

INTRODUCTION

Thirteen-year-old Nathan Fox, an exceptionally gifted boy actor in the same theatre company as Will Shakespeare, has been recruited into Sir Francis Walsingham's fledgling Secret Service as a partner to England's most skilled agent, John Pearce. After arduous training at Robey's School of Defence in London, Nathan and John undertook their first mission together in spring 1587 when they were sent to seek an English alliance with the State of Venice against the threat of invasion by the Spanish Empire. Tragic circumstances led to the ultimate failure of Nathan's first mission but Sir Francis Drake's raid on the Spanish Armada at Cadiz, where he sank or disabled most of the Spanish fleet, gave England a temporary reprieve. However, the Spanish Empire continues to advance and, as Nathan undergoes training for his second mission, events elsewhere in Europe mean that speed is of the essence.

In the autumn of 1587 the Spanish Empire covers most of the Western World. Philip II of Spain had inherited half of the Empire ruled over by his father, the Emperor Charles. The other half of the Holy Roman Empire was inherited by Philip of Spain's uncle, Ferdinand. This comprises Austria and a large part of Central Europe and is, of course, firmly allied with Spain.

There is also an uneasy alliance with France, but that country is torn by religious wars. Philip of Spain is financing the Catholic League of France in an effort to stop France becoming a Protestant country, but the Protestant faction remains strong and it is only a matter of time before they succeed in taking over the country.

All Philip of Spain's vast possessions are administered by the largest (and possibly the slowest) bureaucracy in history. Armies and navies have to be maintained in some of the farthest-flung corners of the known world. Wars are being fought, sometimes on several fronts at once, and this adds to the pressure on money and administration.

Two thorns are stuck firmly in Philip of Spain's side. One is England, now committed to the Protestant religion by its queen, Elizabeth, and the other is the Protestant revolt in the Netherlands, which Philip has been trying to crush for nearly thirty years. The Dutch rebels in the northern region have organized themselves into the United Provinces and, with financial and military help from Elizabeth of England, are proving impossible to overcome.

At times ill-equipped and starving, the Dutch nevertheless use all their knowledge of the land and surrounding sea to fight off everything that the Spanish Empire can throw at them. Even though Philip swamps the Netherlands with over 60,000 troops – sometimes outnumbering the Dutch and English forces by three to one – he cannot defeat what he calls 'those stubborn heretic rebels'.

PROLOGUE

'REVENGE IS A DISH BEST SERVED COLD' – SICILIAN PROVERB

Bernardino de Mendoza, Spain's Ambassador to the Court of France, turned to the man standing in front of him.

'You understand now what you have to do?'

The man nodded and picked up the bag of gold Mendoza had placed on the table in front of him.

Mendoza looked steadily at him. 'I want no mistakes. I have promised His Most Catholic Majesty, King Philip, that we will deliver everything safely. It is important that you understand that.'

The man nodded again.

'You need have no fear,' he replied. 'I understand everything perfectly.'

Mendoza looked satisfied.

'Then God go with you.'

After the man left, Mendoza knelt in prayer before the shrine to St Odilia, the patron saint of the blind. He could barely see her statue in the niche, his eyes were now so clouded.

It had not been a good week for the Spanish Ambassador. His monetary support of the Catholic League in France had suffered a severe blow when they had lost a major battle at Coutras against the Protestants. There had been a moment of panic when it was thought that the Protestants might press on, take Paris and claim the throne, but it had not happened and Mendoza had thanked God for that. But it would only be a matter of time before France fell to the rising tide of Protestantism in Northern Europe, and the Spanish could not afford to fight a war on yet another front.

He sighed and tried to turn his thoughts to his prayers but he failed. All that was in his mind was the task ahead. Ever since Sir Francis Walsingham, England's Spymaster, had persuaded Queen Elizabeth to banish Mendoza from the English court, he had waited for an opportunity to exact his revenge. Three weeks ago, the King of Spain had unwittingly presented him with such an opportunity. There were important tasks to be undertaken in the war-stricken Netherlands and Mendoza knew that Walsingham's spies would have already informed their master of what was about to happen.

But Mendoza, whose own abilities to plot and deceive more than matched those of Walsingham, had already made his own plans. He smiled with grim satisfaction. Spanish agents would be briefed and this time he would undermine the English Spymaster. He had waited three long years for this and he would savour every moment of humiliation suffered by his enemy.

A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts and he struggled up from his knees. These would be the men he had been waiting for – who would put the next part of his plan into operation. He surveyed them calmly as they bowed low. Although his sight was failing he was still able to appreciate the unusual white-blond hair of the younger of the two men who stood before him.

‘I have your orders here, my friends,’ he said quietly, handing the older man a parchment from his desk. ‘Make sure that you instruct our friend in London as to the part he must play.’

‘We shall not fail you, Signor Ambassador,’ the younger man said with confidence.

