

From the Diary of Rufus Hatton, Physician

*20 March, 1555
Hatfield*

I am driven to record the events of this evening, but I would rather it were not so. For these matters are not fit for the archive of memory—indeed, they should never have occurred. But occurred they did, and here I sit, quill in hand, a full pot of ink at the ready, as first light winks beyond my bedroom window; my diary, purchased many years ago but never used, now lies open to the first page, having waited all this time, it seems, for this moment to arrive. My hand, I think, longs to draw the pen across the page more than my heart or even my mind desires to write. These events will be recorded, it seems. But why? To what avail?

It has been the longest day of my life, but perhaps my lady will remember it as being even longer.

Impetuous whore.

There. I've written it. The day may come when these words deliver my head to the chopping block, a device much in use of late. Strange, that with my actions today I have dedicated my life to the coming of that day! But then these are strange times. Dangerous times. Few indeed know how dangerous.

I should blacken those words and save myself, but I cannot. Once again, my hand has its own will. For what purpose is a diary if not to hold communion with a lonesome soul? If I cannot and must not confide my thoughts to another soul, then I have no choice but to confide them to myself. I will hide this book, but even a fool knows there is no true hiding place when great men have great ambitions and think you an impediment to such. Yet I must write the truth, and the truth is this: She is impetuous, and a whore.

Oh, that my Jane were alive! I would whisper this thought to her, and take pleasure in her shocked expression, and comfort in her

discretion. Then would I have no need of this diary. If our daughter Anne had lived beyond infancy, I might have recorded my treasonous thoughts and knowledge in her mind someday, and not upon this brittle parchment. But they were both stolen from me by plague, along with half the population of England, it seemed, and now my sole remaining confidant lies beneath my hand, awaiting news.

It began this morning. Or should I say, yesterday morning? My maid roused me with the news that I was wanted urgently at Hatfield. The night was yet dark, the windows shuttered. In the darkness I saw only her eyes and the occasional glint of her teeth. Lucy hails from the western coast of Africa. Since Jane's death, and then Anne's, I have had need of domestic help and companionship. Blackamoors are better workers than our native girls, and not as dear, and they have nowhere to run when they tire of servitude. Her knowledge of our tongue is imperfect, but she keeps my small house tidy and, I might as well confess, my body warm. Lucy (for that is what I have named her) has been the salvation of my body and my soul.

"A man here for you," she said, in a voice that sounds to my ears as if she sucks on a hard candy while speaking. "He wait you."

Nearly nine months ago, another man had sent for me. "Are you Rufus Hatton, the physician?" asked the servant sent to fetch me that time. He appeared nervous, as if he feared I was an imposter and that he would be blamed for involving the wrong person. "My lady is ill," he said, once I had reassured him that I was indeed the physician. "She is most violently ill." Her family worried for her health, he told me, and for their own futures (this last was unsaid). I don't flatter myself that my reputation caused them to summon me. In truth I am only recently returned from Cambridge. But I was then and am still the closest physician to the palace, residing below it in the village, a short walk from the back gate atop the gentle hill that begins almost at my doorstep. If I have a reputation at all, it is not for healing, I think, but for plain speaking, and for my loyalty to the new church, which I make no secret of, even now.

It was no secret about the village or even the countryside that my lady was at Hatfield, but her presence was rarely mentioned. I think it caused uneasiness in the village, as if she bore a plague. The plague of the new religion, perhaps, now out of official favor. No one ever saw her, of course, as few were allowed inside the gates, and she was never let out.

THE SEMPER SONNET

We mortals live below Hatfield Palace, in its shadow, only guessing what activities, grim and gay, take place above us.

It was her maid, Kat Ashley, who led me into her room that first time, after a short walk up the hill to the palace.

“We fear typhus.” Kat’s eyes brimmed with tears as she stepped closer to me. “Or poison.”

