

Outliers – Stories from the edge of history

Season Two, Episode Eight

Empty Barrels

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February 1540 – Palace of Whitehall

Robert:

It was cold, always too cold. It did not matter how much firewood I piled onto the grate from the meagre stock allocated to my cell of an office, it burned away far too quickly and soon enough the room would feel like ice once more.

I blew my nose, loudly, in the hope that my master Sir Thomas Heneage, ensconced in the larger, warmer room next door might hear. It was said his Majesty's Palace of Whitehall was the largest in Europe, it was almost certainly the draftiest.

On the Thames below my office, a throng of barges passed by in the half light. As I rubbed my hands together for warmth, I watched a squat barge laden with barrels approach the palace stairs. Several cellar-men stood ready to unload the new barrels and replace them with used ones. The new barrels would be taken to the king's wine cellar, and the old ones...well all I knew was they went across the river to Lambeth. What happened to them there was a mystery. What use were empty barrels anyway?



As for the new ones, well the king liked his wine. Each year he and his court drank three hundred barrels of the stuff. I knew because it was my job to pay for them.

You see Sir Thomas, my master, was Groom of the Stool to His Majesty King Henry the Eighth, which meant that he was, in theory at least, responsible for wiping the king's arse. In truth, he was the king's trusted confidante, his personal treasurer and the man who all but ran the kingdom's finances, all of which suggested it most unlikely that he did actually wipe the royal backside - at least not on a regular basis.

As for wine, I could have done with a cup myself: warmed and sweetened with sugar and spice, and preferably served by Jane, the maid who worked in the wine cellars. She always had a smile reserved for me, even on the coldest of days.

My reverie was interrupted by a heavy knock which rattled the door on its hinges

'Enter.'

The door opened and in sidled the thick frame of Francis Grey, my junior clerk.

'Yes?' I asked, more than a little unhappy at the intrusion.

'The latest batch of artefacts has arrived, sir,' he said, bowing obsequiously.

He straightened and grinned: his few remaining teeth standing out like crooked old gravestones.

'Fresh from some monastery in the south west. A most valuable haul if I may say, sir: one and a half tonnes of gilt and treasure.'

'Very well,' I said. 'You have the inventory?'



He produced a square of yellowed paper.

‘Everything’s in the vault beyond the wine cellars.’

I thanked him, then ordered him from the room.

Grey bowed low once more, then turned and left. As the door shut, I gave a shiver, glad to see the back of him. The man was a snake: with a nose for intrigue and a tongue that oft dripped venom. If he had one redeeming feature, it was that he was my snake, ready to do my bidding no matter how distasteful.

And the job was often distasteful. It entailed cataloguing and allocating all of the wealth sequestered from the abbeys and monasteries that had been dissolved upon the king’s orders: all the gold, silver, relics and other holy items that either had value or were seen as despicable papistry by the advocates of the protestant faith. My master would then decide what would remain in the king’s treasury and what would be given to his courtiers to be frittered away.

I had, at first, considered the process to be good and just. His Majesty had decreed that the money be used to build schools, and the lands given to those who needed it, but as time went on, the king had granted it to his flatterers or squandered it waging war on the French. Still, the work was my duty, and I sought to see it conducted efficiently, no matter how unsavoury.

All that changed as I glanced down at the inventory Grey had left on my desk. At the bottom, as usual, was the fat waxy seal of Thomas Cromwell, chief minister to the king. But it was the top of the page which caught my eye. There, in the scratchy handwriting of some clerk in the Court of Augmentations, was written:



'Items sequestered from the abbey of the Benedictines at Buckfastleigh at Dartmoor'

I took a breath. I knew Buckfastleigh, had grown up close by the monastery and attended mass there at Christmas and Easter. I remembered the hymns, the monks' voices raised to the heavens in unison as though the angels themselves were singing. Most of all though, I remembered an old monk called Pembroke: frail, with skin thin like parchment. He had taught me to read, pointing to the intricate letters of the Holy Book with a jewel encrusted golden pointer.

I read down the inventory, the dry words belying the treasures they described, and was suddenly keen to see those magnificent artefacts once more. Given the lateness of the hour, I'd usually wait till morning to check off the items against the inventory, but instead I picked up my ledger, quill and ink pot and stuffed them into my satchel.

I made my way down the stairs of the counting house, into the rain-lashed near-darkness and through the labyrinth of lodgings and apartments that comprised this section of the Palace of Whitehall.

Not so long ago, the whole lot had belonged to the late Cardinal Wolsey. He had fallen from the king's favour on failing to obtain a papal decree of divorce from Henry's first wife, Catherine of Aragon. So Wolsey had lost his house, and then his life, and since then, much of the palace was a scaffold-scarred building site as the king sought to model it to his own meretricious tastes.