‘This time, the task is more complex,’ Mendoza murmured. ‘There are two separate missions outlined in this document. The English must be stopped from succeeding at all costs. Once you have read the document, burn it. It must not go with you to England. May God guide you and keep you.’

The two men bowed and left swiftly. Mendoza turned back to his devotions. All his agents were now in place and he could do no more.

It was extraordinary, he reflected, that the deep game of espionage throughout the whole of Europe was controlled by two sickly old men – a half-blind Spaniard and a crippled Englishman. His next prayer, Mendoza decided, would be that both of them live long enough to see his next adventure brought to its just conclusion.

MASTER OF THE HORSE

Sword clashed against sword with such speed that, at one point, Nathan’s hand was stung by one of the sparks that flew from the blades. Nathan watched in astonishment as the Silver brothers fought each other with a ferocity that was excessive, even for them. They were oblivious to everyone – even their tutor, who was standing on the sidelines, fruitlessly screaming instructions in Dutch.

‘George, *breng omhoog uw linkerwapen!*’

‘Toby, *u zich verdedigt, de heer niet!*’

‘*BEGRIPT U MIJ?!*’

The last instruction was shouted with such force that it finally penetrated the deaf ears of the brothers and they ceased their battle to stare at the hardened soldier in front of them. The man repeated himself, in English this time.

‘Do you understand me?’ he said testily, glaring at the vacant faces of the Silver brothers, ‘and did you hear any of my instructions?’ George and Toby Silver shook their heads and grinned.

Jan Groesbeck let out a sigh of defeat. Trying to teach the Dutch language to this pair of wooden-heads was testing his patience to its limits. He turned to Nathan. 'Tell them what I said,' he asked.

Nathan replied, 'You told George to bring his arm up, and then you told Toby that he was not defending himself. Then you asked them if they understood you.' George pulled a face at Nathan's ready answer.

Groesbeck turned back to the hapless brothers. 'Listen to me, you *domoors*,' – Nathan sniggered at Groesbeck's use of the Dutch word for 'nitwits' – 'Meister Robey tells me that in a very short time, you will all be going over to the Netherlands to aid the Dutch rebels. How in God's name – please tell me – can you expect to stay alive if you don't understand the simplest instruction that may be shouted out to you by a Dutchman who is fighting alongside you?'

George and Toby shuffled their feet, at a loss for an answer. Groesbeck made a dismissive sign at them, and they gratefully stampeded out of the weapons hall without a backward glance.

'They are very good fighters,' Nathan offered by way of an apology.

Groesbeck smiled at him. 'You and I both know that that is not enough. The war in the Netherlands is not a normal situation. There is no clearly defined enemy. There are Protestant Dutchmen who are fighting with the Spanish Army and Catholic Dutchmen fighting with the British. Most of the Spanish army is made up of Italians, French and Germans. Units desert and defect to the opposite side – the fighting is made up of ambushes, sorties, sieges. There are very few pitched battles where you know exactly who you are fighting against and that is why . . .' he pounded his fist into his hand in exasperation, 'it is important to know the language!'

Nathan sympathized with him. Jan Groesbeck was a veteran soldier of the Netherlands conflict. A man to be respected. The ugly scar that slashed across the side of his neck showed he had faced death and survived. This was precisely the reason why Robey had recently taken Groesbeck into his School of Defence – to teach the Dutch method of warfare, as well as the language. Groesbeck was a man who fitted right into the experienced team of soldiers that Robey had built up. His other men, Bardolph, Pistol and Nym, had embraced Groesbeck into the fold as one of their own.

Groesbeck cut into Nathan's thoughts. 'Still, Meister Nathan Fox, you, at least, are an apt pupil. By the time you have finished your lessons with me, you will know enough Dutch to be able to listen in on people's conversations with confidence – and that, I understand, is what your work is all about.'

Nathan nodded, and thanked Groesbeck for the compliments. Secretly, he had struggled with the language because of its strangeness. While Italian, French and Spanish flowed

from his mouth with ease, speaking Dutch was like hawking and spitting, so much of it was produced in the back of the throat. He also knew that learning another language was really a matter of having a good memory and, in his days as a boy actor, he had been able to memorize a different play every week. Toby and George Silver did not have that facility.

‘Come now.’ Groesbeck began to put away the swords in their places on the wall racks. ‘Today you have other work to do and, from what I hear about you, it is work that you will love.’

Nathan was curious as he followed the Dutchman into the kitchen. What could his next task possibly be? He loved most of his work at Robey’s School.

‘Ah, there you are, lad,’ Nym said gruffly as Nathan appeared. ‘Today we’re all going to Kent. You and me – the Silver brothers and . . .’

‘. . .Me!’ said a familiar voice, and Nathan spun round joyously.

‘John Pearce!’ Nathan flung himself at his friend, hugging him so fiercely that he almost knocked the wind out of him.

‘Steady! Steady! I’ve only been away a month!’ Pearce laughed.

‘I was beginning to think that you would never come back!’

Extract from NATHAN FOX – Traitor’s Gold by L.Brittney