I found my lady on her bed in a small room on the second floor, the curtains drawn against a bright morning sun. I confess I approached her with trepidation, for calamity attended her like a fatal odor, felling those who would get too close. When I was but steps from the bedside, the sprightly Kat circled in front of me and removed a chamber pot, but not before I had a chance to examine its contents.

The patient appeared to be sleeping. “Has my lady been able to hold down anything?” I whispered.

“Nothing,” replied the servant, the word like a sigh or moan, heavy with despair. “You must help her.”

I stood by the bed and observed her. I admit my examination was not, at first, entirely scientific. So this was the woman at the center of so much strife. She appeared smaller than I might have expected, though who would not have seemed so, given how large she loomed in the affairs of men. And she was, of course, not well, which did little to flatter her appearance. Her face was long, but with a rounded chin, and her mouth was small and likewise round. Her nose swelled in the middle, her only true deformity, and a minor one at that, though it must be said that overall she was not a great beauty. Her single claim to distinction appeared, during my cursory observation, to be her hands, which lay atop the bedding, unsullied by rings. Her fingers were slender and unusually long. One could imagine her an accomplished player at the lute or virginal. She had passed but twenty-two years on this earth, yet she appeared older to me. Or was it the heavy weight of expectations she bore on her slender frame that had aged her face beyond her years?

Perhaps sensing my presence, she opened her eyes. As she pushed herself into a sitting position, I watched fear give way to fierceness.

“Who are you?” Her voice was weak and hoarse from illness and sleep.

“A physician, my lady. Rufus Hatton. Your servant called for me.”

“I want no physician,” she said, her voice strengthening. “Leave me.”

“But my lady has been ill. Mistress Ashley has—”

“Kat is a fool. Go!”

I had no choice but to heed her. As I was turning, I saw something

on her bedside table: a small pile of garlic cloves on a plate. My heart felt suddenly heavy. While every instinct called to me to leave, I nevertheless found myself turning back to her.

“Was my lady able to smell the garlic?”

“I know not what you mean,” she said quickly, glancing at the plate.

“Who brought you the garlic?”

“I know not why it is here. Or you, for that matter. Now, go!”

I obeyed this time, but I hadn’t reached the door when I heard a softer, more plaintive voice.

“Is it always true?”

I turned. “My lady?”

“I could not smell it. For three days. Kat brings me fresh cloves from the garden every morning, and still I smell nothing. And the vomiting...”

I approached the bed and very carefully formed my next question, for much was at stake, not least my life, depending on how events transpired.

“Has my lady reason to fear that she may be with child?” I whispered.

Her eyes flashed with rage and then, after a long few moments in which I could not breathe, her expression softened. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, she nodded.

And so I became entangled in a most dangerous situation, one of a handful of men and women privy to a secret that could destroy any and all who held it. So many pregnancies never endure to term. It was my fondest hope, and that of others, that this one would so transpire. But God saw fit to dash our unholy aspirations, even after my lady availed herself of a purgative, devised by her loyal Kat, to bring down the term. Two months after that first visit the child quickened, and today, nearly seven months later, I was called to Hatfield once more.

As I walked the short distance to the palace, I said a prayer for which I am both ashamed and unapologetic. A stillbirth would solve many problems and ease many hearts, my lady’s among them.

The gates of Hatfield were swung open for me, and I entered the park just as dawn’s faintest light was casting a portentous glow over the palace. The red bricks of the facade appeared as smoldering embers, particularly on the center tower, which loomed over the two-story building with glowering disdain. It is not the prettiest palace in the land, and certainly not the largest, but all things considered, my lady is fortunate to be its tenant. There are worse places she could be, given the politics of the day, even were she not in her current condition.

A guard stepped aside to let me in through the main door. I made straight for the grand staircase, taking it two steps at a time. Outside

THE SEMPER SONNET

my lady's room stood another guard, whose eyes, when they met mine, expressed what I could only interpret as deep shame. I had but a moment to contemplate this, for a series of sharp, high screams emanated from inside the room, indicating that the trials were well along. I opened the door with some trepidation. Men are not welcome in the birthing room, not even physicians, a situation I find unsatisfactory but am powerless to change. But this was no ordinary delivery room. I had been summoned not to attend to the child, if it survived, for precious few had an interest in that eventuality, but to see to my lady's well-being, should she need assistance.

