

THE BRANDY PLOT

The city streets lay deserted as the first hesitant raise of a new day slowly began to dawn upon London's dark alleyways. The morning was cold and crisp, a freezing wind billowing through the narrow roads, whipping stinking garbage into odorous heaps. Silence reigned, even the soft lapping of Father Thames against its muddy banks failed to carry through the thick blanket of fog that hugged the ground.

The boy gently lifted an eyelid as daylight pierced the curtain of low cloud and crept across his face. Suddenly the coldness and redolent stench of the yard around him banished tiredness from his body and in a matter of seconds he was on his feet. Heavy plumes of condensation exhaled from his lips as the sharpness of the air took his breath away. It was almost time to him to go and wake his drunken slob of a master from the drink enhanced slumber and begin another grueling day.

But the master was all Charlie had now. Both his parents had died from the plague a year earlier, he ought to be grateful for what the baker gave him.

Sleepily he weaved his way through the maze of streets, his thick course jacket pulled tightly around him; the early September morning was uncharacteristically cold for the back end of summer. Turning into the steep street he sighed resentfully at the familiar surroundings and prepared himself for the onslaught as he woke the Baker.

He was surprised to find the shop door ajar, a shiver ran down the length of his spine; something was wrong. He entered cautiously. The room was quiet and dark and glancing to the far end of the room he saw the soft glow of a lamp coming from below one of the ovens. Peering in he saw the tip of a ladder descending down into the light. He stepped onto the top rung and began to climb down.

He could smell the alcohol long before he was able to see into the tiny room, when he did he froze.

"Master!" He screamed.

"Boy!" Shouted Murchin at the top of his voice, gripping the thick butt end of his cane and swinging it menacingly toward the young lad. "Come here blazes, before I beat

the living daylight out of you and that thick skull of yours.” His massive belly quivered under the ferocity of the words.” Tentatively Charlie edged a little nearer.

“Closer, closer. How’m I gonna grab your puny body from there, and hurry up before I piss my pants!” Charlie winched with pain as Murchin wrapped thick fingers cruelly around his shoulder and, staggering, they began to weave their way across the crowded inn towards the backyard.

Charlie turned away as the man relieved himself against the low wall, the hot liquid steaming in the cold evening air. The night was quiet and the muffled sounds from within the inn sounded remote as they stood in the darkness. Already the smell of wine on Murchin’s breath was turning stale and the boy covered his nose with a grubby hand.

Once back inside the inn the baker let his weight fall back into the rough hewn bench and swallowing another glass of dark wine he tried to focus on the figure coming towards him.

“Murchin you old bugger!” called the man. Charlie looked up at the tall stranger and shrank back under his hard gaze.

“C-Catesby. What the devil are you doing here?” replied the baker unsteadily. “I thought you were growing fat on the comforts of the countryside.” The young boy caught a hint of fear on his master’s voice, something in the rigid set of his face betrayed unease. The stranger to, it seemed, sensed the air of apprehension.

“What’s wrong?” he said. “Not pleased to see your old mate?” Murchin shook his head vehemently. “Perhaps you were happy to think you’d seen the last of me?”

“N-No of course not. I am always pleased to see an old friend. Especially one so... so,” he paused and Catesby raised an eyebrow in anticipation.

“So...?” He prompted.

“So... sincere,” stated Murchin limply, thick beads of sweat dripping from his brow. For a moment Catesby looked on severely, the thick ridges of his face outlined grotesquely under the lamplight. Charlie held his breath, he could feel tingling in his lungs as they ached for oxygen, but he couldn’t inhale the thick tobacco blue air of the inn. He was frozen by the evil glint in Catesby’s eye. People close by sensed the atmosphere between the two men and gradually the steady hum of the room became a murmur.

Finally Catesby erupted into a deep bellow laugh, a haunting sound that rasped in the back of his throat. Instantly the atmosphere changed, men continued their conversations and shouted to the barmaids for more drink; only Murchin remained unchanged as the man laughed on.

“Don’t look so afraid my friend,” he said approaching the baker and slapping a heavy hand upon his shoulder. “Have I ever done you any harm?”

“No.”

“Well then why the worried face? Relax.” For a moment the flabby features of Murchin’s face remained taugth, his expression uncertain before eventually softening as the man seated himself by his side.

“Where’s your manners boy?!” He exploded once he had regained his composure. “Get the man a drink. You’d sooner see a man dying of thirst before raising a bloody finger.” Catesby waited until the boy was out of earshot before placing his lips close to Murchin’s ear.

