

EARTHLY JOYS



PHILIPPA GREGORY

Bestselling author of *THE OTHER BOLEYN GIRL* and *THE VIRGIN'S LOVER*

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PHILIPPA GREGORY

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The daffodils would be fit for a king. The delicate wild daffodils, their thousand heads bobbing and swaying with the wind, light-petaled, light-stemmed, moving like a field of unripe barley before a summer breeze, scattered across the grass, thicker around the trunks of trees as if they were dewponds of gold. They looked like wildflowers; but they were not. Tradescant had planned them, planted them, and nourished them. He looked at them and smiled—as if he were greeting friends.

Sir Robert Cecil strolled up, his uneven tread instantly recognizable in the crunch of the gravel. John turned and pulled off his hat.

“They look well,” his lordship observed. “Yellow as Spanish gold.”

John bowed. The two men were near each other in age—both in their thirties—but the courtier was bent under a humped back and his face was lined by a lifetime of caution at court, and with pain from his twisted body. He was a small man, little more than five feet tall—his enemies called him a dwarf behind his hunched back. In a beauty-conscious, fashion-mad court where appearance was everything and a man was judged by his looks and his performance on the hunting field or battlefield, Robert Cecil had started his life with an impossible disadvantage: crooked, tiny and struggling with pain. Beside him the gardener Tradescant, brown-faced and strong-backed, looked ten years younger. He waited in silence for his master to speak. It was not his place to prolong the conversation.

“Any early vegetables?” his lordship asked. “Asparagus? They say His Majesty loves asparagus.”

“It’s too early, my lord. Even a king new-come to his kingdom cannot hunt deer and eat fruit in the same month. They each have their season. I cannot force peaches for him in spring.”

Sir Robert smiled. “You disappoint me, Tradescant, I had thought you could make strawberries grow in midwinter.”

“With a hothouse, my lord, and a couple of fires, some lanterns and a lad to water and carry, perhaps I could give you Twelfth Night strawberries.” He thought for a moment. “It’s the light,” he said to himself. “I think you would need sunlight to make them ripen. I don’t know that candlelight or even lanterns would be enough.”

Cecil watched him with amusement. Tradescant never failed in the respect he owed his master, but he readily forgot everything but his plants. As now, he could fall silent thinking of a gardening problem, wholly neglecting his lord who stood before him.

A man more conscious of his dignity would have dismissed a servant for less. But Robert Cecil treasured it. Alone of every man in his train, Sir Robert trusted his gardener to tell him the truth. Everyone else told him what they thought he wanted to hear. It was one of the disadvantages of his office and excessive wealth. The only information which was worth having was that given without fear or favor, but all the information a squire could buy was worthless. Only John Tradescant, half his mind always on his garden, was too busy to lie.

“I doubt it would be worth your effort,” Sir Robert remarked. “There are seasons for most endeavors.”

John suddenly grinned at him, hearing the parallel between his own work and his master’s. “And your season has come,” he said shrewdly. “Your fruiting.”

They turned together and walked back to the great house, Tradescant a step behind the greatest man

in the kingdom, respectfully attentive, but looking from side to side at every pace. There were things that wanted doing in the garden—but then there were always things that wanted doing in the garden. The avenue of pleached limes needed retying before their early summer growth thrust wands of twigs out of control, the kitchen garden needed digging over; and radishes, leeks and onions should be sown into the warming spring soil. The great watercourses which were the wonder of Theobalds Palace needed weeding and cleaning; but he strolled as if he had all the time in the world, one step behind his master, waiting in silence, in case his master wanted to talk.

“I did right,” Sir Robert said half to himself, half to his gardener. “The old queen was dying and she had no heir with as strong a claim as he. Not one fit to rule, that is. She would not hear his name; you had to whisper King James of Scotland if she were anywhere in any of her palaces. But all the reports I had of him were of a man who could hold two kingdoms, and perhaps even weld them together. And he had sons and a daughter—there’d be no more fretting over heirs. And he’s a good Christian, no taint of papistry. They breed strong Protestants in Scotland . . .”

He paused for a moment and gazed at his great palace set on the high terrace looking toward the River Thames. “I don’t complain,” he said fairly. “I’ve been well repaid for my work. And there’s more to come.” He smiled at his gardener. “I’m to be Baron Cecil of Essenden.”

Tradescant beamed. “I’m glad for you.”

Sir Robert nodded. “A rich reward for a hard task . . .” He hesitated. “Sometimes I felt disloyal. She wrote him letter after letter, teaching him the way of our country, preparing him to rule. And she never knew. She’d have had me beheaded if she had known! She’d have called it treason—toward the end she called it treason even to mention his name. But he had to be prepared . . .”

Sir Robert broke off, and John Tradescant watched him with silent sympathy. His master often strolled into the garden to find him. Sometimes they spoke of the grounds, the formal garden, the orchards, the park, of seasonal plantings, or new plans; sometimes Sir Robert spoke at length indiscreetly, knowing that Tradescant could keep a secret, that he was a man without guile, with solid loyalty. Sir Robert had made Tradescant his own, as effectually as if the gardener had gone down on the loam and sworn an oath of fealty, on the day that he had trusted him with the garden of Theobalds Palace. It had been a massive task for a twenty-four-year-old but Sir Robert had taken the gamble that Tradescant could do it. He was a young man himself, desperate to inherit his father’s position at court, desperate for older and more powerful men to recognize his merit and his skill. He took a risk with Tradescant and then the queen took a risk with him. Now, six years later, both of them had learned the craft—statesmanship and gardening—and Tradescant was Sir Robert’s man through and through.

“She wanted him left ignorant,” Sir Robert said. “She knew what would happen to her court if she named him as heir; they’d have all slipped away from her, slipped away up the Great North Road to Edinburgh, and she’d have died alone, knowing herself to be an old woman, an ugly old woman with no kin, no lovers, no friends. I owed it to her to keep them at her beck and call to the very end. But I owed it to him to teach him as best I could . . . even at a distance. It was to be his kingdom; he had to learn how to govern it, and there was no one but me to teach him.”

“And he knows now?” John asked, going to the very heart of it.

Sir Robert was alert. “Why d’you ask? Is there gossip that he does not?”

John shook his head. “I’ve heard none,” he said. “But he’s not a lad who has sprung up from nowhere. He must have his own way of doing things. He’s a man grown, and he has his own kingdom. I was wondering if he would take your teaching, especially now that he will have his pick of advice. And matters . . .”

