

CHAPTER ONE



August 1641

The Cottage, Hersham, Surrey.

If a Question be asked of marriage, behold the ascendant and the Lord thereof, and the Moon, and the Planet from whom the Moon is separated, and give those for the Significators of the Querent; and the seventh house, and the Lord thereof, and the Planets to whom the Moon applieth, for the Signifiers of him or her concerning whom the Question is asked.

I should introduce myself to you, dear Reader. I am William Lilly Esquire, of some thirty-nine years of age at the beginning of this chronicle. At this time I resided in a large cottage in Hersham, in the county of Surrey, and was in the midst of an unhappy second marriage – but I shall elaborate on that later. My religion, which in the era of my times defines a man, was the reformed Protestant Church of England, although my dealings in the world were more with the Papist than Protestant. And in those days, with the great schism and hatred between Catholic and Protestant growing by the day, I did strive to be as flexible as a sailor steering a boat in a storm and, in this way, keep both my life and my head.

My profession was that of Philomath, specialising in the predictive craft of horary, although I secretly practised the dexterity of the occult (the benign and learned form) as well as

performing as medic and herbalist to many of the local community. Horaries, Natal figures, seduction of reluctant lovers, the finding of lost things, and the location of errant husbands, were just some of my expertise and, as Physic and Astrologer, I was obliged to examine the urine of my clients for ailment, and so I was oft referred to as a piss prophet, to my chagrin.

We are all born with our Fates written like maps across the cosmos, but our faith and humanity give us choice. This is what I, William Lilly, believe: the Stars incline, they do not compel, and it is up to us mortals to know when to play our hand and when to fold.

I remember it was one of the last heady mornings of summer; the scent of lavender still floated over the hedgerow and the hay had not yet been cut from the stem. I had been in my chambers tending to a horary request in a half-hearted manner (it being a minor question of theft). For, dear Reader, lately my discontent had become a threatening rumble, the constant vexing of my peevish wife whittling my patience to a thin veneer. Plainly I craved adventure and the silence of the countryside, once a comfort, did now make me panic. My only escape was provided by my most munificent and ever-bountiful friend, William Pennington, who did oft summon me to London; the gentleman was my mainstay. Bold, very rich and eminent, he was a major patron of mine whom I had helped avoid charges of false paternity and several other ventures in which he was so sorely abused.

Nevertheless, here in the village my life was the slow shuffle of peasants and farmers who sought me out for such portentous events as predicting where stolen goods might be hidden, descriptions of potential spouses they are yet to meet, and the reading of men's Fates from the moles and other marks upon their bodies. Important for the 'small' man, but my talent hungered for greater challenges.

To my vexation, the pealing bells of London, the bustle and shrieking of the pedlar – even the acrid smell of the tanners – pricked at my dreams and crept into my waking day like haunting memories of opportunities lost. I yearned to have power; and the thirst to examine the *great* Questions all scholarly Astrologers wish for, the chance to give direction to the politick of the day, to save and direct powerful men to better ruling, surged up through my body like Desire, and I could quell it no longer.

The night before my restlessness had been ornamented by a dream – a vision. I confess that both my soul and conscience was plagued by this second sight of mine that oft plunged me into moral quandary and did haunt both my nights and days since I were a child. In this dream, I saw myself again in London, in mine own house upon the Strand. I were seated upon a throne, the feet of which were oozing blood, and my head did rest upon a beautiful peacock whose plumage was, most disturbingly, satin black, and what this portended I dared not imagine.

And so it was that morning I found myself at my desk, drawing up a figure, when a carriage of exquisite wood panels, pulled by horses of such breeding that it was no wonder to see the royal crest upon the cabin, rattled down the road. Staring out of the window I did hope King Charles himself might be passing through the hamlet to hunt – anything to break the tedium of this self-imposed exile. Then, to my astonishment, the coach arrived at my cottage. Convinced it must be a courier with some query he sought answer to – perhaps the tricky engagement of some by-blow to a daughter of a wealthy lord, or the outcome of an ill-advised foreign investment – I ran out to greet my city visitor.

