



The Great Lie

M. STANFORD-SMITH

*A Nicholas Talbot
Adventure*

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M Stanford Smith

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On 30th May 1593, a fight broke out in a private room on London's dockside. The brawl developed and knives were drawn. In the subsequent fighting a young gallant was stabbed through the eye and killed.

The broadsheets the next day bore headlines to rival our own tabloids

CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE MURDERED

FATAL STABBING IN DEPTFORD

And more soberly -

Our greatest poet foully done to death

There was a hurried inquest that day but no official ceremony.

Encrypted report from Master Edward Faulds to the office of Lord Robert Cecil, Clerk of the Privy Council.

30th June

All went according to plan, my lord.

As expected, Marlowe's friends hastened to see for themselves and pay their respects but unfortunately the body had already been taken to St Nicholas' church, seen by the coroner, shrouded, coffined and nailed down. The officials and jurors, as instructed, were carefully screened and briefed beforehand.

The other three men involved in the brawl, Frizer, Skeres and Poley were taken for examination. At the end of the week, Frizer, who had wielded the dagger, was pardoned by her Majesty and all three now have been quietly released, as arranged with your office.

After the burial in a corner of St Nicholas' churchyard (over-hasty to my mind), Master Ben Jonson gathered together the remains of the group calling themselves the 'University Wits, Messrs Nashe, Peele and Chapman, in the Mermaid tavern, Bread Street, to join the cream of literary society for a wake and an impromptu secular service that Christopher Marlowe would no doubt have enjoyed. Master Greene was no doubt there in spirit. Thomas Watson was there and Will Shakespeare and that unpleasant youth Webster. Kyd, of course, we have in custody. Master Shakespeare was seen to be in tears. He was pale and appeared unwell. Young Master Talbot, the victim's protégé, was not present. I understand he has gone abroad for his health.

Your obt servant, Phoenix.

By this time, Christopher Marlowe, bearded and dressed as a Jew, was halfway to entering the Bay of Biscay with a following wind, on his way to Italy.

Prologue

Two Gentlemen in Verona. Autumn 1597

Decision made. Decision uttered. Nicholas Talbot sat watching the pale, heart-shaped face brooding across the scarred table. Christopher Marlowe, playwright, gentleman-scholar and spy. Their corner of the tavern was dim, the nearest candle a table away, their own guttering in a pool of stinking tallow. They were a pocket of quiet in the din as Nick waited for a response. Around them bubbled the hell's kitchen that was Verona's answer to the Mermaid, popular and packed. The press and stink of unwashed bodies was miasmic: undertones of urine, spilt wine and worse vied with overtones from the questionable stew being manoeuvred between the tables by the sweating servingwomen. Nick leaned further back in his corner, peeling his leather jack away from the jerkin of the soldier behind him who was using him as a leaning-post, becoming aware of the ache in his thighs from the long ride.

Nick looked round. Courtiers on the way down rubbed shoulders with courtesans on the way up; thieves and dips jockeyed for position, a quartet of habitual gamblers threw dice obsessively at one table and the group of mercenaries next to Nick were celebrating having money in their pockets.

Across the room, Nick noticed a hairy man with a wall eye staring at him fixedly. He leaned down and loosened the dagger in his boot. He observed the man carefully for some time, until he realised that the good eye was concentrated on the be-furred burgher sitting to his left, picking his teeth. The noise was dense enough to lean on, and to Nick, who had ridden from Venice with only the wind for company, it was almost unbearable. Someone was actually strumming a battered guitar and trying to sing against a background of catcalls from the group round the fire. Nick was stifling and he pulled open his jack, bringing a whiff of horse and fresh air into the fetid atmosphere. He looked again at his companion. How could this sophisticated scholar sit there and produce these wonderful plays in these conditions? Not that he looked like a sophisticated scholar these days, no longer the perfumed man of fashion whom Nick had first met brawling in a London tavern. His linen was grubby and the velvet of his once-fine doublet was rubbed and stained. The man did not look well, he had aged. The black hair and unkempt beard was grizzled with grey, the round cheeks a little sunken.

Kit Marlowe was stabbing at the raised grain of the table with a ruined quill, his papers pushed to one side. He was hunched as if in pain, the greasy lovelock almost dangling in his wine. Nick shifted, easing the ache in his muscles, and the tip of his sword scraped on the flagstones. Marlowe looked up, his sloe-black eyes catching the light.

‘Don’t leave me, Nick.’

This happens every time, thought Nick, I’m too useful to him.

‘Show me your hand, my dear,’ came the soft voice. ‘Let me

see where it is written.'

Heigh-ho, here we go again with the fortune-telling. Nick extended his upturned left hand onto the table, indulgent. Marlowe stabbed the quill hard into the middle of the palm.

'There, my mark! You are mine.'

Nicholas reached across and removed the quill and the clutching fingers with a firm grip. He hissed as he poured the crude brandy he was drinking into the wound. He was taking no chances, he knew what the ink was made of – oak-gall and hog's piss – this was his dagger hand.

