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opening extract from

Nathan Fox: Dangerous Times

written by

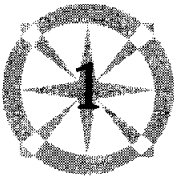
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THE RECRUITMENT

The actors tumbled out of the theatre into the spring sunshine, laughing and joking.

'Was I not superb today?' shouted Richard Burbage.

'As usual, you were the great hero,' answered Will Shakespeare. 'It's a shame you were not a little *less* of a hero.' This sly reference to Burbage's growing waistline sent the others into hoots of laughter and Will merited a cuff around the ear from the object of his wit.

'Enough, Will Shakestongue! You have been an actor in this company but five minutes, whereas I . . .'

'HAVE ACTING IN MY BLOOD!' chorused the other three actors, well used to this speech.

'It's my father who pays your wages!' roared Burbage in mock anger, but a smile played around his lips. The audience had cheered long and hard for him today and nothing was going to destroy his good humour.

At that moment, Nathan Fox came hurtling round the corner and into the group, with the force of a crossbow

bolt. Burbage was taken off balance and fell on to the path, sending up a cloud of dust around him. 'God's blood!' he roared. 'What in the name of all that is holy did you do that for, boy?'

Nathan blushed and struggled to help the heavy actor to his feet.

'Sorry, sir. I was rushing to catch up with you all,' he said, brushing the street dust from Burbage's rather fine clothes.

'And why were you in such a hurry, Nathan?' asked Will Kempe, who always looked depressed and worried despite being the comic actor of the company.

'I . . . I found Will's book on the floor. I wanted to return it to him.' Nathan held up a battered, leather-bound notebook.

'Thank God, Nathan!' cried Shakespeare as he took the book and feverishly fanned through it, as if to check that everything was still there.

'Oh, the famous book,' Burbage said contemptuously. 'Just when are we going to get some benefit from all these scribblings?'

'When I am ready, Richard,' said Shakespeare in a tone that defied any argument.

The group carried on walking in the direction of the nearest tavern. As they turned to go inside, Shakespeare stopped.

'I shall leave you now, gentlemen.'

The others turned in amazement.

'What, no food and drink tonight, Will?' enquired Samuel Crosse, the last member of their little group.

'No, I shall eat in my rooms. I have work to do.' Shakespeare turned on his heel and set off towards his lodgings.

'I'll come with you,' called out Nathan, running after his friend.

The actors stood at the tavern door and watched the pair turn the corner.

'I wish he would just concentrate on being an actor,' muttered Burbage.

'Ah but there is a depth there, you know,' Will Kempe reflected. 'Perhaps we shall be grateful for his words one day. Good plays are hard to find.'

Burbage snorted contemptuously at the thought that a great actor should be thankful to a mere playwright and stepped into the tavern to find food for his growling stomach.

Nathan trotted beside his friend, in an effort to keep up with him. 'When are you going to write your first play, Will?' he asked.

Shakespeare stopped in his tracks and looked intently at the boy. 'When I have enough good stories. A good story is the most important thing. Now, tell me . . .' he continued, 'this play we have done today . . . what did you think of it?'

They began to walk again and Nathan thought

seriously before answering. 'The audience liked it well enough,' he began 'but—'

'Ah yes . . . *but*,' Will interrupted. 'What story was there? None at all. There were some star-crossed lovers – but why did they have problems? This was not explained. There was a comic scene, so that our friend Kempe could clown about and make the audience laugh – but why? There were some effects – your famous acrobatics, Nathan . . .' and he tousled the boy's curls affectionately – 'but none of it meshed together! There was no progression from A to B to C. It was just a collection of set pieces, guaranteed to make an audience react. That is not a play, Nathan. Not my kind of play.'

'Then what *is* your kind of play, Will?'

Shakespeare looked frustrated for a moment, as if struggling with something that he could not quite understand. He took a deep breath. 'I want . . . I want to tell a story that will so enrapture an audience that they will forget that they are in a theatre. I want them to be totally silent—'

Nathan snorted, remembering today's audience and their constant chatter, as well as the comments and abuse they sometimes hurled at the actors on the stage.

Will became more insistent. 'Yes, silent! As if they were spying at the unfolding of someone's life through a window and they dare not breathe in case they are discovered. I want the audience to care about each character – to care if they live or die. I don't want them to just care

about the actors. To applaud their favourites and to talk all the way through the performances of those they do not care for.'

