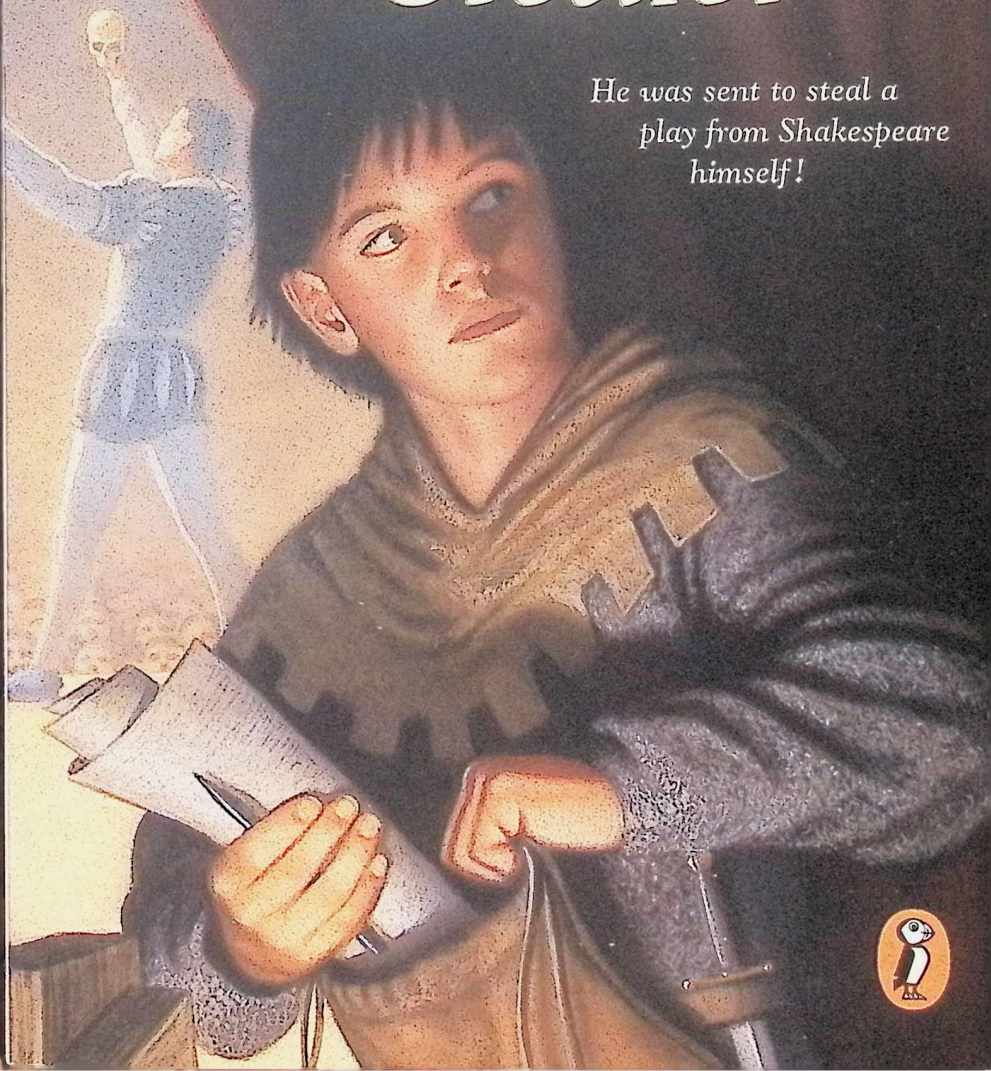
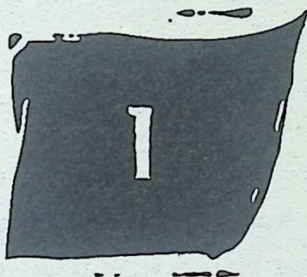


GARY BLACKWOOD

The Shakespeare Stealer

He was sent to steal a
play from Shakespeare
himself!





I never knew my mother or my father. As reliably as I can learn, my mother died the same year I was born, the year of our Lord 1587, the twenty-ninth of Queen Elizabeth's reign.

The name I carried with me throughout my youth was attached to me, more or less accidentally, by Mistress MacGregor of the orphanage. I was placed in her care by some neighbor. When she saw how small and frail I was, she exclaimed "*Och*, the poor little pigwidgeon!" From that unfortunate expression came the appellation of Widge, which stuck to me for years, like pitch. It might have been worse, of course. They might have called me Pig.