'That's hardly the way to keep me,' he said.

'No, that was foolish dramatics. But what do you expect? You have chosen a bad time.'

'Why? Has Julio left you too?'

'You think that would trouble me? He grows fat and idle and is losing his looks. No, you are my lifeline, Nick, how else will my work see the light of day? I must have my audience, make them laugh and cry, or I am dead, Nick, truly really dead.'

'I have letters from home. Responsibilities.' And my woman, he thought. 'It's time I went back.'

'And do what? Dwindle into a landowner, a bucolic farmer tending your flocks, a hayseed, a Corin! Or is there some other pressing call – a siren, a Helen to lure you back – you with your absurd preference for women? You are so stubborn, my dear, I could—'

'Keep your voice down.' Nick squeezed the cut to make the bright blood run and closed his fist to seal it. He would have another scar to go with the missing joint of the middle finger. 'I'm telling you, our masters grow dangerously extravagant in their requirements. Careless. Little Robin Cecil isn't the

man your old paymaster was. I was nearly done for last time. Think. If I were caught on my way there with your plays in my saddlebag, what then? It would be all up with you, you'd be exposed for the trickster you are.'

'How? Where is my name written? They would take it for a cypher.'

'And you think I wouldn't break under the question? I find I am not so brave.'

'Come, come, where is the young cock who crowed so loud in Southwark? What has changed? Have you fallen in love with something other than my words? Or some other impossible she?'

'Can you never imagine other reasons? This is my chance to live my life, not yours, to claim what's mine. And you haven't written for weeks—'

'No, listen, listen, Nick. That is my point. You have been an inspiration to me – you remember that little book you found to remind me – although I have it by heart – *The Prince*? By Machiavelli? My bible. So clever to find it for me again when those philistines have banned it. They called him Make-Evil, did you know? Of course you know, we all do, but do you agree with that? Of course not, he was one of us, a liberal, a freethinker, a little pragmatic perhaps, the end justifying the means, but—' Nick groaned, foreseeing one of those lengthy philosophic discussions he usually enjoyed with Marlowe, but he had other things on his mind. '...but think, a *dispossessed* prince, now. Dispossessed as you were, Nick, but a young man of mild disposition, a poetic even a melancholic cast of thought; what advice do you think our Niccolò Machiavelli would have for him? This starveling thing of poor Kyd's you brought me,

what a chance the man had missed! In my hands it will be my greatest work – my philosopher-prince, the evil king! My Hamlet is a young man, faced with terrible decisions, but he is a scholar, a poet perhaps, who must justify his—’

One of the soldiers, drunk, lurched into their table, flailing for balance. The remains of Marlowe’s wine slopped over his papers and he cried out, frantically mopping with his sleeve. Nick stood up, shouldering the man out of his way. ‘We can’t talk here.’

Marlowe got to his feet, stowing the manuscript inside his doublet.

‘No, we’ll go to my lodging, I want you to read this—’ His last words were lost as the enraged drunk swung wildly at Nick’s head. Nicholas swayed calmly to one side, brought up his knee fast and slammed the heel of his hand up under the man’s nose with a crunch. He did not believe in half-measures when it came to a fight. The man screamed and the table went over as his companions got up. Nick flung his cloak over one shoulder, seized Marlowe’s shirt collar, now liberally spattered with blood, and hustled him through the crowd to the door before the fight could start in earnest. No one followed. The cutpurse waiting in the shadows did not stand a chance.

As the night air hit them, Nick saw that Marlowe was a great deal more drunk than he had realised. Whether with words or wine was unclear but he was grinning and giggling to himself and could hardly stand. Nick set his shoulder under Kit’s and put an arm round his waist just in time to stop him slipping into the slime of the kennel and half-carried, half-dragged him up the shallow flight of cobbled steps that led to the path along the river. Marlowe now had rooms above a paper-maker

nearby, and the musty odour created by the process followed them upstairs.

Kit was still giggling helplessly as Nick hauled him through his door.

‘What a man of action! No model for my philosopher-prince after all. Except...yes. Yes, there must be a hint to please the groundlings, a promise early on that we have a complete man in the making—’ His black eyes were sparkling and intent. Nick recognised the signs with a sigh. Kit would have forgotten all about their discussion, if you could call it that. This new work had taken over.

He threw off his cloak and set about lighting candles and the floating wicks of the small oil lamps. The room was cold after the heat of the tavern and he stirred up the embers of the fire, throwing on more fuel. The store of wood was getting low, he must see about it. Marlowe was already at his desk by the window, finding and mending a new quill, flexing his fingers, oblivious. The remains of his meal were still on the table, together with a straw-covered flask. Nick found a goblet and polished it with the clean square of linen he liked to keep on him, and poured the wine. The droppings on the floor and table did not encourage an appetite for food. He looked round at the squalor in which the man lived these days. A straw palliase had been dragged through from the other room; a chair lay on its side with a discarded shirt draped over it. That, the table and desk, and a winged chair covered in grimy brocade were the only furnishings. Nick glanced through into the next room. A four-poster bed took up most of the space, the sheets were tangled and stained, the pot beside it had not been emptied. The doors of the armoire stood open, clothes spilling out; a chest

under the window was piled high with scribbled paper. Nick sighed again. The man needed a wife. Or something.

