



THE HONOURABLE
LIFE OF
THOMAS CHAYNE

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CHAPTER ONE

I should first relate that the year 1624 saw my birth, on the 23rd of a cold February day. My mother told me that I arrived much before my time, to a landscape covered with deep snow, and more falling from the sky. The best doctors and midwives should have been there to aid her, but the weather and my sudden arrival conspired together to leave my poor mother with no help other than her servants.

Her maid, who had been engaged because of her skill at dressing hair, told my father, who unusually happened to be in residence, that one of the kitchen servants had attended several births, but my father would allow no peeler of carrots to be at the nativity of his heir. The bone-aching cold did galvanise him into ordering the fire to be hastily lit in his wife's chamber, but in

spite of the excellently seasoned ash and oak logs that had been carefully chosen and laid there in anticipation, they had hardly any time to make an impression on the temperature of the room before I arrived with indecent haste.

It would not have been surprising if I had exited this life almost as soon as I had arrived in it, being born small, chilled and hungry, but my mother had lost her first infant, and was not inclined to lose another. In the absence of a wet nurse she scandalised her husband by putting me to the breast. Not only that, she also insisted on me lying close with her in bed, instead of being put in the cold ancestral cradle. Of course, this state of affairs didn't last long. As soon as the snow allowed, a flurry of experts arrived, and I was whisked away, to be raised in a more seemly manner, but I do believe that not only did she bear me, but also it is likely she saved my life.

During those few days together, as the room warmed and we both grew stronger, we must have formed an unhealthily close bond. That was my father's opinion about the great reluctance with which she gave me up. I think now that perhaps he was jealous of the love she had for me, as well as his determination that I should fit the life I was born to. I cannot remember even one occasion when both of my parents and I were fondly as one. My father seemed to hate any sign of affection between my mother and I, and my mother too discouraged it, in obedience to her husband, and also I like to think in order to spare me a little of his ill humour. It was different for my younger brother Hugh. Our mother could tousle his hair and our father would smile. If I sat at her feet and she did it to me he would complain that she was making a fool out of me, and order me to sit elsewhere. Perhaps he loved me, in his own fashion, but I never saw any sign of it. I certainly longed for his love, and never really grew

out of that longing. I honoured him, respected his great station, having as he did the ear of King Charles, and did all I could to spark some sign of fondness from him for me, but his lack of feeling, in the end, obliterated my love for him. I feared him, yes, and yearned for his approval, but in the end I could not love him, however much I wanted to. It was a way, I suppose, to guard myself from his lack of feeling, though it never stopped my yearning. I did love my mother, more perhaps than was wise, but I knew she loved me, and felt almost sure that her reticence was imposed by her husband. All the same, in spite of my natural ebullience, my mother's distance was a cause of great sadness to me, because I was an affectionate child by nature.

Of course my father was away a lot, at court, and my first few years were spent in the nursery, so my father was then seldom in my thoughts. In fact, my first real memory is of Hugh's arrival. I was two years old and earned a smack for poking my finger into his eye when we were introduced. Early childhood memories are like flashes of half-forgotten dreams, and my next vivid memory must have occurred when Hugh was almost walking, and so I suppose I must have been about three.

'You bad, wicked boy!'

Hugh loved his wheeled contraption. Whenever our nursemaid put him into it he would set off, careering across the floor in a haphazard, directionless fashion, his little feet drumming the boards. I loved it too. It changed my brother from a creeping creature to one who could look me in the eye with the promise of adventures to come. Perhaps it was adventure I was looking for, or maybe I was simply curious at how his contraption would handle the stairs. It certainly didn't occur to me that my behaviour was either bad or wicked, nor did I see any danger in my antics.