“It’s time,” he whispered. The baker didn’t move, didn’t dare look him in the eye.

“Have you been doing what I asked?” he continued. “We had a deal, remember?” Wordlessly Murchin gave a slight nod of his head. “Good.”

“Your wine Sir,” said Charlie gingerly, offering the flagon at arms length.

“Thank you son,” he paused, slowly looking the boy up and down, he was shaking. “You’re not afraid of me are you?”

“No sir. I’m a little cold that’s all.”

“Then why don’t you go and sit by the fire.” It wasn’t a question, instinctively Charlie looked to his master for permission. With a flick of his wrist Murchin dismissed him.

“You should have quite a collection for me by now in that little cellar of yours. Now let me see, what was it we said? Five barrels a year? Meagre repayment don’t you think?” Catesby paused to take a sip of wine. “You had nothing before you met me Murchin and don’t you forget it. I gave you the money to start the business and what did I ask in return? Five puny barrels of brandy each year. You swore before Almighty God to grant me one favour if ever I should ask. Remember?”

“Of course,” Murchin’s reply was once again uncertain.

“Well now I’m asking. You cannot deny me my right.”

“What is it you want from me?” The glass in the baker’s hand was shaking as he raised it to his lips, Catesby ignored the question and rose suddenly.

“Drink up,” he said over his shoulder as he made for the door. “We’ve work to do.”

The cold was absolute as Murchin tried in vain to breathe life into his frozen fingers; the icy steel of the key felt hot to touch as he inserted it into the lock. The shop held no respite from the weather, the ashes within the deep ovens had long ago turned grey and

lifeless. Only the faint glow from a low burning lamp placed by the door illuminated the room.

“Business is good?” asked Catesby after Murchin had raised the wick of the lamp and bathed the shop in a curtain of dancing shadows.

“It’s not a good time for any business, God knows how many people died last year. I need mouths to feed to survive, half the city fled, they have never returned. No, business is not good.”

Catesby examined the baker’s face carefully, holding his gaze he looked for a flinch, a muscle twinge, any sign of weakness. “That’s funny,” he said deliberately. “I was told you were flourishing, built quite a name for yourself around here.”

“Who told you that!? They’re lying, what would they know?” The words were out before he could think. Catesby didn’t reply, everything he wanted to know was in Murchin’s voice.

Lifting the lamp the baker strode towards the ovens, their enormous iron doors set into the rough brick. Sweeping the ashes aside he felt with his fingertips for the iron ring, grabbing it in both hands he leant back and tugged, the floor was stiff and didn’t budge. Within seconds Catesby was at the shoulder.

“How long since you raised this?” He rasped, his fist curling around the baker’s collar.

“Not long, not long, I-I think some ash must have blocked up the edges.”

“You’d better not be lying, there should be 50 barrels down there and God help you if there isn’t. Now pull!!!” With all his strength he gave another Tug, for a moment the panel continued to hold firm before finally, a little at first, it gave way.

Turning his back to the oven he backed in feet first, his leading foot groping in the darkness of the newly exposed hole for the first wooden rung. Catesby passed down the lamp as Murchin reached the floor of the cellar before beginning to descend himself.

“Ah good man,” he said softly as his eyes hungrily scanned the barrels stacked high to the ceiling. “I always knew I could rely on you. Do you know why I asked you to collect these?” Murchin shook his head. “Because this is to be our currency, our silk. This blot is worth more to us than 20 pieces of gold. The men we’re going to deal with don’t deal in diamonds or silver, they deal in liquor.”

“But what is it you want in return, what can they give you?”

Catesby smiled. “You still have no idea what all this means do you? This, all this,” he paused dramatically. “Will finish my father’s work.” A look of horror flashed across Murchin’s face.

“You’re mad!”

“Oh if there is one thing I most certainly am not my friend then it is mad. With these goods we will buy gunpowder. Together, you and me we can save this country from the hands of its Protestant rulers. With Charles dead we can restore a Catholic monarch to the throne, James is strong in faith, he would never let Parliament pull the strings.” The blood drained from the baker’s face as he watched Catesby speak, the man was deranged. The look in his eye was distant and glazed, his face red and flushed. He tried desperately to clear his mind, think of the right words to say and talk some sense into this madman.

“Do you really believe we can succeed where your father failed?” Somehow he managed to control his voice. “Your father was a great man, how could we complete what he could never finish.”

“Because unlike him we have no traitors involved, Fawkes was a fool.” The words were spat between pursed lips.