He broke off and his master waited for him to finish.

“When you have a lord or a king,” John went on, choosing his words with caution, “you have to be sure that he knows what he’s doing. Because he’s going to be the one who decides what you do.” He stopped, bent and whisked out the little yellow head of a groundsel plant. “Once you’re his man, you’re stuck with him,” he said frankly. “He has to be a man of judgment, because if he gets it wrong then he’s ruined; and you with him.”

Cecil waited in case there was more but John looked shyly down into his face. “I beg your pardon,” he said. “I did not mean to suggest that the king did not know what he has to do. I was thinking of your subjects.”

Sir Robert waved away the apology with one gesture of his long-fingered hand. They strolled together up the great avenue through the large formal knot garden toward the front terrace of the palace. It was done in the old style, and John had changed nothing here since his arrival as gardener. It had been laid out by Sir Robert’s father in the bleak elegance of the period. Sharply defined geometric patterns of box hedging enclosed different-colored gravels and stones. The beauty of the garden was best seen if you looked down on it, from the house. Then you could see that it was as complex and lovely as a series of neat diagrams of cropped hedging and stone. John had a private ambition to change the garden after the new fashion—to break up the regular square and rectangular beds and make all the separate beds one long whole, like an embroidered hem or scarf—a twisting pattern that went on and on, serpentine and about itself. When his master was less absorbed with statecraft John was going to suggest melding the beds one into another.

Once he had persuaded Sir Robert to follow the new fashion for the knot garden he had an ambition to go yet further. He longed to take out the gravel from the enclosed shapes and plant the patterns with herbs, flowers and shrubs. He wanted to see the whole disciplined shape softened and changing every day with foliage and flowers which would bloom and wilt, grow freshly green, and then pale. He had a belief, as yet unexpressed, almost unformed, that there was something dead and hard about a garden of stone paths edged with box-enclosing beds of gravel. Tradescant had a picture in his mind’s eye of plants spilling over the hedges, of the thick green of the box containing wildness, fertility, even color. It was an image that drew on the hedgerow and roadside of the wild country of England and brought that richness into the garden and imposed order upon it.

“I miss her,” Sir Robert admitted.

John was recalled to his real duty—to be his master’s man heart and soul, to love what he loved, to think what he thought, to follow him to death without question if need be. The image of the cream-tossing heads of gypsy lace and moon daisies encased by hawthorn hedging in its first haze of spring green vanished at once.

“She was a great queen,” John volunteered.

Sir Robert’s face lightened. “She was,” he said. “Everything I learned about statecraft, I learned from her. There never was a more cunning player. And she named him at the very end. So she did her duty in her own way.”

“You named him,” John said dryly. “I heard that it was you that read the proclamation which named him as king while the others were still hopping between him and the other heirs like fleas between sleeping dogs.”

Cecil shot John his swift sly smile. “I have some small influence,” he agreed. The two men reached the steps which led to the first terrace. Sir Robert leaned on John’s sturdy shoulder and John braced himself to take the slight weight.

“He’ll not go wrong while I have the guiding of him,” Sir Robert said thoughtfully. “And neither I nor you will be the losers. It takes a good deal of skill to survive from one reign to the next, Tradescant.”

John smiled. "Please God this king will see me out," he said. "I've seen a queen, the greatest queen that ever was; and now a new king. I don't expect to see more."

They reached the terrace and Sir Robert dropped his hand from John's shoulder and shrugged. "Oh! You're a young man still! You'll see King James and then his son Prince Henry on the throne! I don't doubt it!"

"Amen to their safe succession," John Tradescant replied loyally. "Whether I see it or not."

"You're a faithful man," Sir Robert remarked. "D'you never have any doubts, Tradescant?"

John looked quickly at his master to see if he was jesting, but Sir Robert was serious.

"I made my choice of master when I came to you," John said baldly. "I promised then that you would have no more faithful servant than me. And I promise my loyalty to the queen, and now to her heirs twice every Sunday in church before God. I'm not a man who questions these things. I take my oath and that's the end of it for me."

Sir Robert nodded, reassured as always by Tradescant's faith, as straight as an arrow to the target. "I do it the old way," he said, half to himself. "A chain of master and man leading to the very head of the kingdom. A chain from the lowest beggar to the highest lord and the king above him and God above him. Keeps the country tied up tight."

"I like men in their places," Tradescant agreed. "It's like a garden. Things ordered in their right places and pruned into shape."

"No wild disorder? No tumbling vines?" Sir Robert asked with a smile.

"That's not a garden, that's outside," John said firmly. He looked down at the knot garden, the straight lines of the low clipped hedges, and behind them the sharply defined colored stones, each part in its right place, each shape building up the design which could not even be seen clearly by the workers on the ground who weeded the gravel. To understand the symmetry of the garden you had to be gentry—looking down from the windows of the house.

"My job is to make order for the master's pleasure," Tradescant said.

Sir Robert touched his shoulder. "Mine too."

They walked together along the terrace to the next great flight of steps. "All ready for His Majesty?" Sir Robert asked, knowing what the answer would be.

"All prepared."

Tradescant waited to see if his master would speak more and then he bowed, and fell back, and watched Sir Robert limp onward, toward the grand house, to supervise the preparation for the visit of the Lord's Anointed, England's new, glorious king.



They had news of the arrival long before the first outriders clattered in through the great gates. Half the country had turned out to see what sort of man the new king might be. The whole royal court moved with the king—the baggage trains behind his carriages carried everything from silver and gold cutlery to pictures for his walls. One hundred and fifty English noblemen had attached themselves at once to the new king, their hats banded with red and gold to demonstrate their loyalty. But traveling with him also was his own Scots court, drawn south by the promise of easy pickings from the fat English manors. Behind them came all the retainers—twenty for each lord—and behind them came their baggage and horses. It was a massive battalion of idlers on the move. In the center of the whole train came the king riding his big black hunter and scarcely able to see the country he had come to claim as his own for the lords and gentry who milled about him.

Half of the commoners who had joined the progress as it moved along the dusty roads were turned back at the great palace gates by Sir Robert's retainers—a private army of his own—and the king rode down the great sweep of the tree-lined avenue to the house. When they reached the base court the followers broke away, looking for their own apartments and shouting for grooms to stable their horses. The king was greeted by Sir Robert's chief servant, the master of the house, who had a paper to read to welcome the king on coming to his kingdom, and then Sir Robert himself stepped forward and knelt before him.

