

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Sword of Albion

Mark Chadbourn

About the Book

1588: as the Spanish Armada prepares to sail, rumours abound of a doomsday device that, were it to fall into enemy hands, could destroy England and her bastard queen once and for all.

Enter Will Swyfte.

He is one of Walsingham's new breed of spy and his swashbuckling exploits have made him famous. However Swyfte's public image is a façade, created to give the people of England a hero in their hour of need – and to deflect attention from his real role: fighting a secret war against a foe infinitely more devilish than Spain...

For millennia this unseen enemy has preyed upon humankind, treating honest folk as playthings to be hunted, taken and tormented. But now England is fighting back. Armed with little more than courage, their wits and an array of cunning gadgets created by sorcerer Dr Dee, Will and his colleagues must secure this mysterious weapon before it is too late.

Theirs is a shadowy world of plot, counterplot, deception and betrayal, where no one – and nothing – is quite what they seem. At stake is the very survival of queen and country...

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About the Author
Also by Mark Chadbourn
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THE
SWORD
OF ALBION
MARK CHADBOURN



For Elizabeth, Betsy, Joe and Eve

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Credit must go to four hundred and thirty years' worth of authors responsible for the primary, secondary and tertiary texts which provided the research and resources for this work.

On the matter of dates: at the time of this story, England still used the old Julian calendar while the rest of Europe had adopted the new Gregorian calendar, with which we are all familiar today. To avoid any confusion, I have used the Gregorian dates for all events.



*'Spies are men of doubtful credit, who make a show
of one thing and speak another.'*

Mary, Queen of Scots

PROLOGUE

Far beneath the slow-moving Thames, a procession of flickering lights drew inexorably towards London from the east. The pace was funereal, the trajectory steady, purposeful. In that hour after midnight, the spectral glow under the black waters passed unseen by all but two.

‘There! What are they, sir?’ In the lantern light, the guard’s fear was apparent as he peered over the battlements of the White Tower, ninety feet above the river. He rattled the staff of his halberd against his gleaming breastplate with a nervous rhythm.

Matthew Mayhew, who had seen worse things in his thirty years than the guard could ever dream in his most delirious fever-sleep, replied with boredom, ‘I see the proud heart of the greatest nation on Earth. I see a city safe and secure within its walls, where the Queen may sleep peacefully.’

‘No ... There!’ The guard pointed urgently, his features shifting into shadow beneath the peak of his burgonet helmet.

‘A waterman has met with disaster,’ Mayhew sighed. The Tower guards recognized him as a man apart from their ranks, yet whose word was always to be obeyed. No one was quite sure what role he played there, but his papers were signed by the Principal Secretary himself, Sir Francis Walsingham, and when Mayhew spoke it was with the authority of the Privy Council, and therefore the Queen herself.

Since his temper was as short as his stature, the guards had learned to handle Mayhew with care and made a point of praising the fine court fashions which he took delight in parading, peacock-like. His high-necked, elaborate ruff had nearly six hundred folds, starched so strongly to keep its shape that Mayhew could barely move his head. His doublet had jewelled buttons and a peasecod belly protruding from his ankle-length cloak, which was finely embroidered with a unicorn design, furred at the collar and lined with crimson silk. His beard was clipped to an inch in length and waxed into twin prongs.

Clenching his halberd, the guard gulped the cold air of the March night. 'And his lantern still burns on the bottom? What of the other lights? And they move—'

"'Tis the current.'

The guard shook his head. 'They are ghosts!'

Mayhew gave a dismissive snort.

'There are such things! Samuel Hale saw the Queen's mother walking with her head beneath her arm in the Chapel of St Peter-ad-Vincula. Why, the Tower is the most haunted place in England! The two Princes, Margaret Pole, Lady Jane Grey ... all seen here, Master Mayhew. Damned by God to walk this world after their deaths.'

Mayhew studied the slow-moving lights, imagining fish in the deep with their own candles to guide their way through the inky dark.

The guard's fear made his lantern swing so wildly shadows flew across the tower.