I stepped inside. The wailing continued, but the source of it was obscured by a hovering circle of women. I recognized Kat and two other servants. Another face seemed to belong to Lady Longford, who lives close by and has been one of the few people allowed into Hatfield. Frances Sermon, the midwife, was in attendance, by long-standing arrangement. There were no kin in attendance, as there normally would be, for none of my lady's kin had been alerted to the situation, naturally. The curtains were drawn, as if to contain the noise. I think there were a hundred candles lit, most burned close to their nubs.

I knew better than to make my presence known, for I would be immediately ejected, but eventually Kat turned away from her mistress and spied me. She crossed the room and pushed me into the hallway. I knew her to be a pretty woman, with a lively disposition. But this night her eyes were shrouded in black circles. Unmarried, she had no need to wear a cap, and her hair looked ill-kept, even wild. I asked how long it had been since the labor had begun and was told that several hours had passed. "The child was breach, methinks. The midwife pressed on my lady's belly to right it. I know not if she was successful, but the howling.... I fear that my lady's insides are being ripped to tatters."

As if to lend credence to Kat's narrative, a new series of screams erupted from behind the door.

"We are losing her," she whispered through deep, heaving breaths. "Mother of God, we are losing her."

"The Lord will decide when to take his servant from us, not you, Mistress Kat." I heard little confidence in my voice, for it seemed to me that the Lord had scarce involvement with what was occurring at Hatfield this night. Perhaps the devil was more interested. "When the child is born, whether quick or still, I will attend to our lady and do what I can. Now back to her side, where you belong."

For the next several hours, I roamed the palace, trying in vain to

escape the shrieking from that room and my own sense of dread. Both shadowed me wherever I went. In the great hall, with its arched timbered roof and walls lined with tapestries, I considered the sadness that suffused Hatfield, which had been the home of the bishops of Ely before it came into royal possession during the dissolution. Perhaps any house taken from its owners, no matter how justified the usurpation, would seem melancholy, but Hatfield felt... abandoned, like the lady lately imprisoned (for she had little opportunity to leave it) and now confined within its walls. I walked the length of the great hall, a considerable journey, and wondered when last it had held a grand banquet. Not in my lady's time, that much I knew. I had little need of the screams from the floor above to tell me that Hatfield had become a dark place.

"Sir, the child is born."

This announcement, from the lips of a male servant standing at the south entrance of the great hall, carried no intimation of joy but rather seemed to foretell a new tribulation, not merely in the life our lady but in the lives of all who attended her that day.

I returned to her room. Kat was at her mistress's bedside, but the focus of activity had shifted to the far corner of the room, where four women huddled about a small bundle of white swaddling. I confess my heart did not cheer when I heard the mewling of a healthy infant. Better for all in that room, myself among them, if the child had never taken a breath. I did not inquire after its sex. I wanted no further disappointment.

"Is my lady comfortable?" I asked Kat, who watched over the sleeping form of the new mother like a protective, adoring angel, which is perhaps indeed what she is.

"She sleeps, which is all the comfort she will have."

I took her arm and felt for a pulse.

"Was there much bleeding?" I asked, loudly enough for the midwife to hear.

"Too much," answered Mistress Sermon, crossing the room to join me at the bedside. "Now she must sleep. Your work is done, sir."

A midwife is always jealous of a physician's presence, so I took no offense at her impertinence.

"And the child?"

"A healthy boy. At least there is one in her family that can make such a thing."

"Dangerous words," I said quietly.

The midwife shrugged and rejoined the child, who was already suckling at the breast of a wet nurse. A moment later the boy was taken

THE SEMPER SONNET

from the room, his retinue following.