“You can get up,” the new king said gruffly, his accent extraordinary to those subjects who had only ever heard a monarch speak in the queen's ringing rounded tones.

Sir Robert rose, awkward on his lame leg, and led his king into the great hall of Theobalds. King James, prepared for English wealth and English style, nonetheless checked at the doorway and gasped. The walls and the ceilings were so massively carved with branches and flowers and leaves that the walls themselves looked like the boughs of a wood, and on the warm spring day even the wild birds were misled and came flying in and out of the huge open windows with their vast panes of expensive Venetian glass. It was a flight of fancy in stone, wood and precious metals and jewels, an excess of folly and grandeur in one splendid hall as big as a couple of barns.

“This is magnificent. What jewels in those planets! What workmanship in the wood!”

Sir Robert smiled, as modest as he could be, and bowed slightly; but not even his courtier skills were able to conceal his pride of ownership.

“And this wall!” the king exclaimed.

It was the wall which showed the Cecil family connections. Other older members of court, other greater families might sneer at the Cecils, who had come from a farm in Herefordshire only a few generations ago; but this wall was Sir Robert's answer. It was emblazoned with his family shield showing the motto “*Prudens Qui Patiens*”—a good choice for a family who had made their fortune in two generations by advising the monarch—and linked by swags and ropes of laurel and bay leaves to the coats of arms and branches of the family. The garlands showed the extent of the Cecil power and influence. This was a man who had a cousin or a niece in every noble bed in the land and, conversely, every noble family in the land had, at one time or another, sought the seal of Cecil approval. The rich

swooping loops of carved and polished foliage which connected one shield to another were like a map of England's power from the fountainhead of the Cecil family, closest to the throne, to the most distant tributaries of petty northern lordships and baronetcies.

On the opposite wall was Cecil's great planetary clock, which showed the time of day in hours and minutes as it shone on Cecil's house. A great solid gold orb represented the sun, and then at one side was a moon hammered from pure silver, and the planets in their courses, all moving in their spheres. Each planet was made from silver or gold and encrusted with jewels, each kept perfect time, each demonstrated in its symmetry and beauty the natural order of the universe that put England at the center of the universe and mirrored the arrangement of the opposite wall that put Cecil at the center of England.

It was an extraordinary display even for a house of extraordinary displays.

The king looked from one wall to another, stunned by the richness. "I've seen nothing like this in my life before," he said.

"It was my father's great pride," Sir Robert said. At once he could have bitten off his tongue rather than mention his father to this man. William Cecil had been the queen's adviser when she had hesitated over the death of her cousin, Queen Mary of Scotland. It was Cecil's father who had put the death warrant on the table and told the queen that, kin or no, monarch or no, innocent or no, the lady must die, that he could not guarantee Queen Elizabeth's safety with her dangerously attractive rival alive. It was William Cecil who had responsibility for Mary's death and now his son welcomed the dead queen's son into his house.

"I must show you the royal apartments," Robert Cecil recovered rapidly. "And if there is anything you lack you must tell me, Your Majesty." He turned and waved to a man holding a heavy box. The man, whose cue should have come later, started forward and presented the jewel box on one knee.

The gleam from the diamonds completely obscured Cecil's small blunder. James beamed with desire. "I shall lack nothing," he declared. "Show me the royal rooms."

It seemed odd to Cecil, taking this stocky, none-too-clean man into the rooms which had belonged exclusively to the queen, and were always left empty when she was not there, filled only with the aura of royalty. When she was in residence, on her long and expensive visits, the place was scented with rosewater and orange blossom and the richest strewing herbs and pomanders. Even when she was absent there was a ghost of her perfume in the room which made any man coming into it pause in awe on the threshold. There was a tradition that her chair was placed in the center of the room like a throne, and like a throne it was vested with her authority. Everyone, from serving maid to Cecil, bowed to it on entering the room and on leaving, such was the power of England's queen even in her absence.

It seemed odd, against the grain of all things, and wrong in itself that the heir she had never seen whose name she had hated, should cross her threshold and exclaim with greedy pleasure at her carved and gilded wooden bed where he would now lie, the rich curtains around it and the hangings on the walls. "This is a palace fit for a king indeed," James said, his chin wet as if he were salivating at the sight.

Sir Robert bowed. "I shall leave you to take your ease, Your Majesty."

Already the room was losing that slight scent of orange blossom. The new king smelled of horses and of stale sweat. "I shall dine at once," he said.

Sir Robert bowed low and withdrew.

* * *

John had the final ordering of the vegetables to the kitchen, checking the great baskets as they went from the cold house in the kitchen garden into the back door of the vegetable kitchens, and so he did not s

the royal entourage arrive. The palace kitchens were in uproar. The meat cooks were sweating and as re as the great carcasses, and the pastry chefs were white with flour and nerves. The three huge kitchen fires were roaring and hot and the lads turning the spits were drunk with the small ale they were downing great thirsty gulps. In the rooms where the meat was butchered for the spit the floor was wet with blood and the dogs of the two households were everywhere underfoot, lapping up blood and entrails.

The main kitchen was filled with servants running on one errand or another, and loud with shouted orders. John made sure that his barrows of winter greens and cabbage had gone to the right cook and made a hasty retreat.

“Oh, John!” one of the serving maids called after him and then blushed scarlet. “I mean, Mistress Tradescant!”

He turned at the sound of her voice.

“Will you be taking your dinner in the great hall?” she asked.

John hesitated. As Sir Robert’s gardener he was undoubtedly one of his entourage, and could eat at the far end of the hall, watching the king dine in state. As one of the household staff he could eat in the second sitting for the servers and cooks, after the main dinner had been served. As Sir Robert Cecil’s trusted envoy and the planner of his garden he could eat at a higher table, halfway up the hall: below the gentry of course, but well above the men at arms and the huntsmen. If Sir Robert wanted him nearby he might stand at his shoulder while his lord was served with his dinner.

“I’ll not eat today,” he declared, avoiding the choice which brought with it so many complexities. Men would watch where he sat and guess at his influence and intimacy with his master. John had long ago learned discretion from Sir Robert; he never flaunted his place. “But I’ll go into the gallery to watch the king at his vittles.”

“Shall I bring you a plate of the venison?” she asked. She stole a little glance at him from under her cap. She was a pretty girl, an orphan niece of one of the cooks. Tradescant recognized, with the weariness and familiarity of a man who has been confined to bachelorhood for too long, the stirring of a desire which must always be repressed.

