

AN ACCOUNT OF SIX POISONINGS

A monologue

The Court Poisoner enters with a bottle in one hand and a goblet in the other

Poisoner Welcome, friends, welcome. You are most welcome. Please, please. Fill your glasses. Drink, my friends. Drink your fill. Mine is a sad story, a melancholy tale. A cup or two may serve to numb the sorrow. Join with me, friends. (*raises goblet*) Join with me. I will begin.

My sign was the pestle and mortar. My knowledge was roots and seeds, vines and leaves, bulbs and berries. I was a grinder, a blender, a crusher, a mulcher; I was a master of tubers. I mixed the tinctures and measured the powders that might cure or kill. A single grain may be the difference between health and death. Mine was a calling. A position of trust. I was the court's poisoner.

No more. My poisons are at hand but are seldom employed. What I was I was, and what I am I am. I snore in warm corners. I slumber in a feather bed. I shuffle between here and there. If someone speaks, I cock my ear and pretend to deafness. If someone points, I squint and shake my head. My sign is a bent back, an elder stick, an idiot grin. Why do I play the ancient pantaloon? My friends, a poisoner has many enemies.

You have asked me for an account of the six poisonings, but you must know that this is a dangerous tale which never can be spoken of or shared. Have you taken my meaning? Then I will proceed.

(channelling the voice of Queen Utrica) "Their father was a loathsome toad."

Queen Utrica had an earthy way with words. The high-born have no fear of low speech. I will try to emulate my mistress and speak as plainly as I may.

"He was a brute. As a husband he had nothing to commend him. Nothing except his manliness. His great manliness. His considerable and undeniable manliness."

Queen Utrica sat for a moment lost in her memories of amatory battle.

"Yes, I wept at his death. A tear or two. No more. The wonder is that he died peacefully in his bed."

Here I will confess that I loved Queen Utrica. Humbly, wholly and devotedly. As the loam loves the trowel. As the worm loves the rose. As the living love the dead.

"Life was less beastly without him. Much less beastly. I hoped my sons might be better men than their father, but I found I didn't like either of them."

The Queen sighed deeply.

"I wasn't made for motherhood."

How I adored her.

"Hector and Cyril! What mistaken names we gave them. Hector was to have been a hero but he was as limp as a wilting lily. Pale, frail and feeble."

Although, it should be noted, Hector was something of a scholar. He excelled at poetry and music. Mathematics was too vigorous for him. At a young age, he retired to a single tower in a far corner of the castle grounds. There he wrote verses and played a zither while standing at a high window that overlooked a rose garden.

Hector was never seen with a sword in his hand. His younger brother, Cyril, was seldom seen without one. Cyril was a roaring child. Fury-filled and certainly no scholar. His tutors were too terrorised to teach him either to read or write. Pain was Cyril's music; oaths were his verses. A horrid boy. His father may have loved him.

(drinks) When the King expired, it might have been argued that Hector, as the first-born, should have succeeded to his throne. But it was not an argument anyone was willing to pursue. Cyril had spent so much of his youth cutting things off – arms, heads, legs and the like – and running things through – mostly guts and gizzards – that it was wise never to disagree with him.

King Cyril's coronation should have been a grand affair but it ended abruptly when the King felt it had gone on long enough. He had business to attend to, he said.

After slaughtering his rivals at home, he cast about for enemies abroad. The neighbouring kingdoms of Indium, Gallium and Thulium were conquered and despoiled in quick succession. Hugo Hairshirt, Edgar the Improbable and the Margrave Elector of Shining Badgers all surrendered their territories and were duly beheaded. As was a catholic collection of chamberlains and chancellors. Each head set upon a pole. A veritable forest of heads.

Prince Hector escaped his brother's savage ministrations and stayed untroubled in his tower; playing his zither, composing his

verses and looking down from his high window on the rose garden below.

"I wonder if I should have liked daughters any better."

I will permit myself to suggest that the Queen's opinion of her daughter-in-law, Rosalind, provides the answer.

"A simpering creature. I don't know where Cyril found her. Cowering in the cellar of some smouldering castle, I suppose."

Anyway, Rosalind adored Cyril. I can only speculate that he must have inherited his father's great manliness. After the perfunctory nuptials that united King Cyril and sweet Rosalind, there was a discomfiting lull. Indium, Gallium and Thulium had been reduced to rubble and there was no one left to fight. Thank God, then – if this isn't impious – for the Great Turk's blasphemy and the Pope's crusade to save the Holy Kidney. If he'd known about him, King Cyril would have set out to fight the Great Turk on his own, but his geography was shaky and it was handy to have the Papal map-reader to guide him to Constantinople, Aleppo and beyond. Thus it was that King Cyril left his kingdom for – as it transpired – seven years. Queen Rosalind was distraught.

"A weepy, willowy girl. I should like to snap her in two."

Rosalind took to walking in the rose garden, tearful, wretched, inconsolable. And, from his high window, Prince Hector watched her.