Of my life at the orphanage, I have made it a habit to recall as little as possible. The long and short of it is, it was

an institution, and institutions are governed by expediency. Mistress MacGregor was not a bad woman, just an overburdened one. Occasionally she lost her temper and beat one of us, but for the most part we were not mistreated so much as neglected.

The money given us by the parish was not enough to keep one child properly clothed and fed, let alone six or seven. We depended mostly upon charity. When someone felt charitable, our bellies were relatively full. Otherwise, we dined on barley mush and wild greens. When times were hard for others, they were doubly so for us.

It was the dream of each child within those dreary walls that someday a real family would come and claim him. Preferably it would be his true parents—who were, of course, royalty—but any set would do. Or so we thought.

When I was seven years of age, my prospects changed, as some say they do every seven years of a person's life—the grand climateric, I have heard it called. That orphan's dream suddenly became a reality for me.

The rector from the nearby hamlet of Berwick came looking for an apprentice and, thanks to Mistress MacGregor's praise, settled on me. The man's name was Dr. Timothy Bright. His title was not a religious one but a medical one. He had studied physick at Cambridge and practiced in the city of London before coming north to Yorkshire.

Naturally I was grateful and eager to please. I did readily whatever was asked of me, and at first it seemed I had been

very fortunate. Dr. Bright and his wife were not affectionate toward me—nor, indeed, toward their own children. But they gave me a comfortable place to sleep at one end of the apothecary, the room where the doctor prepared his medicines and infusions.

There was always some potion simmering over a pot of burning pitch, and one of my duties was to tend to these. The pitch fire kept the room reasonably warm. I took my meals in the kitchen. Though the situation was hardly what we orphans had secretly hoped for, it was more or less what I had expected—with one exception. I was to be taught to read and write, not only in English but in Latin, and not only in Latin but also in a curious abbreviated language of Dr. Bright's own devising. *Charactery*, he called it. It was, to use his own words, "an art of short, swift, and secret writing, by the which one may transcribe the spoken word as rapidly as it issues from the tongue."

His object, I soon learned, was not to offer me an education so much as to prepare me to be his assistant. I was to keep his scientific notes for him, and to transcribe his weekly sermons.

I had always been a quick student, but I was never quick enough to suit the doctor. He had some idea that his method of stenography could be learned in a matter of mere months, and he meant to use me to prove it.

I was a sore disappointment to him. It was an awkward system, and it took me a full year to become reasonably adept, and another year before I could set down every word

without begging him to speak more slowly. This vexed him, for once his ample mouth was set in motion, he did not like to stop it. To his mind, of course, the fault lay not with his system but with me, for being so thickheaded.

I never saw him write anything in this short hand himself. I am inclined to think he never mastered it. As I grew confident with the system, I began to make my own small improvements in it—without the doctor's knowledge, of course. He was a vain man. Because he had once written a book, a dry treatise on melancholy, he felt the world should ever after make special allowances for him. He had written nothing since, so far as I knew, except his weekly sermons. And, as I was soon to discover, not always those.

When I was twelve, and could handle a horse as well as a plumbago pencil, the doctor set me off to neighboring parishes each Sabbath to copy other rectors' sermons. He meant, he said, to compile a book of the best ones. I believed him until one Sunday when the weather kept me home. I sat in on Dr. Bright's service and heard the very sermon I had transcribed at Dewsbury a fortnight before.

It did not prick my conscience to know that I had been doing something wrong. We were not given much instruction in right and wrong at the orphanage. As nearly as I could tell, Right was what benefited you, and anything which did you harm was Wrong.

My main concern was that I might be caught. I had never asked for any special consideration, but now I asked Dr. Bright, as humbly as I could, to be excused from the

task. He blinked at me owlshly, as if not certain he had heard me properly. Then he scratched his long, red-veined nose and said, "You are my boy, and you will do exactly as I tell you."

He said it as though it were an unarguable fact of life. That discouraged me far more than any threat or show of anger could have done. And he was right. According to law, I was his property. I had to obey or be sent back to the orphanage. As Mistress Bright was fond of reminding me, prentices were easily come by and easily replaced. In truth, he had too much invested in me to dismiss me lightly. But he would not have hesitated to beat me, and heavily.

There was a popular saying to the effect that England is a paradise for women, a prison for servants, and a hell for horses. Prentices were too lowly to even deserve mention.

Eventually our sermon stealing was discovered. The wily old rector at Leeds noticed my feverish scribbling, and a small scandal ensued. Though Dr. Bright received only a mild reprimand from the church, he behaved as though his reputation were ruined. As usual, the blame fell squarely on my thin shoulders. My existence there, which had never been so much to begin with, went steadily downhill.