Nathan grinned. 'Richard Burbage would be outraged if he did not receive his usual plaudits from the audience.'

Shakespeare smiled wryly, 'Richard does not understand. He is a great actor but he is too concerned with being a *famous* actor to realize that he is capable of more. But I will cure him of that in time.'

Nathan looked at his friend with amusement. 'You seem very sure of yourself, Will.'

Shakespeare shook his head sorrowfully. 'No, what writer is ever sure of himself? Except –' he turned and a light appeared in his eyes as he spoke – 'when he knows that the story he is writing is so good that he cannot fail. Believe me, Nathan, the story is the thing.'

The pair had reached their lodging house and were surprised to see their landlady, Mistress Fast, waiting on the step for them. She looked worried.

'Thank goodness you've come home!' she exclaimed. 'I was about to send someone to find you!'

Shakespeare looked alarmed. 'Why, mistress? Is it the law?' Nathan shot a sideways glance at his friend. He had heard rumours that Will had come to London to escape some trouble with local magistrates.

'No, no, Master Shakespeare. Young Nathan has two important visitors. Marie is talking to them now. I

shouldn't have left her alone with them. I don't like the look of the older man. He gives me chills . . .'

Nathan and Will did not wait to hear more and pushed past Mistress Fast, taking the steps two at a time. They burst into the room, only to be met with a rather tranquil scene. Nathan's sister, Marie, was pouring ale for an older man, who was seated at the table. A handsome young man sat by the window, watching her. Marie looked up at her brother and his friend with consternation.

'Nathan! Why so rowdy?!'

Nathan mumbled an apology and, as he turned to close the door, saw a strange look appear on Will Shakespeare's face.

The older man spoke. 'Master Nathan Fox. And someone I believe I know quite well – Master Shakespeare.'

Shakespeare bowed. 'Good day to you, Sir Francis.'

Nathan's eyes opened wide. '*Sir* Francis?'

'Nathan, this is Sir Francis Walsingham,' said Marie with a smile. 'Her Majesty's Secretary of State.'

Nathan bowed hurriedly as his sister continued. 'And, Nathan, Sir Francis has come here expressly to see you.'

'Me!' he spluttered. 'Why?!'

'I fear we are to find out,' muttered Shakespeare gloomily.

Nathan looked at Sir Francis Walsingham. His skin was sallow and what hair showed around his black

skullcap was greying. He was dressed all in black, apart from the startling white ruff around his neck. His face was stern and his almost black eyes were piercing. But for all that, Nathan did not fear him. There was something about the man that fascinated him.

Walsingham stood up, leaning heavily on a stick. *He looks tired,* thought Nathan, *perhaps he is ill.* Sir Francis motioned him to sit down.

'Master Fox, allow me to introduce John Pearce. He works for me.' Pearce bowed to Nathan and Walsingham continued, 'Of course, you know Master Shakespeare, but what you do not know is that he also works for me.' Nathan's mouth dropped open as he looked at his friend, who seemed more than a little uncomfortable.

'Will? Works for *you*?' Marie was shocked by the news. 'Then, sir,' she added defiantly, 'so do I!' and she produced an embroidered handkerchief from her apron pocket.

Walsingham smiled and turned to Shakespeare. 'So this is the lady who produces the fine handiwork that enables us to send our secret messages?' Shakespeare nodded and the four adults exchanged knowing looks.

Nathan frowned in irritation, feeling left out of this conspiracy. He cleared his throat. 'Begging your pardon, sire, but what exactly is your business with me?'

'No, *you* must pardon *me*,' said Walsingham. 'But before I tell all, our friend John will play guard at the door, for what I am about to say cannot be overheard by

anyone.' And with that, Pearce, his hand firmly on his sword, left the room.

Sir Francis began pacing slowly.

'Master Fox, I am many things to Her Majesty the queen. I am the Secretary of State, I am a member of the Privy Council, I flatter myself I am her confidante, but, above all, I am Her Majesty's Spymaster General. I operate a network of many agents who are my eyes and ears, and sometimes my sword, both in England and abroad. We protect Queen Elizabeth in the best way that we can. These are dangerous times, Nathan. You know that the Pope, many years ago, excommunicated our queen and called upon the world to depose her by any means – even by assassination?'

Nathan nodded. Marie and Shakespeare looked on gravely.