Steadying the lantern, Mayhew said, 'When this great fortress was built five hundred years gone, King William had the mortar tempered with the blood of beasts. Do you know why that was?'

'No, no. I—'

'Suffice to say,' Mayhew interrupted wearily, 'you are safe here from all supernatural threat.'

The guard calmed a little. 'Safe, you say?'

‘England’s defences are built on more than the rock of its people.’

The lights veered away from the centre of the river to the Tower of London where it nestled in the old Roman walls, guarding the eastern approach to the capital. Mayhew couldn’t prevent a shiver running up his spine; the lights were an arrow driving straight towards him.

‘Complete your rounds,’ he said sharply, overcompensating in case the guard saw his weakness. ‘We must ensure the Tower remains secure against England’s enemies.’

‘And the prisoner you are charged to guard?’

‘I will attend to him.’ Mayhew pressed a scented handkerchief to his nose, but nothing could block the stink of the city’s filth caught on the night wind, the excrement in the ditches and watercourses, the butchers’ offal poured nightly into the river, bloody at first, then rotting where it caught in the shallows, the piles of household refuse, replenished as fast as they were moved, all caught up in the blanket of acrid smoke from the cheap coal the working people burned to keep warm. Sometimes it was unbearable. He hated being away from the court where the pleasures of life were more apparent, hated the boredom of his task, and at that moment hated that he was caught on the cold summit of the White Tower when he should have been inside by the fire.

He cast an eye around the fortress. Pools of darkness were held back by the lanterns strung along the walkways among the wards. The only movement came from the slow circuit of the night-watch.

The Tower of London was an unassailable symbol of England. Solid Kentish ragstone formed the bulk of its impregnable heart, the White Tower, protected by its own curtain wall and moat, with a further curtain wall, and thirteen towers, guarding the Inner Ward beyond. And there was the Outer Ward too, with a further solid wall, five

towers, and three bastions. Everything valuable to the nation lay within these walls – the Crown Jewels, the treasury, the Royal Mint, the armoury, and England's most dangerous prisoners, including Mayhew's personal charge.

As he made his way down the stone steps, he was greeted by the clatter of boots ascending, and the light of another lantern. William Osborne, his youthful face and intelligent grey eyes unsettled, was dressed frugally in muddy browns and greys, his breeches only modestly padded and a felt, waist-length cloak covering his cloth jerkin. An unfashionable stiffened hood kept his head warm.

Mayhew wondered if the fellow now regretted giving up his promising career in the law to join the Queen's service out of love for his country, not realizing what would be asked of him.

'What is it?' Mayhew demanded.

'A disturbance. At the Traitor's Gate.'

Where the river lights were heading, Mayhew thought. 'The gate remains secure, and well guarded?' he asked.

Osborne's face loomed white in the lamplight. 'There are six men upon it, as our master, Sir Francis Walsingham, demanded.'

'And yet?'

Osborne's voice quavered with uncertainty. 'The guards say the restraining beam moves of its own accord. Bolts draw without the help of human hand. Is this what we always feared?'

Pushing past him with irritation, Mayhew snapped, 'You know as well as I the Tower is protected. Our men are frightened like maidens.' But for all his contempt at his colleague's words, Mayhew's chest tightened in apprehension.

Walsingham said it could never happen, he reminded himself. *He told the Queen ... Burghley ...*

Trying to maintain his decorum, he descended to the ground floor with studied nonchalance, and stepped out into the Inmost Ward, Osborne at his heels. The white-washed walls of the Tower glowed in the lantern light.

‘Listen!’ The younger man’s features flared in the gloom as he raised his lantern to illuminate the way ahead.

The steady silence of the Tower was shattered by a cacophony of roars and howls, barks, shrieks and high-pitched chattering. In the Royal Menagerie, the lions, leopards and lynxes threw themselves around their pens in a frenzy.

‘What do they sense?’ There was a querulous tremble in Osborne’s voice.

Scanning the Inmost Ward for any sign of movement, Mayhew relented. ‘You know as well as I. Churchyard shades. The Devil’s horned kin. The very stuff of nightmares. Whatever you fear most, that is what they are.’