“A fool maybe but not a traitor, the letter to Lord Monteagle was from all of them.”

“Never!” Catesby was quickly becoming hysterical, as he spoke a stream of saliva gently dribbled down his chin. “He would never be so stupid. Guy Fawkes thought he was clever but he brought them all down. For the sake of one Catholic peer he sentenced the nation of our people to a life of persecution. Until now.”

“But why now? The whole country knows that the Queen may be barren. For years they’ve been married and no children. Don’t you see that if Katherine is infertile then James will inherit the throne anyway.”

“How long would you have us wait? The King is 36. 30 years, 20? 10 if we were lucky. No! We cannot wait, it must be now.” Catesby stood rigid, his heavy laboured breathing clouding in the cool air.

“There can never be another gunpowder plot,” began Murchin. “Do you realise how heavily guarded the King must be. Parliament swarms with his men, we could not even get within 100 yards of the building let alone beneath it.” Catesby gave a small chuckle, its sound hollow under the solid boards of the shop above.

“I have no interest in Westminster, we will choose a time when he is alone, unarmed and unguarded. A time when our great King,” his words were full of contempt and mockery. “Is but a normal man like the rest of us.” Something in his voice made Murchin flinch, what did he know? He spoke with too much conviction to be bluffing and in spite of himself he was unable to resist the question.

“Where?”

“Ah, has our fish finally taken the bait? Oh but surely that is not intrigue I detect in your voice? I thought perhaps the wine had paralysed your senses.” Taking a few short steps forward he came within an inch of Murchin’s face. “Have you not heard the stories about the Kings - hmmm, how shall I put it? Affections?” The Baker shook his head. “Charles it seems is no longer content to share his bed with his wife, he would much rather lie with younger, more fertile women. It is said he already has a litter of bastards tied to the strings of his purse. But if nothing else he is kind to the Queen, I don’t doubt she knows but he does not flaunt these women in front of her. He seeks his satisfaction in private, somewhere where they can be alone.” A sly grin spread across his face, revealing the blackened stumps of his teeth. “What price the knowledge of the whereabouts of this... place?” The baker didn’t need to reply, it was evident in the man’s face that he already knew; but how?

“Who told you?”

“You needn’t worry yourself about that. I know people in all places. Nothing escapes me, 10 years it is since I last set foot in the city and yet I know the comings and goings of everyone.”

“Huh,” snorted Murchin.

“You may not believe me but I know what really happened to the last boy you had.” The colour drained from the bakers face. “What was it you said to the authorities, King’s Evil?”

“How the hell did you know that, no one knows that!” Shouted Murchin, his hands reaching out for Catesby’s neck. In a flash the taller, slimmer man had reached inside the deep folds of his jacket and withdrawn the blade. The amber glare thrown by the lamplight flashed across the steel as it sliced the air before coming to a stop at Murchin’s throat. The sharp point dug at the skin, a tiny speck of blood slowly began to drip down the length of the knife. The cellar was in total silence as the two men stood eye to eye, only the width of the blade between them.

The sound from the floor above boomed like thunder within the confined space in which they stood.

“Who’s that?” Snapped Murchin. Catesby clamped his hand across the man’s mouth and silently motioned him to douse the light. The tension was intense as they stood in total darkness, their ears scanning the air for noise. Not even the sound of their breathing could be heard as they waited. At last the silence was broken by the call of an owl piercing the blackness. The sigh of relief as Catesby sucked the badly needed air into

his chest was closely followed by a replying call as he placed his cupped hands to his mouth and blew.

“It’s all right, it’s one of my men.”

“I thought you said it would only be the two of us,” complained the baker.

“He knows nothing, only that he was to meet us here. We must load the brandy onto his wagon tonight, I have arranged a meeting with the powder traders at first light. We must transport half the brandy across the river whilst it is still dark. If they are satisfied with its quality then we shall exchange the rest tomorrow night.”

The driver was dismissed and told to return for his cart in the morning before they began to load the first shipment of barrels onto the wagon. They were heavy and awkward, causing every muscle in their aching arms to twinge as the barrels were hauled up to the floor of the shop. It took over an hour to fill the cart and with a thankful sigh Catesby lifted the last one into place.

“You stay here and guard the rest,” he panted heavily. “I’ll take these to the docks.”

“Will they be safe?” asked Murchin.

“Let me worry about that, just make sure you’re still here when I get back.” Wearily the baker looked on as Catesby slapped the horses rump and set the wagon in motion. For a long time he could hear the sound of the horse’s shoes striking against the cobbles as it slowly made its way towards the river.