My lady stirred and opened her eyes. Kat leaned over and whispered something.

“Bring him to me,” I heard my lady ask in a weak voice. “Where is he?”

“It is better that you not see him,” said Kat.

“Bring him to me.” Now her voice was firmer, befitting her station.

“I’m sorry, my lady.” Kat sounded close to tears. She retreated from the bed, leaving me alone with its occupant. My lady took my hand. Hers felt limp and cold.

“Will you watch him?” she inquired of me. “Take care of him?”

“Surely the family will have a—”

“Fie to my family. I am bidding you be his guardian, Doctor.”

I could do nothing but agree, though the burden felt heavy already.

“I will call him Edward, after my late brother.”

“A fine name, my lady. Now you must rest, to restore your strength.”

“Yes, my strength,” she said. “I will never endure that again. Such pain as I thought would tear me apart. I will never endure that again.... God be my witness, I will....”

With that, her eyes shut. I watched her for a while, wondering at her fate, which had never been secure but would now be even less so.

Princess Elizabeth, daughter of a King and an adulteress turned Queen, sister of two monarchs, including our reigning Queen, the Catholic Mary Tudor. Now she was the mother of a bastard. Stupid girl, I thought (yet another treasonous thought, if ever Elizabeth should be released from Hatfield, which seems more doubtful than ever). A bastard son would surely ruin whatever slim chance she had of succession. A healthy Tudor son, that rarest of commodities, but born a bastard.

I left her in Kat’s hands. As I was leaving the house I nearly ran into a gentleman, also departing, and in much haste. Something about his manner told me he did not wish to be acknowledged, but my surprise at his presence loosened my lips before my mind had time to apply caution.

“Sir William, good day,” I said.

Sir William Cecil, with his equine face and long beard of startling whiteness, could hardly expect to remain unrecognized. He appeared stunned nonetheless as he returned my greeting.

“Good day, Doctor,” he said, barely moving his lips. His tone made my profession seem little more than that of fishmonger. “I trust your patient is well.”

“Tired, but well.”

He studied me a long while.

“You have a reputation for probity and discretion,” he said at length. “We have need of such a person who lives close by Hatfield.”

“I will of course attend to the Princess’s health, and that of her child when—”

“You must not mention him again. He will be taken from this place and will not return. Even to talk of a child is treason.” His eyes seemed to sweep the floor, as if the correct words lay there, waiting to be plucked up. He spoke the next line slowly. “There is no child.” Then his eyes met mine, and I could only nod. “As for your part, stay close to the Princess. She will have ample cause to see you as she regains strength. Report to me what you know.”

Again, I could but nod. Since the death of young Edward ten years earlier, Cecil has had no formal part to play on the political stage, and Queen Mary distrusts him, with good reason, it is said. Now he looks to be casting his lot with Elizabeth, a dangerous gamble even before the events of the past nine months.

Then again, there is no child.

Still, the Queen is healthy, and Catholic, and her sister a prisoner.

Outside, a retinue of men waited with swords and halberds. What were they about? As if to satisfy my puzzlement, one of the men turned to another and said, “We go now to Stafford.”

The other, brandishing a mirthless smile, replied, “To offer felicitations on the birth of a son.”

“Yes,” said the first man. “But his joy will be short-lived.”

I watched Cecil ride off with his men. The sun was already dying in the west. I hadn’t realized how late the day had grown. I felt tired and burdened and yet restless with anxiety. Two people had charged me with responsibilities I had no wish to assume, first Elizabeth and now Cecil. Oh, how I longed for my Jane to share my burden. Lucy would slake my body’s restlessness with her African magic, but could do little to assuage my mind’s cares. As I left the palace through the village gate, the portal of servants, farmers, and physicians, my body felt twice as heavy as it had that morning. I sensed that my life, no less than that of Elizabeth or Miles Stafford or even their bastard son (Edward, who didn’t exist), had changed that day, and not for the better.