



'Full of twists and turns'
EVENING STANDARD

'Gripping'
SUNDAY EXPRESS

THE ART OF DYING

'Victorian Edinburgh comes
vividly alive – and it's a world of pain'
VAL McDERMID

AMBROSE PARRY



THE ART
OF DYING



AMBROSE
PARRY



CANONGATE

Also by Ambrose Parry

The Way of All Flesh

PROLOGUE



There is not a woman in this realm who does not understand what it is to be afraid. No, not even she who reigns over us, for she was not born sovereign. She was born a girl, and that is why I can be sure that even she has known the fear and the helplessness of being subject to man's dominion. Every woman has felt the fear that derives from her own weakness before men whose greater power derives from a stature that is not merely physical.

Many men have held power over me. They were not great men. Oftentimes they were not even strong men. For in this world, you need be neither of those things to exercise your will upon the weak and helpless. Or at least upon those who have come to believe that they are weak and helpless.

In my life I have learned much about treachery and deceit, but surely the cowardliest trick of all is that of persuading someone that they have no power when you know the opposite to be true.

In order to survive, it is thus vital that a woman should learn to assuage her fear; she must recognise and harness her power. But this must be done with subtlety. Without intimidation. Without overt threat. It is the lot of remarkable women that the world will not know our names: that we might not take the true

plaudits for our achievements, though they outstrip the deeds of men.

We must exercise our power unseen. As women we may not venture forth alone beyond the dusk, but I do not speak of time when I suggest that we must operate in the twilight. I speak of the interstices, the places in between darkness and light, the blind spots in men's vision.

You wish to know how I could have done what I did, how I could have taken so many lives without arousing the merest suspicion. The answer lies within yourselves. It is easy to hide in the plain sight of those who do not consider your presence worthy of notice.

1849

BERLIN

ONE



He could feel warm blood upon his face. He could see blood upon steel, upon cloth, upon the walls and upon the ground. But what mattered was that blood still pumped beneath his breast.

Will Raven caught his breath and steadied himself. He heard footsteps slapping the flagstones as his assailants disappeared into the darkness of the winding passage, the sound slightly muffled by the shot still ringing in his ears. There were sweet smells on the breeze, a bakery preparing its pastries for the morning's sale. Such warmth in the night air had seduced him into dropping his guard. He would not have walked so freely under darkness in Edinburgh, where even on the most drunken night he remained soberly alert to what might lie around every corner. Here in Prussia that vigilance had become distracted by how different the place felt.

They had been attacked as they walked down Konigstrasse, a broad avenue leading from the expanse of Alexanderplatz across the Spree to the Konigliche Schloss. A castle in the centre of the city was at once a reminder of where he had come from and a stark illustration of his distance from it. With its striking green cupola and rigid geometry, it was hard to imagine a more vivid contrast to the grim barracks atop the old volcano at the end of

the High Street back home. But even here, the widest avenues were still transected by dark and narrow passageways, and it appeared that what lurked there was the same the world over.

Three masked men had set upon them, emerging from the shadows where they had lain in wait. One of them demanded money. His German had been strangely accented but the instruction was clear enough. However, one of his comrades had evidently decided it would be easier to raid the pockets of the dead. A pistol was drawn and everything thereafter was a blur.

Fate had turned upon a single stroke of a knife. Few surgeons could boast of such an outcome. This thought passed in a fleeting moment of relief before he was overtaken by a terrifying new fear: that there would be yet a greater price to pay for cheating his destiny.

Raven was a man haunted by the premonition that he would die by violent hands in just such a dark and squalid alley. It was a vision born in Edinburgh on a cold, wet night in 1847, two years before, when he believed he was about to meet his end. He had survived, but the vision had haunted him ever since; not so much out of a fear of death, but of not having made something of his life. He worried that it was a path he was fitted for: that his high aspirations were mere delusion, and that in his essence he was the kind of man who *would* end up dead in an alley.

