose high windows looked out onto the square. There were paintings here too, along with busts and urns aplenty. A fire was burning, almost raging, it seemed to Spandrel, so unaccustomed was he to anything beyond the bare minimum of fuel. A man was standing in front of it, dressed in a purple shag gown and turban, sipping from a cup of chocolate. He was short and broad-shouldered, clearly old, but with none of the weakness of age. If he was desperate, he did not show it. Sir Theodore Janssen had not perfected a demeanour of calm authority for nothing.

'Mr Spandrel,' he said simply, handing his cup to Jupe, who left the room at once and without another word. 'I knew your father.'

'He spoke often of you, Sir Theodore.'

'Did he? As what, pray? A fine patron - or a merciless tormentor?'

'He did not enjoy being in debt.'

'No man does, Mr Spandrel. Yet you took on that state, to spare your father imprisonment.'

'There was nothing else I could do.'

'Some sons would not have taken that view of the matter.'

'Perhaps not.'

'Jupe tells me your present accommodation is ... lacking in most comforts.'

'It's not Hanover Square.'

'No. Nor the Fleet Prison. There's that to console you.'

'So there is.'

'But I've not brought you here for consolation.'

'What have you brought me here for, Sir Theodore?'

'To business, yes? A sound principle. Well, our business is the money you owe me, Mr Spandrel.'

'I can't pay you.'

'Not in cash, no. Of course not. But in kind. Yes, yes. I rather think you *can* pay me in kind.'

'How?'

'By acting as my courier in a confidential transaction.'

'Your ... *courier*?'

'I require an article to be delivered to a gentleman in Amsterdam who is known to me. And I require a trustworthy person to deliver it.'

'Me?'

'Exactly so.'

'But ... why?' Spandrel could not have disguised his puzzlement even had he tried. The simplicity of what he was being asked to do was somehow more disturbing than had Sir Theodore wanted him to murder a business rival. 'Surely you have servants to run this kind of errand. Why not send Mr Jupe?'

'I have my reasons. And you have no need to know what they are. Indeed, the less you know the better. I will cancel your debt to me upon written confirmation that the article has been safely delivered. That is as much as you need to understand. Do you accept my terms?'

'Mr Jupe mentioned my debts to other parties than yourself.'

'There are no other parties. I have bought in all your debts. I am your sole creditor, Mr Spandrel. In passing, let me tell you that your debts came exceptionally cheap. No-one believes they will ever be paid. But no-one is likely to be as flexible as me in devising a means of payment.'

'And all I have to do to pay them off is to act as your postman?'

'Yes. That is all.'

'On this one occasion?'

'This occasion only.'

'That's very generous of you.' It was, indeed, suspiciously generous. How could Spandrel be sure further, more onerous, demands would not be made of him if he proved himself useful by accomplishing this straight forward task? The inescapable answer was that he could not.

'No doubt you are wondering what guaranty you would have that these terms would be honoured.' Sir Theodore seemed to find it easy to read Spandrel's thoughts. 'Well, you would have my word.'

'In my situation, Sir Theodore, would you find that ... sufficient?'

'Your situation, Mr Spandrel, is that of someone who has nothing to lose and nothing to bargain with. In *your* situation, I would find any guaranty sufficient.' Sir Theodore raised his hand to forestall objections, though in plain truth Spandrel could conceive of none. 'I have to trust you with an article of some value and the money you will need to travel to Amsterdam. You have to trust me that your reward for undertaking the journey will be a release from indebtedness. You could abscond. But the consideration you showed your father suggests that you would not lightly abandon your mother. I could break my word to you. But to what purpose? I cannot profit from your imprisonment. I *may* profit from your feeling obliged to me. I still regard your father's map as a worthwhile commercial project. Only you can complete it. I have no wish to prevent you. Who knows but that if you do, we may not be in a position to contract more ... orthodox business together.' Sir Theodore smiled. 'We all take a risk, Mr Spandrel, every

day that we live. The one I am inviting you to take is not so very great, now is it?’

‘I suppose not.’

‘You agree, then?’

‘Yes. I agree.’ Spandrel refrained from adding that he really had no choice *but* to agree.

‘Good.’ Sir Theodore walked past him to a table in the centre of the room. Turning, Spandrel saw that an old leather satchel lay on the table. Sir Theodore pulled it upright and opened the flap. ‘This is the article I require you to carry.’

Spandrel moved closer. Inside the satchel was a maroon leather despatch-box, with brass reinforcements, catches and lock.

‘You are to deliver the box personally to Mijnheer Ysbrand de Vries at his home in Amsterdam. He lives on the Herengracht, near the centre of the city. You will have no difficulty finding the house. Mijnheer de Vries is well known. He will be expecting you. You will obtain a receipt and return here with it.’

‘Is that all?’

‘It is. The box is locked, Mr Spandrel, and I will retain the key. You understand?’

‘Yes.’

‘Mijnheer de Vries is a man of about my own age. We are old friends. There must be no mistake as to the identity of the person to whom you deliver the box. You will say that you are instructed to ask him to recall to mind the third member of the party on the occasion when he and I first met. The person he will name is Jacob van Dillen. You have it?’

‘Jacob van Dillen,’ Spandrel repeated.

‘Van Dillen is long dead. I should doubt if there is anyone now living who remembers him, other than Ysbrand de Vries and myself. And now you, of course.’

‘I won’t give him the box unless he can name van Dillen.’