What did he do with all the money? His share of the plays so successfully rendered through Master Shakespeare was steadily increasing together with the demand for more. The funding from Francis Walsingham's successors was more than adequate: the Queen's legendary meanness compensated for by little Robert Cecil's canny management. Nicholas himself earned more than his keep nowadays.

Nick gazed out of the window at the round sugarloaf hill across the river, musing. Master Shakespeare now had property in London and was looking to build a fine new house in Stratford, and here was Marlowe in dreary lodgings seemingly contented so long as his plays were seen and applauded.

The early dawn light picked out the cypresses that spiralled with the road to the castellated buildings at the top of the hill, black brushstrokes showing the way. The copper roofs of the towers crowning the mound flamed suddenly as the rising sun caught them. It was a scene familiar from so many Annunciations and nursing Virgins, glimpsed through a painted window or in a distant landscape. It was beautiful, and Nick was momentarily overcome with homesickness. He was not the only one. He had recently had a letter from a colleague of Edward Faulds', an Intelligencer stationed in Venice. Poule had written;

'...the shadow of an English oak would give a more perfect refreshing to my whole body than all the stately pines of Ravenna.' Poule, lucky dog, looked like being recalled soon.

Marlowe looked up suddenly, feeling for a word, and caught Nick's eye. A smile of pure joy broke across his face like the

sunrise, and he flung up his arms, making fists.

‘I have it!’ he crowed, and Nick remembered exactly why he could not leave him. He poured more wine and took it to the desk, leaving it in easy reach well away from the inkpot. He stood watching the quill spluttering its headlong way across the page, remembering the first time he had heard this man’s miraculous words spoken in the theatre, and how they had fired him.

He saw now there was still more to come. The plays were growing in stature and maturity, the language refined to pure gold: all Marlowe’s background and experience was now focussed and brought to life, his breadth of understanding deepening, his way of life mere defiance. It was as if he had died indeed and been reborn a wiser man.

‘He is not the only one who’s changed,’ thought Nick. What had happened to the devil-may-care lad who had run away to join the circus that was the London playhouse? Too much. How different his life would have been had he not been ensnared by the gossamer weaving of this man’s words. Not that he had any regrets. Save one. Marlowe waved him irritably out of his light, and Nick found his pack and sat down by the fire, his back against the chair, stretching long legs to the flames. His boots were still muddy from his last errand, and there was a new tear in his hose, goddammit. As he relaxed, growing warmer, with the scritch scritch of the quill in the quiet room for company, he allowed himself to reflect upon the changes of fortune that Kit Marlowe had done so much to bring about. A voice roused him, chiming with his thoughts.

‘What is your motto, Nick? So newly elevated, your father must have had a motto to grace the new coat of arms. Or haven’t

they got round to that yet?’

Stung, Nick answered abruptly, ‘The readiness is all.’

Transfixed, Marlowe fell back in his chair.

‘But that is it! Perfect! My prince exactly! This is what he will come to find, the readiness. I can see it – a magnificent last scene, a duel.’ He seized his pen and began to scribble, alight with invention. ‘Such a waste, a tragedy to die before he can prove himself a great king, likely had he been put on—’ The quill scratched on, Marlowe muttering feverishly to himself.

Nick bent to make up the fire, preparing to see out this new play. Marlowe would need feeding, would have to be reminded to eat, wash, change his clothes, be fed poppy juice to make him sleep. Nick went into the other room and emptied the chamber pot out of the window with a yell of ‘Ware piss!’ He shut the door on the mess, finished his wine and, spurning the grubby mattress, wrapped himself in his cloak and disposed himself on the floor, his head on his priceless pack. The pack was stuffed with letters and packets worth a small fortune in the right (or wrong) hands. And the cyphered stuff from his last mission, of course. It would have to wait... he slept.

Minutes, or hours, later he was startled from his exhausted sleep by a cry of fury. Marlowe was tearing and crumpling the sheets of manuscript, swearing and sobbing.

‘Hell’s teeth, I’ve lost it!’ He turned on Nick with a snarl. ‘You’ve broken the thread, damn your tripes! It was all in my head...’

‘Leave it, Kit. Rest. It will come back.’

Marlowe flung himself back into his chair.

‘Ah, no matter. I have others crowding into my brain – this lad, Orlando, you tell me of and your pretty, witty Kate.’ He

looked into Nick's tired eyes and stopped. 'I am a selfish bitch. Something has happened since I saw you last, my dear.'

Face and voice showed the new depth of understanding that made this mercurial man the great playwright he was. It was too much for Nick and he buried his head in his hands. Marlowe rose to pour wine for them both and came to sit by him. He listened quietly as the tale poured out...