As I had so often done in my orphanage days, I began to wish for some savior to come by and, seeing at a glance my superior qualities, take me away.

In my more desperate moments, I even considered running away on my own. As I learned to read and transcribe such books as Holinshed's *Chronicles* and Raleigh's *Discov-*

ery of Guiana, I discovered that there was a whole world out there beyond Yorkshire, beyond England, and I longed to see it with my own eyes.

Up to now, my life had been bleak and limited, and it showed no sign of changing. In a new country such as Guiana, I imagined, or a city the size of London, there would be opportunities for a lad with a bit of wherewithal to make something of himself, something more than an orphan and a drudge. And yet I held no real hope of ever seeing anything beyond the bounds of Berwick. Indeed, the thought of leaving rather frightened me.

I was so ill-equipped to set out into that world alone. I could read and write, but I knew none of the skills needed to survive in the unfamiliar, perhaps hostile lands that lay beyond the fields and folds of our little parish. And so I waited, and worked, and wished.

If I had had any notion of what actually lay in store for me, I might not have wished so hard for it.



When I was fourteen, the grand climateric struck again, and my fortunes took a turn that made me actually long for the safety and security of the Brights' home.

In March, a stranger paid a visit to the rectory, but it was not some gentleman come to claim me as his heir. He was, in fact, no gentleman at all.

The doctor and I were in the apothecary when the housekeeper showed the stranger in. Though dark was almost upon us, we had not yet lighted the rush lights. The frugal doctor put that off as long as possible. The flickering flames of a pitch pot threw wavering, grotesque shadows upon the walls.

The stranger stood just inside the doorway, motionless and silent. He might have been taken for one of the shad-

ows, or for some spectral figure—Death, or the devil—come to claim one of us. He was well over average height; a long, dark cloak of coarse fabric masked all his clothing save his high-heeled leather boots. He kept the hood of the cloak pulled forward, and it cast his face in shadow. The only feature I could make out was an unruly black beard, which curled over his collar. A bulge under the left side of his cloak hinted at some concealed object—a rapier, I guessed.

We all stood a long moment in a silence broken only by the sound of the potion boiling over its pot of flame. Dr. Bright blinked rapidly, as if coming awake, and snatched the clay vessel from the flame with a pair of tongs. Then he turned to the cloaked figure and said, with forced heartiness, "Now, then. How may I serve you, sir?"

The stranger stepped forward and reached under his cloak—for the rapier, I feared. But instead he drew out a small book bound in red leather. When he spoke, his voice was deep and hollow-sounding, befitting a spectre. "This is yours, is it not?"

Hesitantly, the doctor moved nearer and glanced at the volume. "Why, yes. Yes it is." I recognized it as well now. It was one of a small edition Dr. Bright had printed up the year before, with the abundant title, *Charactery: An Art of Short, Swift, and Secret Writing*.

"Does it work?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"The system," the man said irritably. "Does it work?"

"Of course it works," Dr. Bright replied indignantly. "With my system, one may without effort transcribe the written or the spoken word—"

"How long does it take?" the man interrupted.

Dr. Bright blinked at him. "Why, as I was about to say, one may set down speech as rapidly as it is spoken."

The man gestured impatiently, as if waving the doctor's words aside. "How long to *learn* it?"

The doctor glanced at me and cleared his throat. "Well, that depends on the aptitude of the—"

"How long?"

The doctor shr^ugged. "Two months, perhaps. Perhaps more." Perhaps a lot more, I thought.

The stranger flung the book onto the trestle table, which held the doctor's equipment. A glass vessel fell to the floor and shattered.

"Now see here—" Dr. Bright began. But the man had turned away, his long cloak swirling so violently that the flame in the pitch pot guttered and smoked. He stood facing away a moment, as if deep in thought. I busied myself cleaning up the broken beaker, content for once to be a lowly prentice with no hand in this business.

The black-bearded stranger turned back, his face still shadowed and unreadable. "To how many have you taught this system of yours?"

"Let me see . . . There's my boy, Widge, here, and then—"

"How many?"

"Well . . . one, actually."

The hooded countenance turned on me. "How well has he learned it?"

Dr. Bright assumed his false heartiness again. "Oh, perfectly," he said, to my surprise. He had never before allowed that I was anything more than adequate.

"Show me," the man said, whether to me or the doctor I could not tell. I stood holding the shards of glass in my hand.