“No,” he said regretfully. “I’ll come to the kitchen when the king is served.”

“We could share a plate, and some bread, and a flagon of ale?” she offered. “When I’ve finished my work?”

John shook his head. The ale would be strong, and the meat would be good. There were a dozen places where a man and a maid might meet in the great house alone. And the gardens were John’s own domain. Away from the formality of the knot gardens there were woodland walks and hidden places. There was the bathing house, all white marble and plashing water and luxury. There was a little mound with a summerhouse at the pinnacle, veiled with silk curtains. Every path led to an arbor planted with sweet-smelling flowers; around every corner there was a seat sheltered with trees and hidden from the paths. There were summer banqueting halls; there were the dozens of winter sheds where the tender plants were nursed. There was the orangery scented with citrus leaves, with a warm fire always burning. There were potting sheds, and tool stores. There were a thousand thousand places where John and the girl might go, if she were willing, and he were reckless.

The girl was only eighteen, in the prime of her beauty and her fertility. John was a cautious man. If he went with her and she took with child he would have to marry her, and he would lose forever his chance of a solid dowry and a hitch up the long small-runged ladder which his father had planned for him when he had betrothed him, two years ago, to the daughter of the vicar at Meopham in Kent. John had no intention of marrying before he had the money to support a wife, and no intention of breaking his solemn betrothal. Elizabeth Day would wait for him until her dowry and his savings would make the

future secure. Not even John's wage as a gardener would be enough for a newly married couple to prosper in a country where land prices were rising and the price of bread was wholly dependent on favorable weather; and if the wife proved fertile then they would be dragged down to poverty with a new baby every year. John had an utter determination to keep his place in the world and, if possible, to improve it.

"Catherine," he said. "You are too pretty for my peace of mind, I cannot go courting with you. And I dare not venture more . . ."

She hesitated. "We might venture together . . ."

He shook his head. "I have nothing but my wages, and you have no portion. We should do poorly with my little miss."

Someone shouted for her from the kitchen table. She glanced behind her, chose to ignore them and stepped closer to him.

"You're paid a vast sum!" she protested. "And Sir Robert trusts you. He gives you gold to buy his trees, and he is high in favor with the king. They say he is certain to take you to London to make his garden there . . ."

John hid his surprise. He had thought that she had been watching him and desiring him, as he, despite his caution, had been watching and wanting her. But this careful planning was not the voice of a besotted eighteen-year-old. "Who says this?" he asked, carefully keeping his voice neutral. "Your uncle?"

She nodded. "He says you are set fair to be a great man, although you are only a gardener. He says that gardens are the fashion and that Mr. Gerard and you are the very men. He says you could go as far as London. Perhaps even into the king's service!" She broke off, excited by the prospect.

John had disappointment like a sour taste in his mouth. "I might." He could not resist testing her liking for him. "Or I might prefer to stay in the country and try my hand at breeding flowers and trees. Would you come with me, to a little cottage, if I become a gardener in a small way, and husband a little plot?"

Involuntarily she stepped back. "Oh, no! I couldn't bear anything mean! But surely, Mr. Tradescant, that is not your wish?"

John shook his head. "I cannot say." He felt himself fumbling for a dignified retreat, conscious of the desire in his face, the heat in his blood and the contradictory, sobering awareness that she had seen him as an opportunity for her ambition, and never looked at him with desire at all. "I could not promise to take you to London. I could not promise to take you anywhere. I could not promise wealth or success."

She pouted her lower lip, like a child who has been disappointed. Tradescant put both his hands in the deep pockets of his coat so that he would not be able to put them around her yielding waist, and pushed her to him for consolation and kisses.

"Then you may fetch your own dinner!" she cried shrilly and turned abruptly away from him. "And I'll find a handsome young man to dine with. A Scotsman with a place at court! There are many who would be glad to have me!"

"I don't doubt it," John said. "And I would too, but . . ." She did not wait to hear his excuses; she flounced around and was gone.

A serving man pushed past him with a huge platter of fine white bread; another ran behind with flagons of wine clutched four in each hand. John turned from the noise of the kitchen area and went toward the great hall.

The king was seated, drinking red wine at the enormous hearthside. He was already vastly, deeply drunk. He was still filthy from the day's hunting and the travel along the muddy roads and he had not washed. Indeed, they said that he never washed, but merely wiped his sore and blotchy hands gently on silk. The dirt beneath his fingernails had certainly been there since his triumphant arrival in England.

and probably since childhood. Sitting beside him was a handsome young man dressed as richly as a prince but who was neither Prince Henry the older son and heir nor Prince Charles the younger brother. As John waited at the back of the hall and watched, the king pulled the youth toward him and kissed him behind his ear, leaving a dribble of red wine along the pleats of his white ruff.

There was a roar of laughter at some joke and the king plunged his hand into the favorite's lap and squeezed his padded codpiece. The man snatched up the hand and kissed it. There was high ribald laughter, from women as well as men, sharing the joke. No one paused for a moment at the sight of the King of England and Scotland with his dirty hand thrust into the lap of a man.

John watched them as if they were curiosities from another country. The women were painted white from their large horsehair wigs to their half-naked breasts, their eyebrows plucked and shaped so their eyes seemed unnaturally wide, their lips colored pink. Their gowns were cut low and square over their bulging breasts and their waists were nipped in tight by embroidered and jewel-encrusted stomachers. The colors of the silks and satins and velvet gowns glowed in the candlelight as if they were luminous.

The king was sprawled in his seat with half a dozen intimates around him, most of them already drunk. Behind them all the court drank flagon after flagon of rich wine, and flirted, and schemed and caroused, some inarticulate with drink, some incomprehensible with their broad Scots accents. One or two, with an eye to the English scrutiny, spoke quietly to each other in Scots.

There was to be a masque later representing Wisdom meeting Justice, and some of the court were already in their masquing clothes. Justice was dead drunk, slumped over the table, and one of the handmaidens of Wisdom was at the back of the hall, backed up against the wall, with one of the Scots nobles investigating the layers of her petticoats.