He turned and looked to the mouth of the passage. He could see Henry slumped against the wall, half visible beneath the light of a street lamp. It felt like the report was still bouncing back and forth between the walls, but really it was just bouncing around inside his skull. His memory of the last few moments was a blur. He recalled the familiar crunch of fist upon bone, Henry being spun by a punch and his head striking the wall. The raising of a pistol; Raven lunging to deflect the arm that held it. A gunshot. Then they had run, and Raven had chased.

Raven hurried to his fallen friend and crouched before him. He lifted his chin to look at his face, upon which blood was

running in streams. Happily, his eyes were open, though not exhibiting their usual focused scrutiny.

‘Where are they?’ Henry asked.

‘Fled. Are you hurt? Your face is bloody.’

‘I could say the same. This is just a scalp wound. They bleed out of all proportion. Think I struck my leg on something on the way down, though. That hurts more. What about the ladies?’

Raven looked down the street, where he saw Liselotte and Gabriela by a fountain on Schlossplatz. He had yelled at them to run when the attack started, but they hadn’t got far. These things were always over far quicker than one realised. Events that seem an hour’s battle pass in the blink of an eye to those merely observing. They had stopped and were looking back towards where Henry had fallen.

Raven attempted to help him to his feet, at which point Henry howled.

‘Gods!’

They both looked down, seeing a glistening darkness on Henry’s thigh. Instinctively Raven put a hand to it, whereupon Henry howled twice as loud.

‘I think you’ve been shot.’

Henry’s expression was a mixture of pain and confusion.

‘How did he manage to shoot me in the front of the thigh? I had my back to him and was in the process of bouncing face-first off the wall when he pulled the trigger.’

‘An unfortunate ricochet,’ Raven replied, conscious that it could have been so much worse. He was sure the coward holding the pistol had been aiming for Gabriela when Raven grabbed his arm.

Liselotte and Gabriela had hurried back to assist, concern on both their faces.

‘We heard the shot,’ Gabriela said. ‘Which of you was hit?’

Raven looked at her quizzically, thinking the answer obvious: the one who is bleeding. Then he put a hand to his face. There

was blood spattered upon it, and all over the sleeve of his right arm.

‘This is Henry’s,’ he told her. Not entirely the truth, nor entirely a lie. ‘He was struck in the leg.’

‘We must get him to a surgeon,’ Liselotte said, urgency in her tone.

‘I *am* a surgeon,’ Henry reminded her. ‘Just get me back to Schloss Wolfburg and I can assess the damage.’

Raven ripped off the bloodied sleeve of his shirt and tied it tight around Henry’s thigh to staunch the flow. With support on either side he was able to hobble on one leg. They were not far from the apartments they shared on Jagerstrasse.

They had been on their way back there when they were set upon. Perhaps they had been assumed to be rich travellers from overseas. If so, Raven would accept it as a compliment that someone thought he looked sufficiently respectable, but though they were travellers from overseas, he and Henry were anything but rich. They were studying at the Charité Hospital and had been there for two months, following a stay in Leipzig. Before that they had been in London, Paris and Vienna.

Raven opened the door to the apartments and began lighting the lamps as Liselotte and Gabriela helped Henry inside.

‘Get him to the bedroom,’ Liselotte urged.

‘Words spoken with a familiar insistence,’ Raven said with measured impropriety.

Liselotte tutted. She had been around them long enough not to expect better.

In truth, after what had just happened, Raven wasn’t feeling inclined to give rein to his impish nature, but he wished to keep his friend’s spirits up.

‘No,’ Henry objected. ‘The light is better here. And I need to sit up.’

They helped him to a couch by the fireplace in the central room.

‘Bring in all the lamps.’

Henry let out an agonised moan as Raven pulled off his trousers, the pain starting to overwhelm him. Shock and urgency had muffled the worst of it at first, but now he was being spared nothing.

Henry examined the wound, probing with delicate fingers. He looked at Raven, who was holding a lamp over his thigh.

‘The ball did not go through. It’s not deep but it’s stuck in there.’

He was wincing with every word. Sweating. Raven knew what was coming; had known since they discovered the wound.