The coachman jumped down to open the door of the carriage and I waited with trepidation as the embroidered shoe of a gentlewoman appeared upon the step, the rest of her personage following, her short cloak trimmed with fox thrown across

her shoulders, the yellow silk of her dress billowing in the breeze. To both my horror and astonishment I saw that she wore a peacock feather in her cap, and that it was black as in my dream. Nevertheless, assuming she be royalty and no sorceress, I bowed low, my hand scraping the gravel of the path.

‘You are Master William Lilly? The Astrologer and Adept?’

‘I am, my lady, and you are from London, from the Court itself?’

Stepping forward she gave me her gloved hand, and I did glance down dumbly at such a fragile thing. I was now most conscious of Jane, my wife, at the window, the heat of her gaze setting the back of my doublet ablaze. Curse the jealousy of the woman, an emotion born not of love or the desire for marital congress but of sheer spite. Many are the days I rue the lust that blinded me, an Astrologer, to her true nature during our courtship.

Jane Rowley is my second wife, a union far less happy than my first marriage, Jane being of the temperament of both Mars and Saturn: that is to say, cold, phlegmatic, argumentative and unforgiving. In marrying her I gained a portion of five hundred pounds, but in truth she is spendthrift, with many poor relations forever seeking alms. I love money as my servant – I adore it not as my master, and believe me, William Lilly will be no slave to income or to the will of any man. Jane is also a Quaker, a fact I was not aware of when courting and, as such, disapproves of my astrology and craft. This is hypocrisy most unfair, for she is still content to live off the profits of my industry.

Thinking upon my irksome marriage, I kissed the perfumed gloved hand.

‘My name is Magdalene, Lady de Morisset.’ The aristocrat’s lilting voice suggested a polished girlhood at the French Court.

‘I am here on behalf of a certain painter who works for Queen Henrietta and who, having heard of your fame, seeks the advice of the stars.’

I prickled at the mention of the Queen’s name. I was, after all, a Puritan and the Popish French royal was much vilified, amongst my ranks. But, dear Reader, I am a practical man, and pragmatism is the virtue of the survivor – and if that virtue be of many hues, so be it. Besides, there was a cast to this woman’s features that suggested Venus in Taurus – a steadfast nature but also an adorer of luxury – she was not a beauty but boasted a comeliness a muse might have: strong in feature, green eyes set wide over a patrician nose and most intelligent mouth; I decided I would trust her.

I had by this time been living in Hersham for seven years. Before that, I lived and practised in London at a house on the Strand I did inherit from my first wife, the fortune of my first marriage having allowed me the education of the Philomath. I sought out the best of teachers, but I tell you at great risk of prosecution, my skill as a people’s astrologer I had not learnt from Books, or any manuscript, but from a Cabal lodging in Astrology.

And so it came to be that, as a younger man, I began to make a living as both an Astrologer and Magician. I did learn a number of spells: how to summon angels, fairies and spirits, how to secure the hearts of the indifferent for the lovelorn, and suchlike.

More importantly I learnt how to manipulate outcomes, not just predict them.

Indeed, I was once employed by a doctor of Physic, a John Hegenius, to practise the use of talismans and dowsing rods, which I did with great effect in 1634. And I would have remained in the capital if it had not been for two incidents of magick and mystery.

The first was a search for a quantity of treasure that hath, in theory, been buried beneath the cloisters of Westminster Abbey.

I was called in, along with my partner in such magical matter, John Scott, and a gentleman called Davey Ramsey, to search with the use of divining rods the place whence this treasure could be unearthed. Followed by a disbelieving and jeering crowd we did accidentally uncover a coffin, then, after moving into the Abbey Church itself, a severe wind of most unnatural description did blow up suddenly, terrifying both ourselves and our deriders, and thinking it unhappily spirits, we did flee.

The second event was the suicide of one of my Querents by the poison Ratsbane: a young pregnant woman of lowly status, made with child by an indifferent young Lord who wanted no part of the child and was forever avoiding the said woman. I had correctly predicted where she would encounter him at a theatre box at such and such a time, and that encounter had been successful, though again the young noble made himself unreachable, and again I had predicted where his abused lover would corner the rascal, but this time she did execute her threat and swallowed the Ratsbane at his feet. These events left me afeared and greatly afflicted with the melancholia; more pressingly, rumours of my occult practices had placed me in disfavour of the Old Bailey and Parliament, and I was finally driven out of my beloved London.