Osborne winced at his words. ‘Are you not afraid?’

‘This is the work we were charged to do, for Queen and country. Raise the alarm. Then we must take ourselves to the prisoner.’

‘To arms! To arms!’ Osborne shouted as he raced to find the captain of the Tower’s defenders, and within moments they were running to their positions. Breathless, Osborne returned to Mayhew and together they peered through the gate in the curtain wall where the string of lanterns kept the dark at bay.

‘Nothing,’ Osborne said tremulously, his voice almost lost beneath the cries of the animals.

Mayhew focused his attention on St Thomas’s Tower in the outer curtain wall. Beyond was the river, and beneath lay the water entrance that had become known as Traitor’s Gate, after the enemies of the Crown who had been transported through it to imprisonment or death. The guards had disappeared inside, but there was no clamour.

After five minutes, Osborne's relief was palpable. 'Perhaps we were wrong, and it is Spanish spies on our doorstep. Our men will deal with them in no time.' He looked to Mayhew for reassurance. 'With the country on the brink of war, Spanish spies are everywhere. Yes?'

A guard emerged from St Thomas's Tower, pausing on the threshold for a moment. Mayhew and Osborne watched him curiously. With an odd, lurching gait, the soldier picked a winding path towards them.

'Is he drunk?' Mayhew growled. 'His head will be on the block by noon if he has deserted his post.'

'I ... I do not ...' The words died in Osborne's throat as the Tower defender's path became more erratic. His jerky movement was deeply upsetting, as if he had been afflicted by a palsy.

Mayhew cursed under his breath. 'I gave up a life at court for this.'

As the guard neared, they saw that his hands continually went to his head as if searching for a missing hat. Despite himself, Mayhew reached into the folds of his cloak for his rapier.

'I am afraid,' Osborne whispered.

'Do you hear music?' Mayhew cocked his head. 'Like pipes playing, caught on the breeze?' As he breathed deeply of the night air, he realized the foul odour of the city had been replaced by sweet, seductive scents that took him back to his childhood. A tear stung his eye. 'And that smell,' he said, 'like cornfields beneath the summer moon.' He inhaled. 'Honey, from the hive my grandfather kept.'

'What is wrong with you?' Osborne demanded. 'This is no time for dreams!'

Mayhew felt a sense of loss as his reverie faded, but he was caught by the sight of the soldier entering a circle of torchlight. For the first time Mayhew recognized that something was terribly wrong with the man's face. Revolted yet fascinated, he tried to see behind the guard's

pawing hands. Glimpses came to him, as the man lurched and tore at his skin with increasing panic, of skin unnaturally white, with the texture of sackcloth. *A mask!* Mayhew told himself, knowing it wasn't. When the hands came away for the briefest moment, Mayhew reeled. The soldier's eyes were large and dark, and resembled nothing more than buttons. They didn't blink, they didn't see. Where the mouth had been there was only a row of ragged stitches from which a muffled, desperate mewling issued. *An illusion*, Mayhew tried to convince himself, sweat prickling his scalp despite the cold night, but he couldn't shake off the memory of the dollies the old women sold in Cheapside at Christmastime.

'God's wounds!' Osborne exclaimed. 'What has happened to him?'

Before Mayhew could respond, a blur of ochre and brown burst from the shadows. Amid a terrible roar, the soldier was slammed on to the turf. Claws revealing bones and organs, tearing jaws spraying viscera around the convulsing form. But the most chilling thing was that the man did not utter a sound.

He cannot, Mayhew thought, frozen to the spot.

The lion's triumphant roar jolted Mayhew and Osborne out of their shock.

'The beasts have escaped the menagerie!' Mayhew thrust Osborne back towards the White Tower. Drawing their rapiers, they spun this way and that in disorientation at the wild cries growing louder by the second. The iron tang of blood was lost beneath the heavy musk of the approaching beasts caught on the night breeze.