‘I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to oblige me, old friend.’

‘Ah, but what is it your esteemed Professor Syme maintains? Obstetricians ought not to be carrying out surgery.’

‘And how does your esteemed Professor Simpson counter? We are all licentiates of the Royal College of Surgeons, are we not?’

‘Very well. It would appear that I have little choice in the matter.’

Henry lay back upon the couch, resting his head, then let out another groan.

‘What? I haven’t even started yet.’

‘I just remembered I left my instruments at the hospital. Do you have your own?’

Raven masked his feelings with a smile as he patted the pocket of his coat, inside which sat his knife.

‘And more importantly, do you have chloroform?’

‘No. You’ll just have to tolerate it.’

Raven was echoing the words Henry once used when he had been called upon to stitch Raven’s cheek. His hand went to the scar as he spoke, by way of reminding him. Henry looked despondent.

‘I jest,’ Raven said. ‘Gabriela, would you fetch my bag from the bedroom?’

‘Thank you,’ said Henry. ‘It’s not so much for the pain, as to

spare me the greater agony of witnessing your ham-fisted butchery upon my leg.’

‘Oh, don’t be so precious. You have another.’

Raven pulled the knife from his pocket. Henry’s eyes were immediately drawn to the blade, noticing that it was blood-smeared. Raven hoped that in his delirium he did not think to wonder how.

‘I hope you’re going to wash that thing first. Remember Semmelweis.’

Henry was referring to a doctor he had spoken to in Vienna. Semmelweis had published a paper examining the far higher death rate of maternity patients on a ward staffed by medical students compared to one staffed by midwives. He maintained that this was because the students were coming directly from the dissection room without washing their hands, postulating that morbid material was being transferred from the students to the patients. When he made the students wash their hands in chlorinated water, the death rate went down. Despite this, Semmelweis was having difficulty convincing his colleagues that he was right and was venting his frustrations at anyone who would listen. Henry had proven a sympathetic ear.

Raven did not need to be lectured on this subject. For years Simpson had been teaching his students that puerperal fever was a disease transmitted from one patient to another via the attending doctor or midwife.

He bade Liselotte fill some jugs with water and tear up some sheets to make bandages. While she obliged, Raven prepared the chloroform, asking Gabriela to pay close attention in case he required her to administer more while he worked on Henry’s leg.

Raven shaped a small piece of muslin into a cone and proceeded to carefully angle the bottle so that the liquid fell onto the cloth in small drips. He could not help but think of how Dr Simpson’s discovery had preceded him on all his travels. Chloroform was transforming surgery, its use spreading fast. In London he had

heard John Snow lecture on the importance of precision and control in the dosage. Raven had then witnessed him demonstrate his vaporiser device, invented for the purpose of administering a quantifiable amount of chloroform. Tonight in Berlin he would be relying on an untrained assistant dropping the liquid from a bottle in poor light, and all of them half drunk.

‘The drops must be small,’ he stressed to Gabriela. ‘So that he does not inhale too much.’

‘Right now I’m concerned with inhaling too little.’

Raven held the cone above Henry’s face.

‘And take care not to let it touch his skin. It is an irritant and apt to leave a mark.’

‘Much like yourself,’ Henry added pointedly. He was of the belief that Raven had a gift for attracting trouble.

‘I had no role in bringing down those men upon us.’

‘And once again, here I am, in your company in the bloody aftermath of a fight.’

‘Maybe you are the one who courts mayhem and you are merely fortunate to have me on hand to assist. Have you thought of it that way?’

‘Not once. But often have I said you’d be the death of me.’

Raven searched his memory.

‘You have never once said that.’

‘No,’ he admitted, ‘but I must have thought it. So please prove me wrong. And don’t forget to wash the knife.’

Raven dripped more chloroform into the cone and bade Gabriela hold the muslin while he poured water over the blade. He watched the blood dilute and run from the steel, trickling into the dish he had placed below.