These days King Charles stomps upon the ordinary man in his arrogance and taxation has become intolerable. The Monarch wages a silent war upon both Puritan and his own peoples. The capital is much changed and a far more dangerous place than whence I left.

I stared upon the awaiting coach and the urbane woman before me. Could she be the conduit to the adventure I had been craving, a chance to influence greater destinies, a sign I should return to the great city?

After ordering my wife (who, now, sensing the possibility of a wealthy Querent, hovered like a gadfly) for ale and

riddle-cakes and to make sure the horses were fed and watered I invited the noblewoman into the cottage.

Once in the privacy of my study, I questioned the mysterious visitor further.

‘Who is this painter and what does he want of me?’

‘What makes you so certain it is a he?’

‘A man would know to send a woman as yourself as the messenger – he knows how to coat the bait with honey, a woman would just send her manservant.’

At which she laughed: a full-throated chuckle, not the least becoming to her sex, and I confess I was intrigued. I am of the growing belief that Woman in some ways might be the more powerful gender – swayed by my witnessing of such female visionaries and seers. After all, the power lies not in the strength of the vessel but in the essence God pours in it.

‘My master is a mistress, and yet she is no mistress over me,’ Lady de Morisset answered with a smile.

‘You speak in riddles, like the Sphinx.’

‘And you, sir, make your living speaking in such like pretty metaphor.’

‘Based on the truth of the stars, and the stars live in Heaven, therefore I speak of a truth written by God himself.’

‘You believe our lives are written out in the skies in such exactitude that we have no race to run, and not that victory is won by man’s will alone?’

‘Faith! I think thee an inquisitor who means to trick me into a declaration of allegiance for I can see from your employment and your garb you are a Royalist, and perhaps a Catholic, whereas I am obviously not.’

‘The woman I carry the message for is a friend, and I am no woman’s or no man’s servant. My friend is indeed a great painter, an artist of our times despite her gender. Artemisia Gentileschi, the daughter of the late Orazio Gentileschi, and she is in

Greenwich in the employment of the King, finishing a great mural in the palace.'

'And it is she who wishes me to draw up a figure?'

'A horary for a particular occasion, but she will tell you more in person. You will escort me back to London this very eve.'

'I will? So, you are now my mistress and myself no longer a master of my own Fate?' I could not help but jest.

At which she cast her gaze about the room and I swear, dear Reader, in that moment it was as if I was viewing through her eyes – the drab comfort of the place, plain and a little worn in its function – the hearth and old iron spit, the heavy dark chairs and tables of an older time – one of solid purpose no more and no less. A half-played game of basset still lay upon the table, an indication of time idled away. A few books upon the shelves (my secret library being further within), the cat curled sleeping upon an embroidered stool, my wife's spinning wheel in the corner, some thread still upon it. And all I could perceive was the meagre ambition of my life spiralling into an anonymity that was surely a waste of my talent.

To my surprise, the gentlewoman took me by the arm and pulled me to the window.

'Master Lilly, what is the emblem painted on the side of the King's coach?'

'I see the royal coat of arms, a unicorn and a lion.'

'But there is something else painted upon the door, a beautiful youth with winged feet and a single golden lock falling from his forehead, waiting to be grasped as he races past. Caerus, the young god of opportunity.'

'I know of him and he has deceived me more than once,' I answered warily.

'This time he is true, Caerus only passes momentarily and if you do not grasp him he will escape this time for ever, Mr Lilly. Great talent doth not hide its light.'

‘Tis untrusting times, and I have more friends in Parliament than in the King’s Court.’

‘Artemisia and one far, far higher in status will vouch for your safety. Pack your things: we leave within the hour.’

Again, it was a command, but this time I did not argue, so I bade her wait then retreated to my study, a wood-panelled chamber lined with my many books of both magick, astrology and studies of the occult, a collection that I am proud to say hath amongst it *The Works of Guido Bonatus*, Ptolemy’s *Tetrabiblos* and even the *Commentary on Alcabitius* by Valentine Naibod. I had chased libraries of my peers, both in the occult and astrological worlds and the hunt paid dividends. Although, in the dark months before I was forced to leave London, I made it known that I had burnt these very same books, such was my terror of being branded a Wizard. Yet now the most dangerous of the tomes sat brazen on the shelves before me, like friends one could never betray.