Eyes wide with panic, Osborne appeared to lose all sense of direction until Mayhew grabbed his arm and hurled him against the door. Mayhew fumbled for the handle, glancing desperately over his shoulder. Bounding shadows emerged from the dark. Throwing open the door, Mayhew propelled Osborne inside and slammed it shut

behind him. 'Bar the door and defend it with your lives!' he shouted at the two soldiers who waited within. They blanched as the deafening roars and cries drew near to the entrance.

Osborne sprawled on the flags, fighting to catch his breath. Mayhew hauled the younger man to his feet by his cloak and shook him. 'Courage,' he said under his breath so the soldiers would not hear. His scowl underlined the harshness of his tone. 'Do not fail me. Or the Queen.'

Shaking, Osborne threw himself up the winding stone steps behind Mayhew.

They had only climbed a little way when a tremendous crash resounded from the great oak door through which they had entered the tower. Flashing a wide-eyed stare at Mayhew, Osborne took the steps two at a time. As they raced along the ringing corridors, Osborne asked breathlessly, 'What is coming, Mayhew?'

'Best not to think of that now.'

'I knew that man. Carter, a good fellow, with a wife and two girls. What did they do to him?'

'Stop asking foolish questions!'

A scream at the foot of the steps echoed through the tower, cut short mercifully soon.

'Let nothing slow your step,' Mayhew urged.

Reaching the most secure area of the White Tower, they came to a heavy oak door studded with iron, set in walls thicker than a man's height. After Mayhew gave three sharp knocks with the pommel of his rapier, a hatch opened to reveal a pair of wary eyes.

'Who goes?' came the voice from within.

'Mayhew and Osborne, Sir Francis Walsingham's men.'

While Osborne glanced anxiously back the way they had come, hard eyes searched their faces, until, their owner satisfied, the order was given to draw the fourteen bolts that the Queen herself had personally insisted be installed.

‘Hurry,’ Osborne cried. Mayhew cuffed him across his arm.

Once inside, Osborne pressed his back against the resealed door and let out a juddering sigh of relief. ‘Finally. We are safe.’

Mayhew didn’t hide his contempt. Osborne was too weak to survive in their business; he would not be long for the world and there was little point in tormenting him further by explaining the obvious.

Six men waited by the door, and another twenty in the chambers within, all chosen by Walsingham himself for their ruthlessness and lack of compassion. Their faces were uniformly hard, their hands rarely far from their weapons. At any other time they would be thieves, slitting the throats of rich sots in the stews of Bankside, yet here they were in the Queen’s most trusted employ.

‘The cell remains secure?’ Mayhew asked the captain, whose face boasted the scars of numerous fights.

‘It is. It was examined ‘pon the hour, as it is every hour.’

‘Take us to it.’

‘Who attempts to breach our defences? Surely the Spanish would not risk an attack.’

When Mayhew did not respond, the captain nodded and ordered two of his men to accompany Osborne and Mayhew. Moments later they were marching past rooms stacked high with the riches of England, gold seized from the New World or looted from ships from the Spanish Main to the Channel.

Beyond the bullion rooms, one of the guards unlocked a stout door and led them down a steep, dank flight of steps to another locked door. Inside was a low-ceilinged chamber. Buried so deep in the White Tower that no sounds penetrated through the stone, it was unpleasantly hot, and filled with the vinegary smell of sweat. A brazier crackled in one corner and torches sputtered on opposite walls. Two soldiers played cards at a heavy, scarred table, their eyes

flickering towards the arrivals with faint surprise. They had seen Mayhew and Osborne in that room many times, but never at this hour. When barked orders and the clatter of boots echoed from above, the two men jumped to their feet and drew their swords.

On the far side of the room was a single door with a small barred window. Darting across the room, Mayhew peered through the bars into a dark cell. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he made out a figure hunched over a rough wooden bench, the hood of his cloak, as always, pulled over his head so his features were hidden. Allowed no naked flame for illumination, no drink in a bowl or goblet, only in a flask, never let beyond the secure area of the White Tower, he had been imprisoned here for twenty years. In all that time, the man had never been known to speak.

But now the light leaking through the grille revealed a subtle shift in the dark shape. It was as if the prisoner was listening to Mayhew, perhaps even considering a response.