He thought of something Gabriela had told him about her former home in Madrid. She had grown up in a place called Lavapies. It was at the foot of a hill, where the rainwater from the city had flowed down its carefully maintained gutters for centuries. People would wash their feet there, hence the name.

Unfortunately, there was only so much that mere water could wash away.

Raven cleared his mind, hoping the wine he had imbibed served to steady his nerve rather than tremble his hand. He tentatively touched the area around the wound. Then with the lack of a response from Henry confirming that he was unconscious, he was able to feel for the hard lump where the ball was lodged.

Upon his instruction, Liselotte drizzled water from a cloth to gently wash the blood away as Raven made a small incision. Mercifully, the shot had not struck any of the major blood vessels, though it had been perilously close to the femoral artery. The difference between life and death on this occasion was less than half an inch.

Raven tugged the ball free with a pair of tongs. He was about to discard it but decided that Henry might like it as a memento.

Liselotte drizzled more water to clean out the wound, her face intent upon the task.

The blood and water were soaking into the fabric beneath Henry as Raven commenced his suturing. He tried not to think what their terrifying landlord, Herr Wolfburg, would make of the staining to his couch.

Henry came to a short while later, blinking and groaning. Gabriela looked to Raven, ready with more chloroform, but Henry was awake enough to refuse her.

‘Thank you, my dear, but I am impatient to survey Raven’s handiwork.’ He grimaced. ‘Gods, it looks like a pigskin football.’

Then he offered Raven a smile.

‘I jest. Neatly done, old friend. You have my gratitude. Now, if you don’t consider it rude after your considerable endeavours, it is my firm intention to lapse into unconsciousness, which will not require the assistance of your chloroform. If it turns out I am not dead in the morning, please do make sure I am roused by eight. Langenbeck is giving a lecture on battlefield amputations at nine and I do not wish to miss it.’

TWO



‘That was very courageous, what you did,’ said Gabriela. It was the first either had spoken since they fell upon each other.

They lay upon Raven’s bed, tired, languorous, yet far from sleep. Liselotte had stayed with Henry, ministering to him overnight, although not in the way she had perhaps intended some hours ago. For Raven and Gabriela, however, the proximity to danger had produced an unexpected amorousness; morbid fear transmuted into passion.

Raven had known her for several weeks, having been introduced at a dinner hosted by the Charité’s prosector, Dr Virchow. Although he was head of the pathology department at the hospital, Virchow had an interest in obstetrics and therefore an interest in Raven, who, despite his lowly status, had worked as an apprentice to the famous Professor Simpson. Everyone was keen to know more about the great man and his remarkable discovery. Gabriela was a friend of Rose Mayer, soon to be Virchow’s wife. She had shown little interest in what Raven had to say about chloroform but became considerably more attentive when he mentioned his experience with the Edinburgh photography pioneers David Octavius Hill and the late Robert Adamson.

Gabriela was a slight woman with dark eyes and dark hair,

curls loosely swept up, always at imminent risk of unfurling. He was constantly struck by the contrast with the women at home, their hair pulled rigidly into place, their skin so pale. It was not merely their appearance that seemed constrained by comparison. Fifteen years Raven's senior, Gabriela was a writer, artist and sometime artist's model who had some years ago outraged her wealthy family by leaving her aristocratic husband. She was not a woman prepared to be bound by convention, which both excited Raven and yet made him wary of her. They both knew their relationship was not something that could last: its very transience, no doubt, was part of the allure. Neither would have sought the other out as a suitable partner otherwise.

Raven looked at her in the light of the candles she had placed around the bed, jammed into the necks of wax-encrusted bottles.

'I have performed surgical procedures before. Surgery, however, is not my primary area of interest. The courage was Henry's in entrusting me with the task.'

'No, I mean how you fought off those men who tried to rob us. There were three of them and you faced them alone, knowing one of them had a pistol.'

Could he detect an edge to what she was saying? One of the things that made him wary of Gabriela was the fear that she had the wisdom and experience to see through him to the truth of what he might conceal.

'I wagered he would not have time to reload it.'

'Something of a high-stakes wager.'