John, conscious of the great disadvantage of watching this scene stone-cold sober, took a cup from a passing servant and downed a great gulp of the very best wine. He thought briefly of the old queen's court, where there had been vanity and wealth indeed, but also the rigid discipline of the autocratic old woman who ruled that since she had denied herself pleasure, the rest of the court should be chastened. There had been parties everywhere she had gone, masques and balls and picnics, but all behavior that fell under the scrutiny of that fierce gaze had been strictly constrained. John realized that the long carnival-like journey from Scotland to England must have been a revelation to the English courtiers and what he was seeing was the consequence of a rapid recognition that anything was now permitted.

The king emerged from a slobbering kiss. "We must have more music!" he shouted.

In the gallery, the musicians who had been fighting to make themselves heard above the hubbub in the hall started another air.

"Dance!" the king exclaimed.

Half a dozen of the court formed two lines and started to dance; the king pulled the young man down to sit between his knees and caressed the dark ringlets of his hair. He bent down and kissed him full on the mouth. "My lovely boy," he said.

John felt the wine in his veins and in his head but feared that no wine would be strong enough to persuade him that this scene was joyful, or this king was gracious. Such thoughts were treason, and John was too loyal to think treason. He turned around and left the hall.



“What do we have that is the most impressive?” Sir Robert came upon John in the scented garden, square internal court where John had grown jasmine, honeysuckle and roses against the walls to soften their grim grayness. John was balanced on the top of a ladder, pruning the honeysuckle which had just finished flowering.

John turned to look at his master and took in at once the new lines of strain on his face. The first year of the new king’s reign had been no sinecure for his Secretary of State. Wealth and honor had been showered on Cecil and on his family and adherents; but wealth and honor had equally been poured on hundreds of others. The new king, born into a kingdom of bleak poverty, thought the coffers of England were bottomless. Only Cecil knew and appreciated that the wealth that Queen Elizabeth had hoarded so jealously was flowing out of the treasure room of the Tower quicker than he could hope to gather it back in.

“Impressive?” John asked. “An impressive flower?” His expression of complete bewilderment made his master suddenly laugh aloud.

“God’s blood, John, I have not laughed for weeks. With this damned envoy from Spain at my heels all the time and the king slipping away to hunt at every moment and them always asking me, what would the king think? and I without an answer! Impressive. Yes. What do we grow that is impressive?”

John considered for a moment. “I never think of plants as impressive. D’you mean rare, my lord? Or beautiful?”

“Rare, strange, beautiful. It is for a gift. A gift which will make men stare. A gift which will make men wonder.”

John nodded, slid down the ladder like a boy and turned from the garden at a brisk walk. At once he remembered who he was leading and slowed his pace.

“Don’t humor me,” his lord snapped from a few paces behind. “I can keep up.”

“I was slowing to think, my lord,” John said swiftly. “My trouble is that the main flowering season is over now we are in midsummer. If you had wanted something very grand a couple of months ago I could have given you some priceless tulips, or the great rose daffodils which were better this year than any other. But now . . .”

“Nothing?” the earl demanded, scandalized. “Acres of garden and nothing to show me?”

“Not nothing,” Tradescant protested, stung. “I have some roses in their second bloom which are as good as anything in the kingdom.”

“Show me.”

Tradescant led the way to the mount. It was as high as two houses, and the lane which led the way to the top was broad enough for a pony and a carriage. At the summit was a banqueting hall with a little table and chairs. Sometimes it would amuse the three Cecil children to dine at the top of the hill and look down on all that they owned, but Robert Cecil only rarely came here. The climb was too steep for him and he did not like to be seen riding while his children walked.

The hedges of the lane which wound to the summit were planted with all the varieties of English roses that Tradescant could find in the neighboring counties: cream, peach, pink, white. Every year he grafted

and regrafted new stock on to old stems to try to make a new color, a new shape or a new scent.

~~“They tell me this is sweet,” he said, proffering a rose striped white and scarlet. “A Rosamund rose but with a perfume.”~~

His lord bent and sniffed. “How can you breed for scent when you cannot smell them yourself?” he asked.

John shrugged. “I ask people if they smell good or better than other roses. But it is hard to judge. They always tell me the scent in terms of another scent. And since I have never had a nose which could smell then it’s no help to me. They say ‘lemony’ as if I would know what a lemon smells like. They say ‘honey’ and that is no help either, for I think of one as sour and one as sweet.”

Robert Cecil nodded. He was not the man to pity a disability. “Well, it smells good to me,” he said. “Could I have great boughs of it by August?”

John Tradescant hesitated. A less faithful servant would have said “yes” and then disappointed his master at the final moment. A better courtier would have guided him away to something else. John simply shook his head. “I thought you wanted it for today or tomorrow. I cannot give you roses by August, my lord. Nobody can.”

Cecil turned away and started to limp back to the house. “Come with me,” he said shortly over his sloped shoulder. Tradescant fell in beside him and Cecil leaned on his arm. Tradescant took the burden of that light weight and felt himself soften with pity for the man who had all the responsibility for running three, no, four kingdoms with the new addition of Scotland, and yet none of the real power.

“It’s for the Spanish,” Cecil told him in an undertone. “This gift that I need. What do people in the country think of the peace with Spain?”

“They mistrust it, I think,” John said. “We have been at war with Spain for so long, and avoided defeat so narrowly. It’s impossible to think of them as friends the very next day.”

“I cannot let us stay at war in Europe. We will be ruined if we go on pouring men and gold into the United Provinces, into France. And Spain is no threat anymore. I must have a peace.”

“As long as they don’t come here,” John said hesitantly. “No one cares what happens in Europe, my lord. Ordinary people care only for their own homes, for their own county. Half the people here in Cheshunt or Waltham Cross care only that there are no Spaniards in Surrey.”

“No Jesuits,” Cecil said, naming the greatest fear.

John nodded. “God preserve us. We none of us want to see burnings in the marketplace again.”

Cecil looked into the face of his gardener. “You’re a good man,” he said shortly. “I learn more from you in a walk from my mount to my orangery than I do from a nation full of spies.”

The two men paused. The orangery at Theobalds was open at every doorway, the double white-painted doors allowing the warm summer sunshine to flood into the rooms. Tender saplings and whips of oranges, lemons and vines were still kept inside—Tradescant was a notoriously cautious man. But the mature fruit trees were out in the fine weather, housed in great barrels with carrying loops at four points so they could adorn the three central courts of Theobalds in the summer, and bring a touch of the exotic to this most English of palaces. Long before the first hint of frost Tradescant would have them carried back into the orangery and the fires lit in the grates to keep them safe through the English winter.

“I suppose oranges are not impressive,” he said. “Not to Spaniards who live in orange groves.”