Mayhew's deliberations were interrupted by dull bangs and clatters in the mint above their heads. The sound was muffled, but they heard raised voices, and then a low, chilling cry.

'They are in,' he said flatly. Cursing, he turned back to the room.

Osborne was pressed against one wall like a hunted animal. The four guards cast hesitant looks at Mayhew.

'Help your friends,' he ordered. 'Do whatever is in your power to protect this place. Lock the door as you leave. I will bolt it.'

Once they had gone, he slammed the bolts into place with disdain. 'This buys us a little longer, that is all,' he said. 'If they have gained access to the mint, there is no door here that will keep them out.'

'Pray,' Osborne replied, 'for that is surely the only thing that can save us now. These are not men that we face, not

Spaniards, or Frenchmen, not Catholic traitors from within our own realm. These are the Devil's own agents, and they come for our souls.'

Mayhew snorted. 'Forget God, Osborne. If He even exists, He has scant regard for this vale of misery.'

Osborne recoiled as if he had been struck. 'You do not believe in the Lord?'

Mayhew's forehead was slick with sweat and his heart was pounding. Anxiously, he pressed an ear against the door but heard nothing. 'We face a threat that stands to wipe us away as though we had never been, and if there is to be salvation, it will not come from above. It will be achieved by our own hand.'

'Then help me barricade the door,' Osborne pleaded.

With a fatalistic shrug, Mayhew set his weight against the great oak table, and with Osborne beside him they pushed it solidly against the door.

When they stood back, Mayhew paused. Faint strains of haunting pipe music reached him again, plucking at his emotions, turning him from despair to such ecstasy that he wanted to dance with wild abandon. 'That music,' he said, closing his eyes in awe.

'I hear no music!' Osborne shouted. 'You are imagining it.'

'It sounds,' Mayhew said with a faint smile, 'like the end of all things.' He turned back to the cell door where the prisoner now stood, the torchlight catching a glint beneath his hood.

'Damn your eyes!' Osborne raged. 'Return to your bench! They shall not free you!'

Unmoving, the prisoner watched them through the grille. Mayhew did not sense victory or relief in his posture, no sign that he was assured of his freedom, merely a faint curiosity at the change to the pattern that had dominated his life for so many years.

'Go back and be seated!' Osborne bellowed.

‘Leave him be,’ Mayhew responded as calmly as he could. ‘We have a more pressing matter.’ They drew their swords and faced the door.

Above their heads, they heard barked orders, wild shouts, running feet and the clash of swords. A muffled boom shook the heavy door and showered dust from the cracks and joints in the stone. Silence followed, and the cloying, sweet scent of honeysuckle grew stronger by the moment.

A random scream became a sound like the wind through the trees on a lonely moor. More noises, fragments of events that painted no understandable picture.

Breath tight in their chests, knuckles aching from the grip on their swords, the two men waited.

Something bouncing down the stone steps, coming to rest against the door with a thud.

A soft tread, then gone like a whisper in the night, followed by a long silence – a stillness – that felt as if it would never end.

Finally the unbearable quiet was broken by a rough grating as the top bolt drew back of its own accord. Eyes frozen wide, Osborne watched its inexorable progress.

The bolt at the foot of the door followed, and when that had been drawn the great tumblers of the iron lock turned until they fell into place with an ominous *clack*.

‘I ... I think I can hear the music now, Mayhew, and there are voices in it.’ Osborne began to recite the Lord’s Prayer.

The door creaked open a notch and then stopped. Light flickered through the gap. Not torchlight or candlelight, but with some troubling quality that Mayhew could not identify, reminding him of moonlight on the Downs. The music was louder now, and he too could hear the voices.

A sound at his back interrupted his thoughts. The prisoner’s hands were on the bars of the cell door window and he had pulled back his hood for the first time that Mayhew could recall. In the ethereal light, there was an

echo of the moon within the cell. The prisoner's head was enclosed by a silver skull. A mask of the finest workmanship, it gleamed so brightly that Mayhew could barely look at it. Etched on it with almost invisible black filigree were strange marks and symbols. Through the silver orbits, the prisoner's eyes hung heavily upon Mayhew, steady and unblinking.