"Are you quite deaf?" the doctor demanded. "The gentleman wishes a demonstration of your skill."

I set the glass in a heap on the table, then picked up my small table-book and plumbago pencil. "What must I write?"

"Write this," the stranger said. "I hereby convey to the bearer of this paper the services of my former apprentice—" The man paused.

"Go on," I said. "I've kept up wi' you." I was so intent on transcribing correctly and speedily that I'd paid no attention to the sense of the words.

"Your name," the man said.

"Eh?"

"What is your *name*?"

"It's Widge," the doctor answered for me, then laughed nervously, as if suddenly aware how odd was the name he had been calling me for seven years.

The stranger did not share his amusement. "—my former apprentice, Widge, in consideration of which I have ac-

cepted the amount of ten pounds sterling." He paused again, and I looked up. For some reason, Dr. Bright was staring openmouthed, seemingly struck dumb.

"Is that all?" I asked.

The man held out an unexpectedly soft and well-manicured hand. "Let me see it." I handed him the table-book. He turned it toward the light. "You have copied down every word?" I could not see the expression on his face, but I fancied his voice held a hint of surprise.

"Aye."

He thrust the table-book into my hand. "Read it back to me."

To the unschooled eye, the scribbles would have been wholly mysterious and indecipherable:

φ ∩ 8 - o √ : - 4 9:
o φ - φ √ : o e o \ 6
- o φ 3 √ o m -
x 10.

Yet I read it back to him without pause, and this time I was struck by the import of the words. "Do you—does this mean—?" I looked to Dr. Bright for an explanation, but he avoided my gaze.

"Copy it out now in a normal hand," the stranger said.

"But I—"

"Go on!" the doctor snapped. "Do as he says."

It was useless to protest. What feeble objection of mine could carry the weight of ten pounds of currency? I doubted the doctor earned that much in a year. Swallowing hard, I copied out the message in my best hand, as slowly as I reasonably might. Meantime my brain raced, searching for some way to avoid being handed over to this cold and menacing stranger.

Whatever the miseries of my life with the Brights, they were at least familiar miseries. To go off with this man was to be dragged into the unknown. A part of me longed for new places, new experiences. But a larger part clung to the security of the familiar, as a sailor cast adrift might cling fast to any rock, no matter how small or barren.

Briefly, I considered fleeing, but that was pointless. Even if I could escape them, where would I go? At last I came to the end of the message and gave it up to Dr. Bright, who appended his signature, then stood folding the paper carefully. I knew him well enough to know that he was waiting to see the color of the man's money.

In truth, I suppose I knew him better than I knew anyone in the world. It was a sad thought, and even sadder to think that, after seven years, he could just hand me over to someone he had never before met, someone whose name he did not know, someone whose face he had never even seen.

The stranger drew out a leather pouch and shook ten gold sovereigns from it onto the table. As he bent nearer the light of the pitch pot, I caught my first glimpse of his

features. Dark, heavy brows met at the bridge of a long, hooked nose. On his left cheek, an ugly raised scar ran all the way from the corner of his eye into the depths of his dark beard. I must have gasped at the sight of it, for he turned toward me, throwing his face into shadow again.

He thrust the signed paper into the wallet at his belt, revealing for an instant the ornate handle of his rapier. "If you have anything to take along, you'd best fetch it now, boy."

It took even less time to gather up my belongings than it had for my life to be signed away. All I owned was the small dagger I used for eating; a linen tunic and woollen stockings I wore only on the Sabbath; a worn leather wallet containing money received each year on the anniversary of my birth—or as near it as could be determined; and an ill-fitting sheepskin doublet handed down from Dr. Bright's son. It was little enough to show for fourteen years on this Earth.

Yet, all in all, I was more fortunate than many of my fellow orphans. Those who were unsound of mind or body were still at the orphanage. Others had died there.

I tied up my possessions with a length of cord and returned to where the men waited. Dr. Bright fidgeted with the sovereigns, as though worried that they might be taken back. The stranger stood as still and silent as a figure carved of wood.

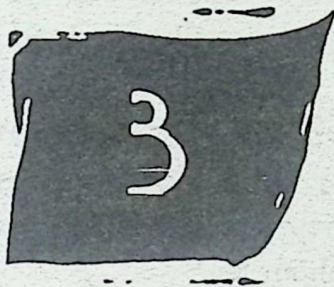
When he moved, it was to take me roughly by the arm and usher me toward the door. "Keep a close eye on him,

now," the doctor called after us. I thought it was his way of expressing concern for my welfare. Then he added, "He can be sluggish if you don't stir him from time to time with a stick."