Cecil was about to agree but he hesitated. “How many oranges could we muster?”

John thought of the three mature trees, one placed at the center of each court. “Would you strip the trees of all their fruit?” he asked.

Cecil nodded.

John swallowed at the thought of the sacrifice. “A barrel of fruit. By August, perhaps two barrels.”

Cecil slapped him on the shoulder. "That's it!" he cried. "The whole point is that we show them that they have nothing which we need. We give them great boughs of oranges and that shows them that anything they have, we can have too. That we are not the supplicants in this business but the men of power. That we have all of England and orange orchards too."

"Boughs?" John asked, going to the central point. "You don't mean to pick the fruit?"

Cecil shook his head. "It is a gift for the king to give to the Spanish ambassador. It has to look wonderful. A barrel of oranges could have been bought on the quayside, but a great branch of a tree with the fruit on it—they will see that it has been fresh-cut by the quality of the leaves. It has to be boughs laden with fruit."

John, thinking of the savage hacking of his beautiful trees, suppressed an exclamation of pain. "Certainly, my lord," he said.

Cecil, understanding at once, hugged Tradescant around the shoulders and planted a hearty kiss on his cheek. "John, I have had men lay down their lives for me with an easier heart. Forgive me, but I need a grand gesture for the king. And your oranges are the sacrificial lamb."

John reluctantly chuckled. "I'll wait till I hear then, my lord. And I'll cut the fruit and send it up to London as soon as you order."

"Bring it yourself," Cecil directed him. "I want no mistake, and you of all men will guard it as if it were your firstborn son."



John's oranges were the center of the feast to celebrate the peace. King James and Prince Henry held Bibles and swore before the nobles and the Spanish ambassadors that the Treaty of London would inaugurate a solemn and lasting peace. In a glorious ceremony de Velasco toasted the king from an agate cup set with diamonds and rubies and then presented him with the cup. Queen Anne at his side had a crystal goblet and three diamond pendants.

Then King James nodded to Cecil, and Cecil turned to where Tradescant was behind him and John. Tradescant walked forward bearing in his arms, almost too great a weight to carry, a great spreading bough of oranges, their leaves glossy and green with drops of water like pearls still rolling on the central vein, their fruit round, scented like oil of sunshine, blazing with color, ripe and fleshy. The king touched the bough and at his gesture Tradescant laid it at the Spanish ambassador's feet as two of his lads laid another and then another in a heap of ripe wealth.

"Oranges, Your Majesty?" the man exclaimed.

James smiled and nodded. "In case you were feeling homesick," he said.

De Velasco threw a quick look back at his entourage. "I had no idea that you could grow oranges in England," he said enviously. "I thought it was too cold here, too damp."

Robert Cecil made a casual gesture. "Oh, no," he replied nonchalantly. "We can grow anything we desire."

A page came through the crowd, carrying a great pannier of fruit, and another followed him with a basket. In pride of place, nestling amid some aromatic southernwood leaves, was a large pale melon.

"Wait a minute," said John. "Let me see that."

The page was in Lord Wootton's livery. "Let me pass," he said urgently. "I am to present this to the king to give to the Spanish ambassador."

"Where's it from?" John hissed.

"From Lord Wootton's garden at Canterbury," the lad replied and pushed through.

"Lord Wootton's gardener can grow melons?" John asked. He turned to his neighbor, but no one but John cared one way or the other. "How does Lord Wootton grow melons at Canterbury?"

* * *

The question remained unanswered. In a nearby inn John sought out Lord Wootton's gardener, who merely laughed at him and said there was a trick to it but John would have to join Lord Wootton's service if he wanted to learn it.

"D'you plant them in the orangery?" John guessed. "D'you have an earth bed inside?"

The man laughed. "The great John Tradescant asking me for advice!" he mocked. "Come to Canterbury, Mr. Tradescant, and you shall learn my secrets."

John shook his head. "I'd rather serve the greatest lord in the greatest gardens in England," he said loftily.

"Not the greatest for long," the gardener warned him.

“Why? What d’you mean?”

The gardener drew a little closer. ~~“There are those who are saying that he has signed his own letter of resignation from service,”~~ he said. “Now that Spain is at peace with England, who can doubt that the lords who stayed with the true faith through all the troubles will come back to court? They’ll find the places at court again.”

“Catholics at court?” John demanded. “With a king like ours? He’d never bear it.”

The man shrugged. “King James is not the old queen. He likes differences of opinion. He likes to dispute with them. Queen Anne herself takes the Mass. My own lord takes the Mass when he is abroad and avoids the English church whenever he can. And if he is high in the king’s favor, giving him melons and the like, then the tide is turning. And stout old defenders of the faith like your lord may find the time has gone.”

John nodded, bought the man another ale, and left the tavern to find Cecil.

His master was in one of the courtyards at Whitehall, about to board his barge to take him upriver to Theobalds.

“Ah, John,” he said. “Will you come home with me by water or travel back with the wagon?”

“I’ll come with you, if I may, my lord,” John said.

“Get your bag then, for we leave at once; I want to catch the tide.”

John hurried to fetch his things and came back as the barge was preparing to cast off. The rowers stood at salute, their oars raised. The Cecil pennant flew at bow and stern. Robert Cecil was seated amidships, a canopy over his head and a rug at his side to ward off the evening chill. John leaped nimbly aboard and sat at the rear of the boat behind the golden chair.

The boatmaster cast off and the rowers started the regular beat, beat of their rowing, the oars splashing in the water and the boat pulling forward and then resting, pulling and then resting. It was soporific, lulling movement, but John kept his eyes on his master.

He saw the head flecked with premature gray hair nod and then sink. The man was exhausted after months of painstaking negotiation and unending civility, mostly conducted in a foreign language. John drew a little closer and watched over his master’s sleep as the sun went down before them and painted the sky gold and peach, and turned the river into a shining path which took them slowly and steadily back to their garden.

When the sky grew darker blue and the first stars came out, John reached for his lord and gathered the blanket around his crooked shoulders. The man, the greatest statesman in the land, probably the greatest in Europe, was as light as a girl. His head lolled to John’s shoulder and rested there. John gathered his lord to him and guarded his rest as the boat went quietly on the inward-flowing tide all the way up the river.

* * *

Just before the Theobalds landing stage Cecil awoke. He smiled to find John’s arms around him.

“A warm pillow you’ve been to me this evening,” he said pleasantly.