'And you know that last month the Queen of Scots was beheaded for her part in a plot to kill our queen?' Walsingham's voice rose a little with passion.

'It is certain,' he continued, 'that the King of Spain will now use force to make England part of the mighty Spanish Empire. My spies tell me that he is building and equipping a massive fleet of ships – an Armada, the Spanish call it – to come and crush us all. England has many brave men, and doubtless we can call on more, but we will never be able to defeat the Spanish in battle. We must do it by sabotaging their plans in secret. This is what my agents are trained to do.'

Walsingham stopped pacing and faced Nathan.

'I know something of your life – that you and your sister are orphans. And that your parents were gypsies from some European state. Is that so?'

Brother and sister looked at each other. Marie's chin rose defiantly. She knew only too well the drawbacks to having gypsy blood. Gypsies were not welcome in any country. Even the famously tolerant Queen Elizabeth had passed a law, in her youth, that gave the death penalty to any gypsy caught thieving or practising witchcraft.

Walsingham smiled and patted Nathan's shoulder reassuringly. 'Your gypsy blood has given you your acrobatic skills, I'm sure. I have watched you in the theatre. You are strong and agile. But,' Walsingham continued, sounding more sinister, 'mark my words, if we are conquered by Spain, your skills and courage will not save you from the tortures of the Inquisition. Even now, there are Jews, Moors, gypsies and Protestants burning in Spanish cities.'

'Such intolerance is not theirs alone,' murmured Shakespeare to himself.

Walsingham rounded on him with fire in his eyes. 'You live in a world of make-believe, Master Shakespeare, where good and evil are clearly separate and all stories end well. *I* am forced to live in the real world. Yes, I have executed Catholic priests and queens, but not

because they were *Catholics* – because they were *assassins.*'

He turned back to Nathan. 'I do this work, Nathan, because I have travelled the world and there is nowhere like England. It is a precious stone set in a silver sea, a fortress built by Nature herself against infection and the hand of war – it is a scepter'd isle. This we must protect.'

Out of the corner of his eye, Nathan could see Shakespeare scribbling furiously in his book.

Walsingham turned to Will with an amused look. 'Have my words impressed you, Master Scribe?'

'Deeply, Sir Francis,' muttered Shakespeare.

'Then let us hope they have impressed Master Fox.' Walsingham drew a deep breath. 'Will you work for me, Nathan? Will you be Queen Elizabeth's youngest, and perhaps most useful, spy?'

Nathan was astounded, filled at once with a confusing mixture of fear, pride and excitement. 'Me, sir? I am only an actor!'

Walsingham laughed. 'Then you have some of the very best training – for spying is all about deception and disguise. And where better to learn those than in the theatre? But I will not deceive you. It is dangerous work. Many of my agents have been killed or imprisoned. But if you came to work for me, you would have John Pearce as your partner and you could have no better protection. It was he who found you and it is he who thinks you

would be of use to him. Together, you would make a formidable team. What do you say?'

Nathan looked at his sister and her lack of enthusiasm was obvious.

'I like it not, sir' Marie said flatly. 'Nathan is safe in the theatre. I swore to my father that I would take care of him. He is a mere boy. He should not be exposed to such dangers.'

Walsingham nodded. 'I understand your concern. But he would be trained to take care of himself. I would see to that. And he would be partnered by my best agent. John has survived far longer than many other men, in the most dangerous conditions. Perhaps he can reassure you himself.' Walsingham strode to the door and opened it, beckoning Pearce inside. Then he turned to Shakespeare. 'Will, stand guard for a moment. I will call you back when we have finished.' With a bow, Will changed places with Pearce.

Walsingham put his arm around Pearce's shoulders. 'John, Nathan's sister feels that the work would be too dangerous for him and I said that you could reassure her.'

Pearce told Marie that he would pledge his life to take care of Nathan and he spoke of how Nathan would be coached in all the arts of survival. Marie's face softened just a little. Pearce's sincerity was obvious.

But before she could respond, Nathan cleared his throat and glared at his sister. '*I* will decide whether I

choose this service or not,' he said forcefully. He was not about to let his sister seal his fate.

'But you are not of an age to—'

'I have earned money for the both of us since I was eight years old!' Nathan retaliated.

'In the theatre, where you are safe!' Marie countered.

'If we do not save England from war, no one will be safe,' stated Pearce plainly. 'Nathan can be of more use with me – especially on my next mission.'