The stranger pushed me out the front door and closed it behind him. A thin rain had begun to fall. I hunched my shoulders against it and looked about for a wagon or carriage. There was none, only a single horse at the snubbing post. The stranger untied the animal and swung into the saddle. "I've only the one mount. You'll have to walk." He pulled the horse's head about and started off down the road.

I lingered a moment and turned to look back at the rectory. The windows were lighted now against the gathering dark. I half hoped someone from the household might be watching my departure, and might wish me Godspeed, and I could bid farewell in return before I left this place behind forever. There was no one, only the placid tabby cat gazing at me from under the shelter of the eaves.

"God buy you, then," I told the cat and, slinging my bundle over my shoulder, turned and hurried off after my new master.



I had no notion of where I was being taken. We headed south out of Berwick, past the slate-roofed house of Mr. Cheyney, the wool merchant, past the old mill, past the common fields. I had been south as far as Wakefield; beyond that, my geography was unreliable. I knew that if one continued south a week or so, one would end up in the vicinity of London. But I was sure this man was no Londoner.

Judging from Dr. Bright's accounts, the men of London dressed in splendid clothing, all ornamented and embroidered, and spoke in a civil and cultured manner. They lived in houses ten times larger and grander than Mr. Cheyney's and consorted with ladies of elegance and beauty.

I had a hard time matching the stranger's pace. He never

looked back to see whether I was keeping up, or whether I was following at all. Yet I was sure that, if I took it into my head to slip off into the dark woods, he would know at once. Besides, there were the woods themselves to be reckoned with.

About Berwick, the woods were tame. The trees were broad and widely spaced; sheep and pigs grazed on the swards among them, and on my rare free afternoon, I had walked there without fear.

These woods were dense and dark and dreadful. To run there would be like jumping into the fire to escape the cooking pot. Those trees, I had heard, concealed every unsavory brigand and every ravenous beast of prey in the shire—until nightfall, when they ventured out upon roads such as this, in search of victims.

I shuddered and, breaking into a trot, closed the gap between myself and the stranger's horse. When I grasped the frame of his saddle, I could shuffle along with less effort. Still, I was not used to physical exertion, and the pace took its toll on me. I summoned enough breath to say, "Will we be stopping for the night, then?"

The man twisted in his saddle and glanced down at my hand clutching the frame. I was afraid he might push me away, but he faced front again. "Speak when you are spoken to," he said in a low voice.

We pushed on long after the last light was gone from the watery sky. I hoped that we might put up at the King's Head in Wakefield, but we passed by without pausing.

From there, the road was unfamiliar to me, though its ruts and rocks felt all too familiar. The bottoms of my shoes, which were thin as paper, grew ragged. At last I trod on a sharp stone that pierced the leather sole, and the sole of my foot as well. "Gog's blood!" Losing my grip on the saddle, I fell to my knees on the hard dirt.

The stranger wheeled his horse about. "Silence!" he hissed. "You'll have every cutpurse within a league down upon us!"

"Sorry!" I whispered. "I've hurt meself."

He sighed in disgust. "Can you walk?"

I tried to place my weight on the injured foot. It was like stepping on a knife. "I wis not."

"If I give you the flat of my blade, can you?"

I considered a moment, then took a sharp breath. "Nay, I still wis not."

He reached out for me, and instinctively, I ducked. "Give me your hand!" His voice was harsh and impatient. Hesitantly, I put my hand in his. Despite the clammy air, his palm was hot and dry, like that of a man with a fever, and his grip was painfully strong. He lifted me bodily and dragged me across the horse's flank until I could swing one leg over the animal's haunches. I had scarcely settled in before we were off again, at a quicker gait than before. I dropped my bundle in my lap and clung desperately to the saddle frame.

After a time, I relaxed a bit, and even felt drowsy. My head drooped forward and came to rest on the stranger's

damp cloak. He jerked violently, as though bitten, and I sat abruptly erect again. Despite all my care, this happened several more times. Finally, the man snapped, "Either ride properly, or go back to shank's mare"—meaning, of course, my feet.

As the night advanced, the air grew more chill, which helped keep me uncomfortably awake. In the small hours, we came upon an inn. My master took a room; I was given a pallet on the floor and was wakened long before I was ready the following morning. A loaf of bread and some cheese served as both breakfast and dinner. Each was eaten unceremoniously upon the back of the horse.