Despatches from King Cyril received at court told of battles, massacres, marches, sieges, trophies taken, prisoners slaughtered. Glorious triumphs in the cause of the Holy Kidney. We all hoped – although we did not admit it – that the Great Turk would continue his stubborn resistance. What none of us wanted – with the exception, naturally, of Queen Rosalind – was King Cyril's return. Nor did we want him dead. Were King Cyril to be killed, chaos might be unleashed. A hundred clans and factions would twitch to life and – like reattached limbs – writhe and wrestle to take his lands. No, we needed King Cyril alive. To be living. But not here.

(drinks) Is not God good? This was our thought when first we heard the news that King Cyril had been captured by the Great Turk. It seemed an answer to our prayers. He was alive – but far away in a deep dungeon. If we had known that the Great Turk – a chivalrous gentleman – had not in fact confined his prisoner in darkness but permitted him to wander through the luscious foliage and sweet fountains of his courtyard, it might not have troubled us. But it should have done.

For a period, life was bountiful. Our lives at court could be enjoyed to the full. Rosalind, it is true, remained in her state of

misery but now she was joined in her walks around the rose garden by Prince Hector who had descended from his tower to commune with her.

And then disaster. News reached us that King Cyril had escaped. Or — as we were later to learn — his escape had been effected by Fatima, the daughter of the Great Turk. She, it seems, had spied the prisoner walking day after day in her father's gardens and fallen in love with him. It was an unlucky turn of events. In a month or two King Cyril — accompanied by Fatima who, naturally, was now his lover — returned to his kingdom.

If you have read the chronicle, you will know what happened next. The official history is most touching. Fatima, the Great Turk's daughter, loved King Cyril as much as any woman could, while Rosalind's joy at her lord's return was such that she happily forgave her husband's love for his saviour. She, too, loved Fatima, and Cyril loved them both. He had no wish to choose between them. And so he sought a dispensation from the Pope to take a second wife which — in recognition of his service in the matter of the Holy Kidney — was granted. Cyril and Fatima were joined in holy matrimony and shared their bed with Rosalind. A loving trinity.

But, friends. What one reads should not always be believed.

(drinks) Nonetheless, King Cyril was a much-changed man. Whether he had been chastened by captivity or civilised by the Great Turk, is not for us to judge. And although he didn't learn to read or play himself, King Cyril could now be seen with his head in Fatima's lap while Rosalind sang sweetly or read verses of her own composition. Prince Hector had returned to his tower. If Rosalind frowned, King Cyril, resting beneath fragrant Fatima's soft bosom, saw nothing.

Bear.

When Rosalind approached me, I sought Queen Utrica's counsel.

"Matrimony is a sacrament. It is your duty to restore propriety."

The stems of powdered monk-eye picked at dawn served Rosalind well — and Fatima died in frightful agony.

King Cyril, it seems, had favoured the Great Turk's daughter above adoring Rosalind and, although much reformed, his course was clear.

When King Cyril approached me, I sought Queen Utrica's counsel.

"The King is the agent of the Almighty. It is your duty to serve him faithfully."

The rind of ground angel-toe picked at noon served King Cyril well — and Rosalind died in frightful agony.

Prince Hector, from his high tower, saw all. The murder of beloved Rosalind was more than he could bear.

When Prince Hector approached me, I sought Queen Utrica's counsel.

"The heart's cause is sacred. It is your duty to worship at love's shrine."

The bark of crushed hermit-nose, picked at dusk, served Prince Hector well — and King Cyril died in frightful agony.

There was an interlude when it seemed Prince Hector might now descend from his tower in order to ascend the throne. This was, of course, unthinkable.

"Regicide and fratricide are offences against Nature. It is your duty to ensure justice is executed."

The crust of sliced virgin-spleen, picked at night, served Queen Utrica well — and Prince Hector died in frightful agony.

Queen Utrica's rule was harsh but fair — well, harsh — and all was well. But then, as if for the first time, Queen Utrica seemed to see me. Her loyal servant. Her devoted slave. The court's poisoner. And I sensed that she was troubled.

I spied her walking in the rose garden, surveying roots and seeds, vines and leaves, bulbs and berries, and I, too, was troubled.

The husk of sieved poet-brain, picked day or night, has always served me well — and Queen Utrica, it pains me to confess, died in frightful agony.

This, my friends, is an account of the six poisonings. I ask you to raise your glasses to poisoners and their melancholy profession.

(drinks) Ah. You have been counting? The fragrant Fatima. Love-lost Rosalind. Cyril, the terrible. His brother, Hector. And Utrica, my beloved Queen. That's five poisonings, you say. Let us drain our glasses and I will explain.

(drinks) Your health, friends. Your health. Flakes of baked players-tripe are odourless and tasteless in a cup of wine or ale. Your health, friends. Your health. Did I not tell you that this was a dangerous tale that can never be spoken of — or shared?

THE END