Raven looked away, fearing what more his expression might involuntarily disclose, specifically that his wager had been wrong. He opted for a playful response instead, as though making light of it.

'I would have given them money had we any to offer. Having drunk it all, there seemed little option but to fight them off. I think it unlikely they would have accepted our apologies in the absence of payment.'

‘Nonetheless, three on one is not a fair contest, yet you did not shrink from it.’

‘It was not my first brawl, if that is what you are implying. I have the experience to know that those who prey upon the weak and unsuspecting do not always rise to the challenge when faced with a real fight.’

‘You placed a high-stakes wager on that too.’

Raven said nothing. His gaze was drawn to the letter that lay by his bed, to which he still had not replied. Dr George Keith was leaving 52 Queen Street to set up practice with his brother Thomas, and Professor Simpson was offering Raven the position of his new assistant. He was fully qualified now, an apprentice no more, and in his year abroad he had expanded his medical knowledge more than he would have thought possible in such a short space of time.

And yet.

He thought of what Henry had often intimated regarding his ‘perverse appetite for mayhem’, as he put it. Moreover, he had his mother’s words echoing in his head, spoken sometimes in jest, sometimes in earnest.

You have the devil in you.

Raven had come to hope that was no longer true. He had not been involved in any such chaos for a long time, certainly not since leaving Edinburgh, and thought it was because he had tamed his nature. He wondered now whether it was merely that the opportunity had not arisen. When bidden tonight, the devil had roused itself, proving it was not dead but merely sleeping. And back in that alley a man had paid for disturbing its slumber.

Gabriela placed a hand upon his shoulder.

‘Remember me?’ she said.

‘I’m sorry. My mind strayed. Thinking about Henry.’

She laughed. ‘Your mind strayed much further than the next room. Do not take me for a fool, Raven. I have been with you many times, remember? Whenever we lie together, afterwards you are not here.’

It would be folly to deny it. Certainly not to her.

‘You are somewhere distant, in the company of someone else. I have always wondered who she is.’

He wanted to say that it was a more complex matter than that, but he did not wish to encourage further scrutiny. She was older than him, wiser than him, and he feared there was little he could hide from her. He wondered, then, why he wished to.

Raven thought about the men Gabriela must have had before him. He did not contemplate it in a way that was jealous or disapproving. Rather, he wondered what version of herself she had presented to each of them. He wondered at the lives with which she had intersected, the many people she had been.

‘Gabriela, you have lived in several different places, uprooted yourself and started again. Is it possible to become someone else, to create yourself anew? Or do you always bring with you the person you truly are?’

Gabriela traced a finger across Raven’s chest.

‘I think the question you must ask is who it is you wish to become. Do you even know?’

‘I wish to be a successful medical practitioner. Respected by my peers and sought after by patients.’

‘Why would you need to change yourself in order to do that? It is everything you have been educating yourself for.’

‘Yes, but in Edinburgh the standards and expectations are so high, and I fear I will betray myself somehow. It is a place where reputation is everything.’

Gabriela raised an eyebrow and stared intently at him.

‘You would speak to a woman such as myself about reputation? If you had any notion of the disdain to which I have been subject . . . ?’

‘But that is why I ask. Can you truly become the person society expects? Or is it always a matter of wearing a mask to hide your flawed nature?’

Gabriela considered this a while before answering.

‘If you wear it long enough, a mask will become a comfortable fit. But you risk losing the man behind it.’

Raven thought it sounded a price worth paying.

‘I have been to London, Paris, Vienna, Leipzig, and now Berlin. I have studied at great institutions, learned at the hands of great men. I should feel transformed, and yet in many respects I fear I have not changed at all. I thought that the more I learned, the more I experienced of the world, the more of a man I would become. I thought that I would feel certain of myself. But instead I feel as though the world just keeps getting larger and I am not growing to meet it.’

Gabriela nodded, giving him a sympathetic look that was at once comforting and yet made him feel like a child.

‘I suspect that you have journeyed long enough, Will Raven. If you have become lost, there is only one place you can be sure to find yourself.’