At my desk I rolled out a blank scroll and, with the assist of a ruler and an abacus, calculated the auspices of the journey and the following day. How had my reputation – still in its infancy – reached the ear of an influential courtier? A man of law, perhaps, a whisper of a quandary solved, an auspicious time and place predicted correctly?

I finished the horary figure and studied the planetary symbols. The auspices for the journey were mainly favourable, although Mercury in Gemini, ill-aspected by Saturn, suggested caution in any communications or business transactions. Could this be the opportunity for adventure I craved? So, on balance, I instructed the maid to pack a trunk with some clothes and books. Then, despite the loud complaints from my wife, by the time the sun was shining over the thatch we had departed.

I watched Magdalene de Morisset against the velvet upholstery, the motion of the carriage making her coiffured hair and breasts

shift against the silk in the most fetching way. I found myself wrestling with the Puritan within: such a woman is the very embodiment of original sin, displaying her assets with such obvious delight. But to my confusion the intensity of her intelligence seemed to me both a paradox and a counterbalance to all that glittering splendour and in this I could not dismiss her as a whore nor as a lesser being. It was most vexing. To distract myself from such temptation, I endeavoured to gaze out of the window.

‘It has been over a year since I have visited the city.’ I spoke lightly, conscious of our touching knees. ‘My London patrons tell me it is much changed?’

‘Like a clock that is uncomfortably wound, it gets tighter,’ she answered obliquely.

‘The King has made himself unpopular. It was a mistake to have dismissed Parliament in the first place, but then to rule for so long without one . . .’

‘Eleven years. The King takes his duty most serious, sir, and we cannot forget he is the representative of God himself. Besides, he restored Parliament last year.’

‘The so-called short Parliament – appointed in April, dissolved in May. Is it any wonder the people doubt that the King really hears them, never mind the guilds and merchants? A head needs a body, legs to walk and arms to hold. The King is the head, the army and navy his arms – but the rest is his People. The ship tax is deeply unpopular, the folk are frightened about a war in Ireland and of Scotland rising and they fear the Queen’s French connections. They want England to be one faith. The King does himself no favours.’ I was shocked at my own audacity; in truth, this noblewoman summoned the younger, braver and undoubtedly rasher man in me. Was it her beauty or her intelligence that emboldened me this way? I still do not know, but I knew now that my words did allow her to

mark me for a traitor. Thankfully, she put her finger to her lip, warning me to say no more.

‘The King is an uxorious husband and has all the hallmarks of an austere and religious man. His weakness, which he shares with the Queen, is arguably that of a zeal for the patronage of the arts, but is it so sinful to want Hampton Court to rival Paris in its high culture? Surely it is for the good of the nation to have such investment in such a heritage?’ She leant forward and I could smell the scent of violets and her own musk. ‘Artemisia herself is finishing a series of extraordinary panels started by her father for Her Majesty at Greenwich palace – an allegorical piece that will inspire all who gaze upon it, from peasant to earl. And it was her great friend and paramour, Nicholas Lanier, master of the King’s music, himself a fine artist and musician, who bought van Dyck to Court, just as Lord Buckingham persuaded Rubens to grace us. I might add that Rubens’ *Crucifixion of Christ* at Denmark House is the most inspirational depiction I have ever seen,’ she concluded passionately, and I wondered if she herself was an artist.

‘That it might be, nevertheless the starving cannot eat art.’

‘But it is food for the soul.’

She slept whilst I gazed upon the passing fields and forest, reflecting upon the visit. Such a day, such an hour of significance that it made me examine the portentousness of the encounter. I stole a glance. Her hair was auburn, but in the sunlight that dappled the carriage as it moved forward it appeared blonde in parts, russet in others. Her hands anchored to long fingers, betraying sensitivity, her figure was slim and girl-like, yet there was a maturity. She looked, I wagered, like a woman whose hips had not borne a child. She appeared to be around twenty-eight years in age, against my own thirty-eight, and yet it was as if I had known her from an earlier time. So overpowering was this familiarity I decided that it was the sole

reason I, a cautious man, had lowered my guard and spoken so bluntly, courting the politics of the scaffold by doing so. What manner of magick was this?

Just then, the coach came to a sudden stop, jolting me from my seat. Outside, the air was full of men shouting as Magdalene, thrown toward me, grasped my arm. ‘What’s this? Are we at the inn already?’