We paused once in the afternoon, to allow the animal to drink from a stream. I barely had time to soak my swollen foot before we were again on our way. When night fell, we were once more beset by woods on either hand, and no settlement in sight before or behind. What drove this man so, I wondered, to risk his life—and mine—on the high road after dark? Were we too near the end of our journey to stop?

All the preceding night and day, I had been in a sort of daze, brought on by the abrupt change in my circumstances. Now I was beginning to come out of it, and a hundred thoughts and questions rose in me, none of which I dared give voice to. All I could do was what I had always done: wait and watch and hope for the best.

The trees edged in and threatened to claim the very road. In places, their branches met above our heads and in-

terlaced, nearly blocking out the light of the half moon. In one such dismal spot we got our first taste of trouble. There was no warning; one moment the road was deserted, dappled with moonlight, the next, half a dozen shadowy figures stood before us. I stiffened, and a gasp escaped me.

Instead of turning back or spurring the horse in a bid for escape, the stranger reined in and slowly approached the bandits, who stood in a crescent, blocking the path. Most were armed only with staves and short swords, but one man of imposing stature held a crossbow leveled at us. "Hold!"

The stranger let his horse advance until we were nearly abreast of the big man. "God rest you, gentlemen," he said, in a surprisingly amiable tone.

The big man, crowded by our horse, let his crossbow drift to one side. "Don't tell me you're a parson."

"Far from it."

"Good. I don't like doing business with parsons. They're too parsimonious." He guffawed at his own joke. "Well, let's have it, then."

"Have what?" the stranger asked innocently.

The big man laughed again, and this time his companions joined in. "Have what? 'a says. Have what? Why have a pot of ale wi' us, of course." More soberly, the man said, "Come now, enough pleasantries. Let's have your purse."

The stranger reached inside his cloak and drew out the

purse with which he had bought me. It was still heavy with coins. "Forgive me for not taking your meaning."

"Oh, aye," the big man said. "An you forgive us for taking your money."

The stranger leaned down, as if to surrender the pouch. But instead he swung it in a sudden arc and struck the bandit full in the face. The man staggered backward; his cross-bow loosed its bolt, which flew wild. I gave a cry of dismay as the other thieves sprang forward.

But the stranger was ready. The hand that had held the purse an instant before now grasped his rapier. He kicked the nearest man's stave aside and give him a quick thrust to the throat. A second man's sword he deflected with his cloak, and sent the man reeling away, clutching at his bloody face. He seized the blade of a third man's weapon in his cloak-wrapped hand and yanked it away.

I, meantime, was struggling with a one-armed ruffian who had latched on to my tunic and was trying to pull me to the ground. I clung tenaciously to the saddle frame and kicked at my assailant, but it was no use. My small strength gave out, and I toppled like a wounded bird from my perch.

Flailing about for something to break my fall, I fastened on the neck of the one-armed man. He cursed and stumbled backward, and we both crashed to the ground. A rock struck my elbow, numbing my arm. It did even more damage to the bandit's head, and he lay suddenly still.

I dragged my limp arm free and got to my feet to see the

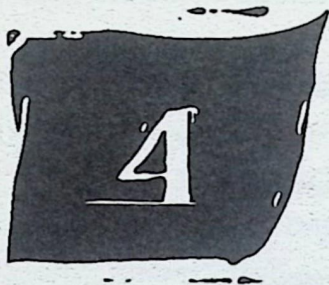
stranger dispatch the last of the outlaws with a sweeping blow that knocked the man into the road, where his companions lay in various attitudes and degrees of unconsciousness.

The stranger guided the horse to where the crossbow lay. With a flick of his blade, he severed its string, then lifted his fallen purse with the point of the sword. He shook a single coin from it and tossed it at the feet of the big man, who sat ruefully holding his jaw. "If this is a toll road, you might simply have tolled me."

The big man let out an abrupt laugh, then groaned with pain. "Would that you had been a parson after all."

Several of the bandits had begun to come around now. "Could we go on?" I pleaded. The stranger twisted about impatiently and, grasping the back of my tunic, hoisted me up behind him. Though I kept a wary eye on the thieves, he did not deign to glance back even once. Only when they were well out of sight did I breathe easily again. "What you did back there—I've never seen the like."

The stranger was silent a long moment, then he said gruffly, "You were told not to speak unless spoken to."



We rode on until at last, dew damp and bone weary, we came upon a small inn, where we took a room for what remained of the night. In the morning, after breaking fast with cold beef and ale, we set out once more, still heading south. My thighs were chafed raw from the constant motion of the horse, and every sinew and muscle ached fiercely.