The cellar was still freezing as he sat motionless upon one of the barrels. His mind was a frenzy of thoughts. What was he doing? The whole scheme was utter madness, they would both wind up dead, their heads stuck upon poles and paraded before the whole of London. Even if they did succeed, how could they avoid capture? With these thoughts on his mind he lowered his head and gazed at the floor.

The blade of the knife twinkled in the half light. At first he couldn’t move, his eyes staring disbelievingly at the weapon. Suddenly everything became clear. Who would ever know if he was to slit Catesby’s throat and discard his body into the Thames before daylight. Nervously he closed his fingers about the shaft and lifted it from the floor. It fitted his hand well, its power seeping through his body as he tightened his grip. He knew what he had to do, now all he needed was the courage.

Holding the barrel between his knees he brought the knife down hard. The sharp blade pierced the casing easily and it wasn’t long before the cold, strong liquid was burning the back of his throat.

The lids of his eyes had grown heavy by the time the sound of footsteps rapped up on the shop-floor. For a moment he wasn't sure where he was, his mind cloudy and full of sleep.

"Murchin!" The voice snapped him back to his senses and cleared his head. With narrowed eyes he watched as Catesby lowered himself into the cellar.

"Good news, they liked t-," the words fell from his lips as he stared at the Baker. "What the devil are you up to?" In a flash he saw the open brandy upon the floor and launched himself at the man. "You fool!!" He screamed as he flew across the short distance. He was too quick for the baker, before the large man had time to react he crashed against his chest and threw him to the ground. The two men fell against the open barrel, tipping it onto its side and spilling its precious contents upon the floor. They fought in silence. With every ounce of strength in his body Catesby encircled Murchin's fat neck with his hands and tried to squeeze the life from his body. Murchin fumbled blindly in his jacket pocket for the knife, his breath was growing short, the veins in his temple throbbing painfully. He couldn't last much longer, already a darkness was descending upon him and the room span before his bulbous eyes.

At last he felt the blade, he barely had the energy to pull it free of his jacket before raising his arm into the air and bringing it down into Catesby's back. The man cried out in pain and jumped to his feet, his back afire with pain. Murchin looked on helpless as the man managed to curl his arm behind him and withdraw the dagger from the wound.

"Master!" Screamed Charlie from the wooden steps as he saw Catesby standing alone, the bloody knife dripping in his hand. Catesby threw out an arm and caught the boy across the chin, sending him reeling to the floor.

"You're a bloody fool Murchin," he growled as he grabbed the boy and held a knife to his throat. "We had it made, we would have gone down in history you and me. But no, you had to go and ruin it. Well there's no way back now, not for you or the kid." Murchin saw the lamp standing upon the floor, slowly he edged his fingers across the brandy covered floor, careful not to make any sudden movements.

"You could have had anything you wanted," continued Catesby. Murchin curled his hand around the lamp, he felt dizzy and sensed a blanket of darkness hovering above him. In one sudden movement, summoning the last drop of strength left in his exhausted body he swung the lamp through the air. The glass bowl of the light splintered against Catesby's head gashing a large slit across his forehead. Murchin smiled as he saw the blood ooze from the man's brow before closing his own eyes and relenting to the blackness.

The broken lamp fell to the ground, the naked flame flaring hungrily as it touched the brandy. Charlie looked on in horror as the flames leapt across the cellar and began to lick at the curved wooden slats of the barrels stacked against the far wall. Braving the fire he ran to his master side and tried to wake him. There was no response, desperately he tried to drag him towards the stairway but it was futile. When he looked up the fire was all around him, the heat was intense as he watched it reach for the boards of the floor above. Thick smoke bellowed across the room, there was nothing he could do. Taking a deep breath he ran for the ladder and stumbled his way up to the safety of the shop above.

“Help! Fire!” He shouted as he rushed out into the street. But it was still early, London was still sleeping as he ran blindly through empty roads, screaming at the top of his voice. It seemed an eternity before he saw a group of men walking towards him.

“You must help me,” he gasped, his voice hoarse from running. “He’s trapped, the fire will kill him!”

“Who? Where?” said one of the men urgently.

“Please you must come quickly, he will die.” Tears were streaming down his face as he pictured his master lying amongst the flames.

“Calm down lad, tell us where the fire is, we must know where it is.”

“The bakery,” the words were barely a whisper as exhaustion and shock began to overcome him.

“In which street?” The question was urgent.

Struggling for breath Charlie whispered the name of the road in the man’s ear.

“Pudding Lane....”



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