The door must have been left ajar by mistake. I am sure I was not able to unlatch it, but I could certainly pull it wide. With great good fortune, one of Hugh's wheels got stuck, and so his walker only clattered down the first step, lurching Hugh sideways and almost throwing him out. I remember so clearly his laughing face, close to mine while I tugged unsuccessfully at his chariot, trying to free the wheel. Then there were the screams of the nursemaid, who had been repairing yet another of my torn gowns, the lifting of Hugh from danger, and me being dragged in confusion from the top of the stairs. The commotion even brought my mother to see what was amiss. The result was that I never saw that particular nursemaid again. Of my own punishment I remember nothing, except that I was made to pray forgiveness for something I did not understand. It seemed the adults thought I wished my brother to die. In truth, Hugh and I were very close all through our childhood, and although we have not met for many years, I still think of him often.

As we grew, we discovered that life was not all play. A tutor was engaged, and for a while I sat alone in the classroom, learning at first to read and write my own language and then Latin and Greek. By the time Hugh joined me I had my own pony and was learning to enjoy the hunt as well as my books. Hugh was not a natural scholar, but I am, and so we often found ourselves secretly in the role of teacher and pupil, as I strove to help him avoid a beating for not managing his lessons. I always wanted to protect him and I continue to thank God that he survived the dreadful times that were to come. But that all lay in a future I had no conception of then. Indeed, I doubt any at that time would have imagined the difficulties that lay ahead.

CHAPTER TWO

In my tenth year, my father decided to take me to court in the expectation of presenting me to the King. I always think of that occasion as the start of my adult life. It was when I began to find myself as a person in my own right instead of simply being my brother's guide and playmate. I cannot say I looked forward to the journey. I hardly knew my father, and feared him, but being of an optimistic nature I did hope that spending time alone together might help him to know and like me better. I was keen to impress him with my conversational skills, but things did not happen quite as I had hoped.

‘So, you see, Thomas, how important it is to be knowledgeable about all factions at the court, if I am able to advise His Majesty wisely.’

We were in my father's coach, still at least two hours from Whitehall, and I was already weary of my father's attempts to educate me about politics. I wanted to ask about the beggar on a board at the inn where we had changed horses. Had he lost his legs in some accident, or had he been born without any? But I didn't voice my question. It, like the others I had asked, would bring irritation and dismissal, not an answer. The last question, about the name of the great tree we had passed a while ago, had prompted a withering rebuke. My father had glanced at it briefly and then turned to me.

'Trees are for foresters, Thomas. I'm told you have a good brain in your head. Use it to learn about things you will need to know, not frivolous nothings.'

I was angry with my father, and secretly wondered if he even knew the answer to my question. But I was also gratified that he acknowledged my intelligence. I did still want to please him. I could tell, however, that if this was ever to happen I would need to commit all the names of the men he spoke of to memory, as well as their opinions and alliances. It was not his fault that I found such things crushingly tedious. Maybe, once we arrived at court, I would be able to put faces to the names, and everything would fall into place. I would try a better question, on his subject, to show I had been listening.

'So, Father, are all these men members of the privy council?'

Too late I realised I had made another mistake. His frown betrayed his true feelings, although his voice strove to keep his temper under control.

'Of course not! It is vital for the King to have trusted advisers outside the council. It is a mistake to think that the privy council contains all the best brains, or even most of them. Though that,' he added swiftly, 'is not to be voiced in

court, nor anywhere else, particularly by a beardless boy.’

Maybe a year before I would not have realised how angry and frustrated he was at not being a member of that inner circle but now, suddenly, I could see it. With that insight came the extraordinary knowledge, like the pounce of a hawk, that like me he was not entirely master of his life, and that his frustration coloured it. I gazed at his profile under my new hat, and decided that when I was grown, I would never put myself in a position where I had to do as I was told. Kings might be our masters, but why put oneself so directly under them, when a life of hunting and hawking, servants to carry out our wishes and comfort aplenty was ours at home? I was, after all, just a boy, but was learning that life was more complicated than I had thought. I had been told much about duty, responsibility and the destiny that was mine, but the word ‘ambition’ had never been mentioned. Mine had always been to gain my father’s affection; now, for the first time, to me he looked less powerful, and much less worthy of my embryonic ambition. Was a man who worked at what frustrated him and could not even name a tree someone I should respect? I glanced at his florid complexion, his greying moustache and his bulging stomach, and with the devastating logic of a ten-year-old, decided that I would never turn into him.