The door into the room opened.

CHAPTER ONE

EVEN AN AFTERNOON of soft skin and full lips could not take away her face. Empty wine bottles rattling on the bare boards could not drown out her voice, nor the creak of the bed and the gasps of pleasure. She was with him always.

'They say you single-handedly defeated ten of Spain's finest swordsmen on board a sinking ship in the middle of a storm,' the red-headed woman breathed in his ear as she ran her hand gently up his naked thigh.

'True.'

'And you broke into the Doge's palace in disguise and romanced the most beautiful lady in all of Venice,' the blonde woman whispered into his other ear, biting his lobe as she stroked his lower belly.

'Yes, all true.'

'And you wrestled a bear and killed it with your bare hands,' the redhead added.

He paused thoughtfully, then replied, 'Actually, that one is not true, but I think I will appropriate it none the less.'

The women both laughed. He didn't know their names, didn't really care. They would be amply rewarded, and have tales to tell of their night with the great Will Swyfte, and he would have passed a few hours in the kind of abandon that always promised more than it actually delivered.

'Your hair is so black,' the blonde one said, twirling a finger in his curls.

'Yes, like my heart.'

They laughed again at that, though he hadn't said it in particular jest. Nathaniel would have laughed too, although with more of a sardonic edge.

The redhead reached out a lazy hand to examine his clothes hanging over the back of the chair next to the bed. 'You must cut a dashing figure at court, with these finest, and most expensive, fashions.' Stretching a long leg, she traced her toes across the shiny surface of his boots.

'I heard you were a poet.' The blonde pressed herself gently against his hip. 'Will you compose a sonnet to us?'

'I was a poet. And a scholar. But that part of my life is far behind me.'

'You have exchanged it for a life of adventure,' she said, impressed. 'A fair exchange, for it has brought you riches and fame.'

Will Swyfte did not respond.

The blonde examined his bare torso, which bore the tales of the last few years in each pink slash of a rapier scar or ragged weal of torture, stories that had filtered into the consciousness of every inhabitant of the land, from Carlisle to Cornwall. He had the lithe, powerful physique of a swordsman, a good length of bone - his frame stretched from the top of the bed to the bottom - and a vitality that was evident in his clear skin and shining hazel eyes. Black curls falling to the nape of his neck added a note of sensitivity which offset the hardness carved into his features by a life lived in the shadows. Thrice-weekly visits to the barber on Lombard Street kept his cheeks clean-shaven, and his beard trimmed close to the lines of his jaw in the current fashion.

Aroused, the blonde swung her leg over him for another bout of love-making, then cursed loudly as an insistent knocking began at the door.

'Go away,' Will shouted.

The knocking continued. 'I know you are deep in doxy and sack, Master Swyfte,' came a curt, familiar voice, 'but

duty calls.'

'Nat. Go away.'

The door swung open to reveal Nathaniel Colt, shorter than Will and slim, but with eyes that revealed a quick wit. He pointedly ignored the naked, rounded bodies and focused his attention directly on his master's face.

'A fine place to find a hero of the realm,' he said with sarcasm. 'A tawdry room atop a stew, stinking of fornication and spilled wine.'

'In these harsh times, every man deserves his pleasures, Nat.'

'This is England's greatest spy,' the redhead challenged. 'He has earned his comforts.'

'Yes, England's greatest spy,' Nathaniel replied acidly. 'Though I remain unconvinced of the value of a spy whose name and face are recognized by all and sundry.'

'England needs its heroes, Nat. Do not deny the people the chance to celebrate the successes of God's own nation.' With gentle hands, he eased the women away from him. 'We will continue our relaxation at another time,' he said warmly, 'for I fear my friend is determined to enforce chastity.'

His eyes communicated more than his words. The women responded with coquettish giggles as they scooped up their dresses in a half-hearted attempt to cover their modesty.

Kicking the door shut after them, Nathaniel said, 'You will catch the pox if you continue these sinful ways with the Winchester Geese.'