At this time there were large numbers of rogues and beggars lurking in the countryside, to the great terror of the traveller. Exploitation by the wealthy of both worker and peasant had made two Englands – one blind to the other. Sensing danger, I drew Magdalene from the window, indicating that she should keep silent.

I pulled the curtain aside: a group of men in the plain robes of the Puritan had blocked the path with an old wooden cart. There were four of them, two carrying hoes, the other two with swords on their hip. The coachman appeared to be trying to reason with them.

I immediately took off my purse, bidding Magdalene to do the same, then hid them between the cushions of the coach. A moment later the door was yanked open.

‘Good sir and Madam, pray descend so that we may gauge the cut of your cloth.’ The man, in his twenties, spoke with the local accent, and yet I did not recognise him. Hoping to protect my companion I climbed out first.

‘We are unarmed and on an errand of a personal nature,’ I declared, now wishing I had packed my dagger upon my person.

There were four of them, two younger and two older. Only one looked to have soldiering skills, the others had the cast of the farmer about them. It was an odd encounter, and they were not of the appearance of the usual highwaymen. Nevertheless, there were four of them and three of us, and although the coachman bore weapons I saw, with failing heart, he was restrained by one of the men.

‘I am a local man and you have no business with this gentlewoman,’ I urged as Magdalene stepped down, all eyes upon her.

‘A local man, in a coach that hath the royal crest upon it?’ The leader who addressed us spat upon the ground in disgust.

‘A Surrey man and one of plain prayer, as you can see of my attire,’ I insisted, hoping to draw their attention to myself and away from the young aristocrat, whose proud bearing I feared did her no favours.

‘Then what are you doing with this Royalist whore?’ The youngest, whose pockmarked face betrayed a mean and vicious nature, lurched forward. I flinched, fearing they meant to violate Magdalene, but she stood her ground and met their gaze with a defiance that, after a coiled moment, engendered embarrassment in the men like a tiny flame licking tinder.

‘I am no man’s whore, good sirs, but it is also true I am no man.’ She spoke in a steady voice. ‘So if you wish to assault me, pray do it knowing I am not the King’s property, I am my own woman, with my own politick. Assault me and you assault all womanhood, but not the King. If you wish to take that burden upon your righteous shoulders I shall lie myself down upon the grassy knell yonder.’

Faith, I was impressed, she had the courage of a bull and the wit of a lawyer.

Now the men, shifty about their feet, looked abashed. Finally, the leader spoke.

‘But the coach is of the palace?’

‘She was sent to fetch me, and I, Brother, am both godly and straight.’ Again, I stepped between the men and Magdalene, tugging on my white collar as an indication of my Puritan ways. ‘I am Master William Lilly, of Hershams.’

‘I’ve heard of thee. Thou art the Astrologer, a great predictor of happenings; you told my aunt where her favourite breeding

ewe had gone wanderin’,’ the youngest piped up, his face broken by a greening smile.

‘And did she find it?’

‘Aye, she did. So now the King calls for thee – maybe he’s lost some sheep?’

The others laughed, and again I felt the tide turning. If we were to travel safely on I had to act quickly and most cleverly.

‘If he has, he is bringing forth the right man, but I fear he had lost a lot more than sheep these past years . . .’ At this the air grew very tight indeed, our Fate dancing upon the whim of the moment. ‘He hath made enemies of three goodly men in our Puritan leaders Prynne, Burton and Bastwick, and now courts a dangerous fortune. King Charles’ stars and blessings are mixed indeed.’

There followed a short silence in which a cow bellowed in a nearby field, and a bumblebee, attracted to the yellow, danced before my lady’s silk skirts.

Finally the leader pulled open the coach door. ‘On your way, good sir and Madam,’ and turning to the lad holding the coachman, ‘Jack, let the coachman to his post.’

Greatly relieved, I helped Magdalene back into the carriage, but as I was about to ascend the leader pulled me toward him.

‘Master Lilly, you tell the King he must stop bleeding the people. No more taxes, for army or ship – I have five children, two of which have died of hunger. We have no land of our own, yet each year the squire takes more and more. You tell him, Brother, the people must have a voice.’

And so, with these words resounding in my head, we continued toward London, that cornucopia of life and chance.