At court I was allowed to watch King Charles and his queen dine. I wondered that they could enjoy their food with so many gawping at them, but they seemed indifferent to their public. All sorts of people came to stare, comment to each other and go on their way. The sight of so much food made my stomach argue for sustenance, and so I was relieved when Their Royal Highnesses rose from their table and disappeared from view. The common people left the palace, but we took a different route. I would

soon have been lost, but my father was very familiar with our surroundings. He took me to a side room, where several people were eating together. They hailed my father as a friend, and made room for us at the table. While they talked, I ate. A girl not much older than I, sitting opposite to me and splendidly dressed, smiled at me.

‘You are Thomas Chayne,’ she told me, as if I might not know.

‘I am,’ I agreed, swallowing hastily.

‘Have a woodcock,’ she said. ‘They are very good.’

‘We have woodcock at home,’ I said, taking one. ‘And I like them very much.’

It was far more interesting talking to this girl than listening to my father’s impenetrable conversation with his friends, but it wasn’t long before the gentleman next to her pushed his plate away and got up.

‘I must go,’ the girl said, hastily wiping her greasy fingers on her napkin. ‘My husband has business elsewhere.’

I stared at her like a fool. I had assumed, if I had considered it at all, that he was her father, bringing her, like me, to court for the first time. And yet, I suppose he was not so very old. I got up and gave them both the best bow I could with my stool so close behind me. I hoped I had not done anything to offend him. He had done no more than nod at me when I first sat down, and had not engaged his wife in any conversation at all. I wondered how she had known my name, but then felt even more foolish. She and her husband must know my father well, and had known he was going to bring me to court. She had spoken politely to me but I had not so much as enquired her name. I felt abashed by my rudeness, but by the grin she gave as she took her husband’s arm I suppose she must have forgiven me.

A few minutes later the whole company broke up as they went about their business. There were meetings, and committees, petitioners and huddles of friends discussing who knew what. Some greeted my father, and made comments about my likeness to him, which secretly appalled me. One of the ladies caressed my cheek. I did not much like it, although my father smiled indulgently, which he most certainly would not have done if she had been my mother. I bowed and smiled, nodded and replied to the inane questions asked of me as best I could. I could tell that most of the people were little interested in me. They were simply being polite. After this awkward progress we entered the room where King Charles sat, speaking to two gentlemen. We approached a little, and then waited for the discussion to end. Before it had, the King looked up and, seeing us there, smiled and beckoned us forward. I had been taught how to behave in front of my monarch, but found I was very nervous.

‘Thomas!’ It was my father he spoke to, not me. But then he regarded me with a keen eye. ‘And this is your son.’ My father bowed again and I did the same.

‘Your father is a great addition to our court,’ he told me. ‘His knowledge of the mood of the people is often right, and I rely on his good judgement. Will I also be able to rely on you, in time to come?’

I did not think he required an answer, but I mumbled something and bowed again. Before I had raised my head he was speaking again to my father.

‘There is a meeting this afternoon about the tax that has been proposed. I would like you to attend and give me your opinion afterwards. You may leave the boy here. No doubt the ladies will enjoy his company.’ He turned back at once to his

earlier conversation and it was obvious that we were dismissed.

I tried not to convey my alarm at the prospect of my father leaving me with all these strangers, but I suppose he must have noticed. He was not used to reassuring me but made a gruff attempt. Pulling me away by the sleeve, he deposited me near a group of gentlemen playing cards.

‘I will return when I can. Don’t forget your manners.’

I watched him out of the room, wishing I was at home with my mother, my brother and my pets. Alone of all the people in the room, I knew no one. I was perfectly able to behave in a proper manner if I was spoken to but could not begin to think of initiating a conversation myself. Everyone was occupied in one way or another, and so I stood miserably by the wall, watching, and feeling invisible.

However, after some minutes, which felt like an hour, I did recognise someone. It was the girl who had spoken to me during our meal. There was no sign of her husband, and she was with a couple of other girls. After a few moments she spied me and came to me, bringing her friends.