Now, in the grim air of a detestable February evening, I walked through the courtyards to the windowless building which was used by the Court of Augmentations as a vault. Here the treasures from the monasteries would be stored before being assessed to be parcelled up or melted down. With a nod to the two thickset guards who stood either side I entered.

The room was dark, lit only by feeble flames from a few candles; the air dank, though tinged with the fragrance of centuries of incense which clung to the monks' treasures like a faded memory. I inhaled the familiar scent and was suddenly transported back to Dartmoor.

The artefacts: the golden altar goods, the silver plate and communion cups, the tapestries, the bones of saints; all had been stored in one corner, smaller items thrown randomly into hessian sacks, the larger ones, piled unceremoniously on the floor.

Grabbing a sack, I hauled it closer to the candlelight and began to search. Within it were a stack of illuminated manuscripts, a golden locket containing the ashes of St Oswald, and lastly the hair shirt of Sir Thomas More. I dismissed these and kept searching, and it was only on opening the third sack that I found what I'd been looking for. There, among the assorted texts was the golden pointer and the great, gilt-edged Bible from which the monk, Pembroke had taught me.

With trembling fingers, I opened it and gazed upon the intricate lettering, the beautiful images, and suddenly felt myself overcome with a humour which could only be described as madness. In an instant, I'd extracted the ledger from my satchel and ripped most of the pages from the covers, leaving but a



few in place. Between these I placed the great Bible of the Abbey of Buckfastleigh, before stuffing the package and the now naked sheaves back into my bag.

Into my boot I slipped the golden pointer and moments later, with my heart racing, I walked out, pulling the door firmly behind me. With a nod to the guards I began to pace quickly away.

‘Wait!’ called one.

Cold sweat trickled down my back. With blood rushing to my ears, I turned around slowly, prepared for the worst.

‘You couldn’t fetch us a drink, could you, friend?’ he asked. ‘It is devilish cold tonight.’

‘Of...of course,’ I stammered.

In a daze I started in the direction of the tavern established for the workmen and clerks of the palace. There, I could ask one of the maids to take the guards a jug of mulled wine, but more importantly contemplate the folly upon which I seemed to have embarked. Besides, Jane, the maid with the sweet smile might be there, and I felt the sight of her might help restore me to some form of sanity.

I entered the warmth of the low-ceilinged room, ordered a jug to be taken to the guards, and sat down at a bench against the far wall. To my delight, it was Jane who came over.

‘A cup of wine, Jane.’

On another day I might have waylaid her a while in conversation, but presently, my thoughts were too addled for such fripperies.



She returned within minutes.

‘There you go, my love. Anythin’ else you’d be wantin’?’

I thanked her and told her that was all for the present. She seemed disappointed but said nothing and returned to her work. I gulped down the wine, then asked for another, and another as I contemplated the treason I’d committed.

It was madness of course. Theft of the king’s property, even a thimble, was punishable by death. I felt the chill of the grave close in around me. The sensible thing to do would be to return what I’d stolen immediately. Yet sight of the great Bible and pointer that now rested among my possessions, had instilled a fervour within me - not religious, nor avaricious - but something else. These items were worth more to me than their holy words or their gems and precious metal. They had helped make me the man I was, the man I could be, and I realised I would never be able to let them fall into the hands of those who would burn them, or sell them. I would not. I could not.

I drank, and the wine helped to calm my frayed nerves. I would have to hatch a plan, not only to extract the items from the palace, but more importantly to cover my tracks. There was, you see, the matter of the inventory with Cromwell’s seal at the bottom. His men would return in the morning, the list would be scrutinised, and any discrepancy investigated.

An hour later, I was still there, wallowing in despair. I had never before stayed in the tavern so long, and Jane, I realised, was watching me, no doubt concerned as to my odd behaviour. As I caught her eye, she walked over.

‘Are you sure you’re alright, Master Philips?’



I felt the overwhelming desire to unburden myself but instead I thanked her for her kindness. I refused to place her in jeopardy for my foolishness.

With that, I rose, made for the door and stepped into the cold night air. As I crossed the yard, I turned in the direction of the store room. The guards still stood there sheltering in an alcove, but something else caught my eye. For a moment I thought I saw the figure of Francis Grey, watching me. Then he disappeared into the shadows.

A black fear gripped me as I stumbled back to my office. I told myself to be calm. There was no way Grey could know what I'd done...Was there? Either way I had to act now.

Back at my desk, I hid the items in a chest, then began drawing up a new inventory excluding the items that I had liberated. I tried my best to approximate the handwriting. The seal however, was another matter. I did not have access to Lord Cromwell's seal and there was no way to forge it. Instead I did the next best thing.