“I did not want to disturb you,” John replied. “You looked weary.”

“Weary as a dog after a whipping,” Cecil yawned. “But I can rest now for a few days. The Spanish are gone; the king will return to Royston for the hunting. We can prune our orange trees back into shape, can we not, John?”

“There’s one thing, my lord,” John said cautiously. “A thing that I heard and thought I should tell you.”

Cecil was instantly awake, as if he had never dozed at all. “What thing?” he asked softly.

“It was Lord Wootton’s man, he suggested that now there is peace with Spain the Roman Catholic will come back to court, that there will be new rivals for you at court, and in the king’s favor. He knew that the queen has become a Roman Catholic. He knew she takes Mass. And he named his own lord as a man who worships in the old way when he can, when he is abroad, and avoids his own church when he can at home.”

Cecil nodded slowly. “Anything else?”

John shook his head.

“Do they say I am in the pay of Spain? That I took a bribe to get the peace treaty through?”

John was deeply shocked. “Good God, my lord! No!”

Cecil looked pleased. “They don’t know about that yet then.”

He glanced at John’s astounded face and chuckled. “Ah, John, my John, it is not treason to the king to take money from his enemies. It is treason to the king to take money from his enemies and then to do their bidding. I do the one; I don’t do the other. And I shall buy much land with the Spanish gold and pay off my debts in England. So the Spanish will pay hardworking English men and women.”

John looked scarcely comforted. Cecil squeezed his arm. “You must learn from me,” he said. “There is no principle; there is only practice. Look to your practice and let other men worry about principles.”

John nodded, hardly understanding.

“As to the return of the Catholic lords,” Cecil said thoughtfully, “I don’t fear them. If the Catholic lords will live at peace in England, under our laws, then I can be tolerant of some new faces in the king’s council.”

“Are they sworn to obey the Pope?”

Cecil shrugged. “I care nothing for what they think in private,” he said. “It’s what they do in public that concerns me. If they will leave good English men and women to follow their own consciences in peace and quiet, then they can worship in their own way.” He paused. “It’s the wild few I fear,” he said softly. “The madmen who lack all judgment, who care nothing for agreements, who just want to act on their own. They’d rather die in the faith than live in peace with their neighbors.”

The boat nudged the landing stage and the rowers snapped their oars upright. A dozen lanterns were lit on the wooden pier and burned either side of the broad leafy path to the house to light the lord’s way homeward. “If they attempt to disturb the peace of the land that I have struggled so hard to win . . . then they are dead men,” Cecil said gently.



The peace Cecil worked for did not come at once. A year later in mid-autumn John saw one of the house servants picking his way down the damp terrace steps to where he was working in the kitchen garden. Cecil had finally agreed that he should take out the gravel and replace it with plants. John was bedding in some strong cotton lavender which he thought would catch the frost and turn feathery white and beautiful in the winter, and convince his master that a garden could be rich with plants as well as cleanly perfect in shapes made with stones.

“The earl wants you,” the servant said, emphasizing the new title, reflecting the pleasure the whole household felt. “The earl wants you in his private chamber.”

John straightened up, sensing trouble. “I’ll have to wash and change my clothes,” he said, gesturing to his muddy hands and his rough breeches.

“He said, at once.”

John went toward the house at a run, entered through the side door from the Royal Court, crossed the great hall, silent and warm in the afternoon quiet after the hubbub of the midday dinner, and then went through the small door behind the lord’s throne which led to his private apartments.

A couple of pageboys and menservants were tidying the outer room, a couple of the lord’s gentlemen were gambling on cards at a small table. John went past them and tapped on the door. The sound of the Irish harp playing a lament abruptly stopped and a voice called: “Come in!”

John opened the door a crack and sidled into the room. His lordship was, unusually, alone, seated at his desk with his harp on his knee. John was instantly wary.

“I came at once; but I’m dirty,” he said.

He wanted Robert Cecil to glance up, but the man’s face was down, looking at the harp on his lap. John could not see him, nor read his expression.

“The man said it was urgent—”

The figure at the desk was still.

There was a silence.

“For God’s sake, my lord, tell me you are well and that all is well with you!” John finally burst out.

At last Cecil looked up and his face, normally scored with pain, was alive with mischief. His eyes were sparkling; his mouth, under his neat moustache, was smiling.

“I have a game to play, John. If you will take a hand for me.”

The relief to see his lord happy was so great that John assented at once, without thinking. “Of course.”

“Sit down.”

John pulled a little stool up to the dark wood desk and the two men went head to head, Robert Cecil speaking so softly that a man in the same room could not have heard them, let alone any of the servants waiting outside the door.

“I have a letter that I want delivered to Lord Monteagle,” he whispered. “Delivered to him and no one else.”

John nodded and leaned back. “I can do that.”

Cecil reached across and pulled him closer again. "It's more than a messenger boy I want," he whispered. "~~The contents of the letter are enough to hang Monteagle, and to hang the messenger.~~ You must not be seen delivering it, you must not be seen with it. Your own life depends on you getting it to him with no man seeing you."

John's eyes widened.

"Will you do it for me?"

There was a brief silence.

"Of course, my lord. I am your man."

"Don't you want to know what's in the letter?"

Superstitiously, John shook his head.

Cecil, mightily amused at the sight of his gardener stunned into silence, broke down and laughed aloud. "John, my John, what a poor conspirator you will make."

John nodded. "It is not my trade, my lord," he said with simple dignity. "You have others in your service better skilled. But if you want me to take a letter and deliver it unseen, then I will do that." He paused for a moment. "It will not undo Lord Monteagle? I would not be a Judas."

Cecil shrugged his shoulders. "The letter itself is nothing more than words on a page. It's not poison; it won't kill him. What he does with the letter is his own choice. His end will be determined by that choice."

John felt himself to be swimming in deep and dark waters. "I'll do what you wish," he muttered, clinging only to his faith in his lord and his own vow of loyalty.

Cecil leaned back and tossed a small note across the table. It was addressed to Lord Monteagle, but the hand was not Robert Cecil's nor that of any of his secretaries.

"Get it to him tonight," Robert Cecil said. "Without fail. There's a boat waiting for you at the jetty. Make sure you are not seen. Not in the streets, not at his house, and not, *not*, with the letter. If you are captured, destroy it. If you are questioned, deny it."

John nodded and rose to his feet.