'The pox is not God's judgement, or all the aristocracy of England would be rotting in their breeches as they dance at court.'

'And 'twould be best if you did not let any but me hear your views on our betters.'

'Besides,' Will continued, 'Liz Longshanks's is a fine establishment. Does it not bear the mark of the Cardinal's

Hat? Is the land on which this stew rests not in the blessed ownership of the Bishop of Winchester? Everything has two faces, Nat, neither good nor bad, just there. That is the way of the world, and if there is a Lord, it is His way.'

Ignoring Nathaniel's snort, Will stretched the kinks from his limbs and lazily eased out of the bed to dress, absently kicking the empty bottles against the chamber pot. Slipping on his shirt, he struggled into his tight-fitting breeches, then laced them to his black doublet. He motioned to Nathaniel to help him on with boots of the finest Spanish leather.

'And,' Will added, 'I am in good company. That master of theatre, Philip Henslowe, and his son-in-law Edward Alleyn are entertaining Liz's girls in the room below.'

'Alleyn the actor?' Nathaniel puffed as he forced the right boot up Will's calf.

'Acting goes together with whoring by tradition, as does every profession that entails holding one face to the world and another in the privacy of your room. When you cannot be yourself, it creates certain tensions that must be released.'

'You will be releasing more tensions if you do not hurry. Your Sir Francis Walsingham is on his way to Bankside, and if he finds his favoured tool deep in whores, or in his cups, he will be less than pleased.' Nathaniel threw Will his jerkin to end his frustrated searching.

'What trouble now, then? More Spanish spies plotting against our Queen? You know they fall over their own swords.'

'I am pleased to hear you take the threats against us so lightly. England is on the brink of war with Spain, the nation is torn by fears of the enemy landing on our shores at every moment, we lack adequate defences, our navy is in disarray, we are short of gunpowder, and the great Catholic powers of Europe are all eager to see us crushed and

returned to the old faith, but the great Will Swyfte thinks it is just a trifle. I can rest easily now.'

'One day you will cut yourself with that tongue, Nat.'

'There is some trouble at the Tower, though I am too lowly a worm to be given any important details. No, I am only capable of dragging my master out of brothels and hostelries and keeping him one step out of the clink,' he added tartly.

'You are of great value to me, as well you know.' Finishing his dressing, Will ran a hand through his hair thoughtfully. 'The Tower, you say?'

'An attempt to steal our gold, perhaps. Or the Crown Jewels. The Spanish always look for interesting ways to undermine the nation.'

'I cannot imagine Sir Francis Walsingham venturing into Bankside for bullion or jewels.' He ensured Nathaniel didn't see his mounting sense of unease. 'Let us to the Palace of Whitehall before the Principal Secretary sullies his boots in Bankside's filth.'

A commotion outside drew Nathaniel to the small window, where he saw a sleek black carriage with a dark red awning and the gold brocade and ostrich feathers that signified it had been despatched from the palace. The chestnut horse stamped its hooves and snorted as a crowd of drunken apprentices tumbled out of the Sugar Loaf across the street to surround the carriage.

'I fear it is too late for that,' Nathaniel said.

Four mounted soldiers eased the crowd back, amid loud curses and threats but none of the violence that troubled the constables and beadles on a Saturday night. Two of the well-armed men barged into the brothel, raising angry cries from Liz Longshanks and the girls waiting in the downstairs parlour, and soon the clatter of their boots rose up the wooden stairs.

'Come, Nat, let us meet them halfway,' Will said, picking up his velvet hat.

‘If I were you, I would wonder how your master Sir Francis Walsingham knows exactly which stew is your chosen hide-away this evening.’

‘Sir Francis commands the greatest spy network in the world. Do you think he would not use a little of that power to keep track of his own?’ Ducking to avoid the low crossbar, Will closed the door behind them and led the way down the winding, uneven stairs.

‘But you are in Sir Francis’s employ,’ Nathaniel said.

‘As the Queen’s godson likes to say, “treason begets spies and spies treason”. In this business, as perhaps in life itself, it is best not to trust anyone. There is always another face behind the one we see.’