'Which is what?' demanded Marie.

Pearce looked at Walsingham for permission to speak and his employer inclined his head in agreement. 'I am to go to Venice to set up an alliance.'

Nathan suddenly felt dizzy with excitement. Venice! The exotic setting for so many of the plays he had performed in the theatre!

'I have always wanted to go to foreign places!' he exclaimed.

Marie remained stubborn. 'And how would a young *boy* be of help?'

'He would pretend to be my servant and would thus be able to find out things in the servants' quarters that I could not. He could overhear gossip, eavesdrop on conversations. A young servant boy is invisible to the adults around him.' Pearce turned to Nathan. 'You speak several languages, do you not?'

Nathan nodded eagerly. 'Yes, sir. Marie taught me Italian and I learned French from some travelling actors.

Greek and Latin were given to me at school. I learn languages very quickly.'

Walsingham murmured his approval.

Marie looked defeated. 'Do you want to do this, Nathan?'

Nathan's chest felt tight and his face hot. *Who could refuse the promise of such adventure?* 'Yes, I do. More than anything.'

'Then I will allow it,' said Marie in a small, almost sad, voice. She turned to Walsingham, her eyes suddenly steely. 'But if any harm comes to him, you will find that I am your greatest enemy, sir. I will lay a gypsy's curse on you forever.'

'God forbid that any harm would come to the boy, but if it did, you may find yourself at the back of a very long queue; for I am hated by so many that I cannot count them. Come, John, we shall go now. Mistress Fox, please pack Nathan's bags tonight, for John will come and take him away for training tomorrow. He must be ready to sail with Sir Francis Drake before the month is out.'

Nathan's eyes widened. 'Sir Francis Drake!'

Walsingham looked amused. 'You like pirates, do you, boy? I like pirates too. They have a poor reputation, but they do good work for me.'

With that, England's Spymaster and his chief spy made their goodbyes and left. Will Shakespeare returned to the room. 'So the puppet master has signed himself up another puppet,' he said cynically.

'A puppet, just like you, Will,' Nathan reminded the playwright cheekily. 'So, what is it exactly that you do for Sir Francis?'

Shakespeare smiled. 'Show him, Marie.'

Marie delved into her apron pocket and produced the embroidered handkerchief, along with a piece of parchment. 'Read it,' she said, handing Nathan the parchment.

He scanned the verses on the page and recognized them as Will's.

My heart is longing, ordinary mortal I,
No warmth to greet, no sweet murmurings
From your cruel lips, sweet Elizabeth.
Of't fond of telling, fair nymph of the land,
Our two souls must ne'er share those happy states
Where parlous love lies in gravest beauty tamed
And sighs are merely like soft wisps of clouds.

Perchance your ill thoughts of me
Arise from whispers that assail the ear.
Would I might remove the slurs of others' spite
And in this action we then should be
Entwined in all embraces, all lies forfend.
And now I beg that you might cast away all doubts,
To talk of hopes and not besmirch my name.

I know that I am kept at length with cold visage.
My dream is broken, spare your sour notes.

We needs must part and we must break our troth,
All joining in sweet remembrance, though
We are together, tied in past sorrows.
God will judge my heart, e'en though I be not well with you.

'So?' asked Nathan.

'Is that all you can say – so? Does not the beauty of the verse strike you?' asked Shakespeare, exasperated.

Ignoring Will's frustration, Marie instructed Nathan to place the parchment on the table and lay the handkerchief over it. Tiny strawberries, flowers and leaves were sewn all over the fine linen in a random pattern. Each flower had a small hole in its centre. Nathan laid the handkerchief over the square of parchment. It fitted exactly on top and he was surprised to see that certain letters were visible through the holes in each tiny flower. Slowly he read out the message.

My l ord
greet ings
From Elizabeth
Of e ng land,
Our two states
ar e in grave

Per il

from the
might of sp
A in we should be
al lies
And I beg you
To talk

at length with
My e m is s ar y
We must
join
together
God be with you.

Nathan raised his head and looked at his sister. He smiled. For many months, Marie had been embroidering handkerchiefs and being paid well for them. Nathan had thought nothing of it, thinking it woman's work and her business. Now he looked at his sister with new respect. Will Shakespeare and Marie: part of the intelligence web spun by the clever Sir Francis Walsingham. And now Nathan too had been drawn into the web.