‘It’s young Thomas Chayne!’ she said in a teasing voice. ‘What are you doing lurking by the door?’

A shrug has no place in a book of manners. A shrug combined with a slight bow and an embarrassed blush must have made me look as stupid as I felt, but she was not a cruel girl.

‘This is Alice, this is Mary and I am Elizabeth, as you know,’ which of course I did not. It was kind of her to be so informal.

‘Come with us,’ said the one called Mary. ‘We are going to practise our parts. You can help.’

‘I’m terrible at remembering my lines,’ said Alice. ‘Do come. You can prompt me.’

Elizabeth grinned. ‘Your father and my husband are at the

same meeting. They will be ages. What else are you going to do? Come on.'

I needed little encouragement.

Much later, on the way home, my father neglected to ask how I had passed my time, huffing instead about the meeting, and telling me how difficult it had been. I hugged my own afternoon to myself, keeping it until I could boast to Hugh about my adventure. When my father was gone again on business I told my mother too, sitting at her feet in her room, with the sunlight warm on my face and the silk of her dress cool against my neck. I had enjoyed a glorious time, being treated like a pet by those beautifully dressed women. The rehearsal for Her Majesty's masque had been enormous fun and I had thrown myself into it. With the words on a paper thrust into my hands, I prompted where needed. The masque would not be performed for some weeks, and it was just as well. Lady Alice was indeed terrible at remembering her lines, no matter how many times I helped her out. I did not have the masque clear in my mind, but these three had been cast as nymphs. Mary's role seemed to consist mainly of her gazing up at the moon, while Elizabeth had a whole verse to recite, and did it almost flawlessly. I, of course, would not be there to take part, or to see it, which felt a great pity. As well as prompting, they had me play all kinds of extra parts, whether made up for their amusement, or in fact to stand in for props that Mr Inigo Jones would supply on the day, I could not tell. I was not used to the company of girls, but they made my presence seem like a treat, and enormous fun. I had not laughed so much, ever! I even saw the Queen. She paused in the doorway to watch for a moment, waving us to continue as we all scrambled to acknowledge her. I, being already on my hands and knees, taking the part of a swan, could not decide if my position was humble

enough or not. By the time I had got to my feet to bow she had gone, with a nod of approval to her nymphs before she moved on to inspect, perhaps, others rehearsing for her masque. I still remember that day with great fondness.

I don't mean to convey that my home life was as sad and drab as the afternoon at court was joyful and full of colour. The older Hugh and I got, the more licence we had to ramble over our estate on pony and foot, when lessons were done for the day. We two fought and made up, came home dirty and grew closer each day. Our mother was at pains to teach us all the formality we needed, but when father was away, in her private quarters we could play chess or cards, read aloud or tell stories, and best of all, laugh at jokes. There was much merriment, but it was a separated life, with formality and sober duty in public. I was, I think, fortunate to have been born a merry and demonstrative person, and have always been quick to laugh, but that brought its own frustrations as I often had to master my mirth and assume a purposeful expression. But that afternoon at court taught me that my father's insistence on sober behaviour was not the only way for well-brought-up people to behave. There was no impropriety in the behaviour of the young ladies, simply fun and high spirits. If the Queen could encourage the enjoyment of her masques, with her husband reputed to be righteous and faithful, how could it be wrong? From that day on, I decided to no longer think of those times in our mother's company as a guilty secret. It was, I decided, for whatever reason, my father's error, not ours. Even unto embracing our mother. If Hugh was allowed to, then why should not I? After I had told her of my afternoon at court I stood up and hugged her. The fact that she returned my embrace so warmly told me that in spite of her past reticence she welcomed my affection, and that we had

made a pact of sorts. Perhaps she had worried that as a little boy I would not be able to restrain myself in company, especially that of my father, and wanted to spare me his ire. But I was old enough now to understand. The artificial stiffness that had kept us physically apart melted away. It was easy to be formal when I knew that I only had to wait until my father was gone back to his dreary business at court.