"John—" his master called as he reached the door. John stopped and turned around. His lord sat behind his desk, his face, his whole stance alive with joy at plotting and trickery and the game of politics which he played so consummately. "I would trust no other man to do this for me," Cecil said.

John met his master's bright gaze and knew the pleasure of being the favorite. He bowed and went out.

* * *

He went first to the knot garden and gathered up his tools. The plants which were not yet bedded in he took back to his nursery plots and heeled them into the earth. Not even an act of high treason could make John Tradescant forget his plants. He glanced around the walled nursery garden. There was no one there. He rose to his feet and brushed the earth from his hands and then he went to the potting shed where he had left his winter cloak. He carried it over his arm, as if he were headed for the hall for a bite to eat, but turned instead toward the river.

There was a wherry boat waiting at the lord's private jetty but it was otherwise deserted.

"For London?" the man asked without much interest, "In a hurry?"

"Yes," John said shortly.

He stepped into the little boat and he thought the lurch it made at his weight was what caused the sudden pounding of his heart. He sat in the prow of the boat so the man might not have the chance to look in his face, and he wrapped himself warm in his cape and pulled down his hat over his face. He w

sure that the sunlight along the river was pointing a rippling finger toward him so that every fisherman and riverside walker, peddler, and beggar took particular note of him as the boat went swiftly downstream.

The river flowed fast down to London, and the tide was on the ebb. They did the journey quicker than John had hoped and when the boat nudged against the Whitehall steps and John leaped ashore it was only dusk. He blamed his sense of sickness on the movement of the boat. He did not want to recognize his fear.

No one paid any attention to the workingman with his hat pulled down over his eyes and his cape up to his ears. There were hundreds, thousands of men like him, making their way across London for their suppers. John knew the way to Lord Monteagle's house and slipped from shadow to shadow, making little sound on the dirt and mud of the streets.

Lord Monteagle's house was lit by double burning torches in the sconces outside. The front door stood wide open and his men, hangers-on, friends and beggars passed in and out without challenge. His lordship was dining at the top table at the head of the hall; there was a continual press of people around him, friends of his household, servants, retainers and, toward the back of the hall, supplicants and common people who had come in for the amusement of watching the lord at his dinner. John hurried back and surveyed the scene.

As he waited and watched, a man touched his shoulder and went to hurry past him. John recognized one of Lord Monteagle's servants, a man called Thomas, hurrying to dinner.

The note was in John's hand, the direction clear. "A moment," he said, and pressed it into the man's hand. "For your master. For the love of Mary."

He knew what a potent spell that name would weave. The man took it and glanced at him, but John was already turning away and diving into an alley out of sight. He took a moment and then peered cautiously out.

Thomas Ward had entered the big double doors and was making his way to the head of the table. John saw him lean to whisper in his master's ear and hand him the note. The job was done. John stepped out into the street again and strolled onward, careful not to hurry, resisting the temptation to run. He strolled as if he were a workingman on his way to an inn, hungry for his supper. As he turned the corner and there was no shout of alarm, and no running footsteps behind him, he allowed his pace to quicken—as fast as a man who knows that he should be home by a certain time. One more corner and John allowed himself to run, a gentle jogging run, as a man might do when he was late for an appointment and hoping to make up for the delay. He kept a sharp watch out among the dirt and cobblestones so that he did not slip and fall, and he kept a brisk pace until he was ten, fifteen minutes away from Lord Monteagle's, out of breath, but safe.

He took his dinner at an inn by the river and then found he was too weary to face the journey back to Theobalds. He headed instead for his lord's house near Whitehall, where Tradescant might always command a bed. He shared an attic room with two other men, saying that he had been sent to the docks for some rarity promised by an East India trader but which had proved to be nothing.

When all the clocks in London struck eight, John went down to the great hall and found his master, as if by magic, also resident in London, calmly seated to break his fast at the big chair at the head of the big table at the top of the hall. Robert Cecil raised an eyebrow at him, John returned the smallest nod, and master and man, at either end of the hall, fell on their bread and cheese and small ale and ate with relish.

Cecil summoned him with a crook of his long finger. "I have a small task for you today and then you can go back to Theobalds," he said.

John waited.

~~“There is a little room in Whitehall where some kindling is stored. I should like it damped down prevent the danger of a fire.”~~

John frowned, his eyes on his master’s impish face. “My lord?”

“I’ve got a lad who will show you where to go,” Cecil continued smoothly. “Take a couple of buckets and make sure the whole thing is soaked through. And come away without being observed, my John.”

“If there is a danger of fire I should clear it all out,” John offered. He had the sense of swimming in deep and dangerous water and knew that this was his master’s preferred element.

“I’ll clear it out when I know who laid the fire in the first place,” Cecil said, very low. “Just damp down for me now.”

“Then I’ll get back to my garden,” Tradescant said.

Cecil grinned at the firmness of the statement. “Then your job is finished here; go and plant something. My work is coming into its flowering time.”

* * *

It was only after November fifth that John learned that the whole Gunpowder Plot had been discovered by Lord Monteagle, who had received a letter warning him not to go near Parliament. He had, quite rightly, taken the letter to Secretary Robert Cecil, who, unable to understand its meaning, had laid the whole thing before the king. The king, quicker-witted than them all—how they praised him for the speed of his understanding!—had ordered the Houses of Parliament to be searched and found Guido Fawkes crouched amid kindling, and nearby, barrels of gunpowder. On the wave of anti-Catholic sentiment Cecil enforced laws to control papists, and mopped up the remaining opposition to the English Protestant succession. The handful of desperate, dangerous families were identified as one confession led to another, and as the young men who had staked everything on a barrel of wet gunpowder were captured, tortured and executed. The one bungled plot forced everyone from the king to the poorest beggar to turn against the Catholics in a great wave of revulsion. The one dreadful threat—to the king, his wife, to the two little princes—was such that no monarch in Europe, Catholic or Protestant, would ever plot again with English Catholics. The Spanish and French kings were monarchs before they were Catholics. And as monarchs they would never tolerate regicide.

Even more importantly for Cecil, the horror at the thought of what might have happened if Monteagle had not proved faithful, if the king had not proved astute, persuaded Parliament to grant the king some extraordinary revenue for the year and pushed back for another twelve months the impending financial crisis.

“Thank you, John,” Cecil said when he returned to Theobalds in early December. “I won’t forget.”

“I still don’t understand,” John said.

Cecil grinned at him, his schoolboyish conspiratorial grin. “Much better not to,” he replied engagingly.

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