I crept into my master's office, and in the ghostly light of a full moon, made my way to the drawer in which I knew he kept his seal. I returned to my room and as quickly as I was able, I melted a disc of red wax onto the parchment, then impressed it. I wiped it clean then returned it to its rightful home, then placed the new inventory on top of the original and locked both in my desk drawer.

By now, the hour was late. A combination of fear and probably wine had left me exhausted. I sat back in my chair, rubbing my eyes, and attempted to set my mind to the problem of getting the items out of the palace gates undetected.



I awoke with a start to the sound of banging at my door. Aghast, I realised it was daylight. I cursed myself for my utter stupidity. Before I could gather my wits, a scrawny lad of no more than fifteen entered. Hastily, he passed me a note. It was from Jane. She had overheard that rat Grey speaking to the guards, questioning them as to my movements.

It appeared my fears had been justified. The snake had seen me return from the vault and enter Sir Thomas's office, and this morning he'd decided to conduct his own enquiry.

Whatever Jane's reasons for helping me were, her warning might have provided me the only chance I had for escape. If Grey and the guards searched my office now, I was a dead man.

My gut reaction was to flee. But running would mark me as guilty, besides the king's men could find me anywhere. Instead, I took a breath and forced myself to keep calm. Thanks to Jane, I still had time. What mattered now were the relics. There was only one thing for it. I had to get rid of them. But how?

There came a commotion from the courtyard below. Opening the door a crack, I peered into the corridor. Grey was at Heneage's door, requesting an audience. My head spinning, I collapsed into a chair. Grey had moved faster than I had expected. I knew I had mere minutes before he burst in and found the missing relics. Escape now was impossible. Grey would have informed the guards to stop me should I try to flee. I knew, because that's what I would have done.

There was only one thing for it. I walked over to the window and opened it. The angry Thames flowed directly below. From the chest, I extracted the satchel containing the pointer and the Bible, and made to hurl the bag into the river.

I stopped.



I could not do it.

Could not bring myself to destroy those precious objects. I was trapped. My throat rasped.

Good lord, I needed a drink. Wrenching open my door, I shouted for the servant boy to fetch wine.

I was back at the window when it arrived but instead of the boy, Jane was standing there with a tray. In all my time at the palace I had never seen her outside of the tavern. Maybe the Lord was granting me a final wish. She placed a jug on the table, concern writ large on her face.

‘Is there anything else I can do for you, Master Phillips?’

I shook my head. ‘Bless you, Jane, but I think it is too late for me. Matters are too far gone.’

I was about to close the window and return to my desk, when something caught my eye. I could not help but cry out.

The noise startled her.

‘Are you alright, Master Philips?’ she asked.

Outside I heard a door open and Grey’s voice, raised in triumph. I heard him running down the stairs.

‘Maybe there is one last thing you could do for me Jane.’

She had left when Grey and his guards burst in.

‘What’s the meaning of this?’ I blustered, summoning up reserves of false outrage.

‘Papists!’, spat Grey. ‘A plot to steal the king’s rightfully seized treasure!’

I tried to sound incredulous. ‘And so you come bursting in here?’



Grey shot me a look of contempt. 'Sir Thomas has ordered all the offices of the counting house to be searched. Anyone found harbouring the king's property is to be taken to the Tower. Now where's the inventory?'

I made a show of retrieving the forged list from my drawer, unfolded it and handed it to him. He scanned it quickly, neglecting, in his haste, to examine the seal at the bottom, while in the grate beside him, the original list was burning to ashes. As his men began to tear my office apart, I stood with my back to them, staring out of the window.

Finally, they reached my chest, opened it and extracted the contents, examining them carefully, poring over each item. I closed my eyes and uttered a prayer to the Lord.

After what seemed like an eternity, one of the men called out. 'There's nothing here.'

Grey looked crestfallen.

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Search again!'

His men did so, and of course found nothing. Reluctantly Grey gave the order to move on.

They left and suddenly the air in the room seemed foul. I made for the window, gulping great lung-fulls of fresh air.

On the quayside, the cellar men were pushing empty wine barrels to the dock to load onto a waiting barge. Grey's men were searching all the people coming and going. I watched as



the final barrel was loaded, then saw Jane approach. I held my breath as she was searched thoroughly by Grey's men.

She was allowed to proceed onto the barge and, as it set off across the river, I breathed a sigh of relief. If Jane had done as I had asked, one of those old wine barrels on the barge now contained some of the treasures of Buckfast Abbey. Soon it would make its way to a school upriver in Oxford. At least then the bible and pointer would be of some use in the teaching of young boys.

The day before I'd stood here and asked myself what use empty barrels were.

Well now I certainly had my answer.