About midday, I got up enough courage to ask, "When will we be there?"

The stranger gave me a glowering glance. "We will be there when we get there." Even in daylight, I saw little of his face, for he never pulled back the hood, except by accident. I did, however, memorize every square inch of the back of his cloak.

I despaired of that day ever reaching its end, but of course it did, and with it our journey. Just as the sun rounded the corners of the Earth, we came around a bend in the road and before us lay a landscape of stark steeples and thatched roofs glowing golden in the last rays of the sun—more buildings than I had ever seen in one place. "Is this London, then?" I asked, forgetting in my astonishment the commandment to hold my tongue.

Unexpectedly, the stranger laughed. "Hardly. It's only Leicester."

"I've heard of that," I said, feeling like an ignorant lumpkin.

Before we quite entered the town, we turned off the road and down a narrow lane to a substantial house surrounded by a high hedge. The stranger guided our horse down a cobbled walk to a stable nearly as imposing as the house.

I was scarcely able to believe that we had reached our destination, but the stranger dismounted and snapped, "Don't sit there like a dolt; get down!" My legs were in such a condition that they buckled under me. The stranger seized my arm and all but dragged me to the rear of the house.

As we came around the corner, we nearly collided with a husky youth who was headed for the stable. He stepped aside quickly and bobbed his head apologetically. "You're back, then. I'll see to your horse, sir."

"Give her an extra ration of oats. She's had a hard trip."

"Right, sir." The boy tried to be on his way, but the master stopped him.

"Adam."

"Yes, sir?"

"Your place is in the stable. Stay out of the kitchen."

"I will, sir." He hurried off.

"Lazy swad," the man muttered. We entered a spacious kitchen, lit not by rush lights but by actual candles. A plain young woman in a linen apron and cap was busy at the fireplace. "We'll be wanting supper, Libby," the man told her. "The boy will have his in his room."

"The garret?" the girl asked.

The man nodded brusquely, turned, and was gone.

The girl looked me over curiously. "Where are you from?"

"Berwick-in-Elmet."

She raised her eyebrows as though I'd said I came from the Antipodes. "Where's *that*?"

"Up Yorkshire way. Near Leeds."

"I see," she said, as if that explained something—my appearance, perhaps, or my speech. "Well, come. Best get you to your room."

"I'm to have a room of me own?"

"It looks that way, don't it?" She picked up a candle and led me through the pantry and up a set of steps, which in my exhaustion I was hard put to climb, to a small attic room. "Here you are. It's not much."

It could have been a pit full of snakes for all I cared. The moment she was gone, I blew out the candle and collapsed on the bed. I expected to be shaken awake at the crack of dawn, but when I finally woke, the sun was streaming through the gabled windows. I leaped up, hardly knowing where I was, struck my head on the low ceiling, and sat down again. For several minutes I remained there, holding my head and letting my mind adjust to these new and strange surroundings.

A pewter bowl of cold meat, carrots, and potatoes sat beside the bed. I gobbled it in a trice, then tried standing again. My legs felt uncertain, and my foot still pained me. Hearing footfalls on the stairs, I straightened myself and tried to look as though I had been up for hours and awaiting my master's call. But my visitor was only the stableboy. He thrust my bundle of clothing into my arms. "I'd put on something clean if I was you," he said. "You smell."

It seemed wicked to don my Sunday garb on an ordinary day, but it was all I had. The bundle had been tampered with, untied and hastily retied. I spread the clothing out on my bed and found my wallet, which had contained my meager savings. The money was gone, every farthing.

Though I was sure it was the stableboy's doing, I knew better than to say so. I was the new boy here, and I had long since learned that new boys have no rights. I would have to content myself with cursing him roundly and silently.

When I carried my dirty clothing downstairs, the girl

called Libby took them and gingerly dropped them in a basket. "The master said to bring you to him as soon as you were up, but I expect you'll want to be fed first."

"I've eaten. What was in the bowl."

She clucked her tongue. "That was last night's supper, you ninny. You were asleep when I brought it up."

I shrugged. "It served well enough as breakfast."

"Dinner, more like. It's nearly noon. Come, then."

As we passed from the kitchen into a great open room, I said, "Will 'a be cross wi' me, do you wis?"

She cast me the same doubtful glance she'd given when I told her where I hailed from. "Wis?"

"Aye," I said, wondering what she found so strange in a word I'd used all my life.

Libby led me up a wide staircase, to a large gallery with a dozen windows, and tapestries hung between them. "I can't say whether he'll be cross or no. He's a queer one, the master is." She turned and whispered, "Not to tell him I said so, now."