‘What a sad life you lead.’

‘It is the life I have. No point bemoaning it.’ Will’s broad smile gave away nothing of his true thoughts.

The guards escorted them out into the rutted street, where a light frost now glistened across the mud. The smell of ale and woodsmoke hung heavily between the rows from the inns and stews that dominated Bankside, and the night was filled with the usual cacophony of cries, angry shouts, clamour of numerous simultaneous fights, clatter of cudgels, cheers and roars from the bull- and bear-baiting arenas, fiddle music flooding from open doors and drunken voices singing clashing songs. Every conversation was conducted at a shout.

As Will pushed through the crowd towards the carriage, he was recognized by some, and his name flickered from tongue to tongue in awed whispers. Apprentices tentatively touched his sleeve, and sultry-eyed women pursed their lips or thrust their breasts towards him, much to Nathaniel’s weary disdain. But others revealed their fears about the impending invasion and offered their prayers that Will was off to protect them. Grinning, he shook hands, offered wry dismissals of the Spanish threat, and raised their spirits

with enthusiastic proclamations of England's strength; he played well the part that had been given to him.

At the carriage, the curtain was drawn back to reveal a man with a fixed mouth that appeared never to have smiled, and dark, implacable eyes. Francis Walsingham was approaching sixty, but his hair and beard were still black, as were his clothes, apart from a crisp, white ruff.

'My lord,' Will said.

'Master Swyfte. We have business.' Walsingham's eyes flickered towards Nathaniel. 'Come alone.'

Will guessed the nature of the business immediately, for Nathaniel accompanied him everywhere, and had been privy to some of the great secrets of state. Will turned to him and said, 'Nat, I ask a favour of you. Go to Grace and ensure she has all she needs.'

Reading the gravity in Will's eyes, Nathaniel nodded curtly and pushed his way back through the crowd. It was in those silent moments of communication that Will valued Nathaniel most of all; more than a servant, Nathaniel had become a trusted companion, perhaps even a friend. But friends did not keep secrets from each other, and Will guarded the biggest secret of all. It ensured his path was a lonely one.

Walsingham saw the familiar signs in Will's face. 'Our knowledge and our work is a privilege,' he said in his modulated, emotionless voice.

'We have all learned to love the lick of the lash,' Will replied with a sardonic note.

Walsingham held the carriage door open and Will climbed into the heavy perfume of the court, the scent of lavender, sandalwood and rose emanating from iron containers hanging in each of the four corners of the interior. They kept the stink of the city at bay, but also served a more serious purpose that only the most learned would recognize.

Hands reached in through the open window for Will to touch. After he had offered his fingers in exchange, he drew the curtain and let his public face fall away along with his smile.

‘They love you, Master Swyfte,’ Walsingham said. ‘As they should. Your fame reaches to all corners of England, your exploits recounted in inn and marketplace. Your heroism on behalf of Queen and country is a beacon in the long dark of the night that ensures the good men and women of our country sleep well in their beds, secure in the knowledge that they are protected by the best that England has to offer.’

‘Perhaps I should become one of Marlowe’s players.’

‘Do you sour of the public role you must play?’

‘If they knew the truth about me, there would be few flagons raised to the great Will Swyfte in Chichester and Chester.’

‘There is no truth,’ Walsingham replied as the carriage lurched into motion at the crack of the driver’s whip. ‘There are only the stories we tell ourselves. They shape our world, our minds, our hearts. And the strongest stories win the war.’ The older man’s piercing eyes fell upon Will from the dark depths beneath his glowering brow. ‘You seem in a melancholy mood this night.’

‘My revels were interrupted. Any man who had his wine and his women dragged from his grasp would be in a similar mood.’

A shadow crossed Walsingham’s face. ‘Be careful, William. Your love of the pleasures of this world will destroy you.’

Disapproval meant nothing to Will. He did not fear God’s damnation. Mankind had been left to its own devices, and in his opinion there was too much hell around him to worry about the one that might lie beyond death.

‘I understand why you immerse yourself in pleasure,’ Walsingham continued. ‘We all find ways to ease the burden