I made a cross over my heart as proof that I would not. We stopped before a paneled door, on which the girl knocked lightly. "Enter!" called a voice from within. The girl motioned me inside. As Libby pushed the door shut, she sent me an encouraging wink.

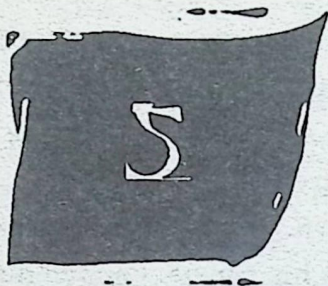
The room in which I found myself was so foreign that I might have stepped into another land. A soft carpet covered the floor; two of the paneled walls were hung with pictures; the other two were obscured top to bottom by more

books than I would have suspected existed in all of England. If this is but Leicester, I thought, what must London be like?

So awed was I that it was a moment before my eyes fell on the figure at the writing desk, bent over some close task. "Widge?" he said, without turning.

I swallowed nervously. "Aye."

"Come, sit down." I was almost at the man's side before he looked up from his papers. I stared dumbly at him. This was not the fearsome stranger who had brought me here. This was a mild-looking man with a well-trimmed beard and a balding head of hair of an odd, reddish hue. He smiled slightly at my obvious bewilderment. "My name is Simon Bass," he said. "I am your new master."



You might sit down," Simon Bass said, "before you fall down."

I sank into an upholstered chair. "But—but I thought—"

"You thought the one who brought you here was to be your master." Bass shrugged. "Falconer is not the most communicative of men, nor the most genial. But he is reliable, and effective. I could not go to Yorkshire myself because . . . well, for various reasons. He got you here in one piece, at any rate."

"Aye . . . mostly."

Bass chuckled. "Neither is Falconer the most considerate of traveling companions, I warrant. Have you eaten?"

"Aye."

"Good. Good." He shoved his papers aside, took up a

pipe, and filled the bowl of it with tobacco from an earthenware jar. "Then we can get right down to business. You'll be wanting to know what's expected of you."

"Aye." Though my seat was comfortable, I shifted about nervously.

"Very well." He went to the fireplace, touched a taper to a live coal, and lit the pipe. "The first thing I expect is that you say 'yes' rather than 'aye.' Your task will not require you to speak overmuch, but I'd as soon you did not brand yourself as a complete rustic. Understood?"

"Aye—I mean, yes."

"Excellent." His manner, which had become prickly, turned cordial again. "Now. When you go to London—"

"London?"

"Yes, yes, London. It's a large city to the south of here."

"I ken that, but—"

"Let me finish, then ask questions. When you go to London, you will attend a performance of a play called *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. You will copy it in Dr. Bright's 'character' and you will deliver it to me. Now. Any questions?"

I scarcely knew where to begin. "I—well, how—that is—they will not object? The men who present the play?"

"Only if they discover you. Naturally you will be as surreptitious as possible."

"And an they do discover me?" I asked, thinking of the sermon-copying affair.

Bass blew out a cloud of smoke which made me cough.

"The Globe's audience is customarily between five hundred and one thousand. Do you suppose they can watch over every member of it?"

"I wis not."

"You wis not. Of course they can't. You will use a small table-book, easily concealed." He rummaged through the riot of papers on his writing desk. "You see how easily it is concealed? Even I can't find it." Finally he came up with a bound pad of paper the size of his hand. "There. Keep it in your wallet. You have a plumbago pencil?"

"Ay—yes."

"Any further questions?"

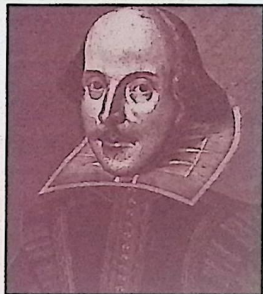
"An I might ask . . . for what purpose am I to do this?"

Bass turned a penetrating look on me. "Does it matter?"

"Nay, I wis not. I was only curious."

He nodded and scratched the balding top of his head. "You'll know sooner or later, I suppose." He puffed thoughtfully at his pipe, then continued. "I am a man of business, Widge, and one of my more profitable ventures is a company of players. They are not nearly so successful as the Lord Chamberlain's or the Admiral's Men, but they do a respectable business here in the Midlands. As they have no competent poet of their own, they make do with hand-me-downs, so well used as to be threadbare. If they could stage a current work, by a poet of some reputation, they could double their box."

"Box?"



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