

## The Most Dangerous People in the World.

He had travelled far.

By ship across the Narrow Sea to Haarlem, sharing sleeping space with a well-fed Burgher who smoked a foul smelling mixture in a long-stemmed pipe. By horse drawn Trekschuit, the ferry that plied the Haarlemmertrekvaart, as the Hollanders called it in their unpronounceable language, the canal between Haarlem and Rijnsburg. Finally, on foot to the high-gabled, red-brick cottage that was his destination. It stood alone beside a stand of elms, on the edge of a village surrounded by ice-rimmed, dark soiled fields stretching away to a grey, lowering horizon.

He rapped his iron shod stick on the oaken door. "What a miserable, God forsaken country this is. Nothing but windswept marsh, dune, broad water and windmills. And as cold as Cromwell in his grave." He pulled his cloak tighter, wishing he had worn a hat.

"Perhaps if Mynheer had worn a hat, or stout boots?" The man who opened the door was huddled into a craftsman's smock. Sparse shocks of dark shoulder length hair tumbled beside his deeply creased face and a pair of thin rimmed spectacles clung to the perilous slope of his aquiline nose.

"I never wear a hat or boots. Suffering's good for the body. Anyway, Master Spinoza, I didn't know you spoke English."

"Only a little. I have Portuguese, Hebrew, Spanish, Dutch, French and Latin. Which of them would you prefer?"

"French or Latin. But I warn you, I pronounce both in the way of the English."

A resigned smile spread across Spinoza's full lipped mouth. He switched to French. "*Bien*, I am sure we shall comprehend each other. Now, come in out of the cold."

The low-ceilinged room into which he invited his visitor was warmed by the glow of a log fire. Smoke blackened beams supported the floor above, an oak dresser lined the far wall, a book strewn table sat against one window and a wooden lens grinding machine beside the other.

"Sit please, Mynheer Locke." He indicated a wing backed arm chair beside the fire. "It is true, you never wear hat nor boots?" He settled into the opposite one.

"'Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger,' my mother used to say. She made me wear thin shoes year-round. If my feet got wet, she told me it would toughen me up. Even now, free of her Puritan apron strings, I still go out without hat and boots, if only to cock a snook at my fellows."

"Mothers! Sadly, I remember little of mine. But you did not come here to discuss mothers. Nor, I suspect, our tulips."

"I saw the fields either side of the canal, filled with neat rows of green shoots, but nary a flower to be seen."

"The autumn was warm Mynheer, the bulbs were planted late. But we had strong frosts and the crop will be good."

"Good enough to send you all mad again?"

"*Ita vero*. Tulip mania. Truly, it made men mad. You like tulips, Mynheer?"

"I didn't come for the flowers."

"Then tell me, please? To what do I owe the honour of your visit? Your letter was vague. For a pair of lenses perhaps?"

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“My eyesight is fine. I am here by order of the King.”

“King Charles sent you?”

“It was an order for an arrest warrant. I am charged with treason. My Lord Shaftesbury plotted to assassinate the King and I am guilty merely by association. Pah! All I have ever sought was peace and quiet, and to pass silently through this world.”

“I fear your wish is not likely to be fulfilled. The mind of the thinker can never be quiet, nor, if he expresses himself honestly, can he ever pass silently.”

A door at the far end opened and the housekeeper appeared bearing a tray on which rested an earthenware jug and two goblets. She curtsied to the visitor and placed the tray on a low table at Spinoza’s side. Steam rose from the neck of the jug and with it the nose tingling aroma of clove and cinnamon.

“*Danke je, Geertruyd.*”

He poured the steaming hot mulled wine into the goblets and handed one to Locke.

“My humble home is at your disposal, but why choose Holland, Mynheer?”

“The air is cleaner than that of France.”

“You are thinking of your health?”

“I am thinking of my head. The divine right of Kings is as sacred to Louis, *Le Roi Soleil*, as it is to Charles and his papist brother. You have heard of Filmer, Master Spinoza?”

“Sir Robert, the author of *Patriarcha*?”

“*The Natural Power of Kings*. Indeed, the same. And a greater load of bullock’s dung I never set eyes upon. If, as Filmer claims, Adam was God’s first anointed ruler of the world, that all the patriarchs were monarchs and they and all Kings are his heirs, then what absurdities follow. If Kingship can only be inherited by the first born, then there is only one King who can claim to be the direct inheritor of Adam’s throne. All the others are mere imposters, who should renounce their crowns at the feet of the one true ruler ... whenever we find him.”

A sly smile spread across Spinoza’s lips. “And if the first born is a woman?”

“The laws of kingship are quite distinct to those governing the family. A woman cannot inherit a kingdom. And yet, did not Socrates argue that male and female dogs were equally capable of hunting, and guarding the flock.”

“I am not at all sure, Mynheer, that I should want to be remembered for likening a woman to a dog. Education was a prerequisite for the guardians of the Republic. Are women’s brains capable of it? *Pace* Plato, I am certain they are not. Even educated, women are not capable of governing on equal terms with men, without disturbing the peace.”

“The mother too hath her title and Adam did not have private dominion over the earth. Eve, as well as he, was Lord of the World. There will surely come a time, Master Spinoza, when all will recognise that the intellect of women may equal, if not exceed, that of men. Anyway, I thought you were a Cartesian. Surely you know that Teresa of Avila’s treatise on meditation is the foundation from which Descartes distilled *cogito ergo sum*? She thinks – as you and I think – therefore she exists. A man might have more knowledge crammed between his ears, but sometimes an overabundance of facts impedes the path to the truth.”

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“In truth, I can see that King Charles has much to fear from you.” Laughing, Spinoza took another draught of mulled wine. “You question the divine right of Kings. Moses wrote that God created woman out of man. Question you the divine also?”

It was Locke’s turn to laugh. “The skillet doth call the hob black. From what I hear, had you been living elsewhere than Holland, your head would have been separated from your shoulders, if not your body consumed by the fire.”

“You think me not a believer?”

“Let me hear your definition of God.”

“By God I mean the existence of a being absolutely infinite, consisting of an infinity of attributes, each of which expresses an eternal and infinite essence.”

“It has substance, this infinity?”

“It is the only substance of the universe.”

“So held Anaximander. And your proof?”

“It is axiomatic. It is the nature of a substance to exist. Try if you will and imagine that such a God does not exist?” He smiled, while waiting for Locke’s answer.

“This is just the trickery of Anselm, imaging a supremely perfect being which, because it is perfect, must exist. I have many a time imagined a perfect woman. She has yet to awaken in my bed.”

“Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. She might well exist, but you have not yet found her. That aside, I meant no trickery. If God is the only substance of the universe, and we can experience the universe through our senses, then we are experiencing God.”

“So, God is the universe?”

“God is the only substance, everything in the universe is in God.”

“That is the same for which Bruno was burnt at the stake.”

“Heresy?” Spinoza removed his spectacles and rubbed the bridge of his nose with his fingers. “You are a man of reason, Mynheer. Think you I am guilty of that?”

“I think that God has not been so sparing to our race as to make us just two legged creatures, reliant upon Aristotle to know what is rational. God gave us reason and can hardly deny us the use of it to investigate what we experience through our five senses, and such matters as it is wise to accept in practise, even if they only have probability and not certainty in their favour.”

“Such as the existence of God himself?” said Spinoza.

“His existence is a given.”

“So say I. But if your conception of God differs from mine, how do we judge between them?”

“By revelation,” said Locke. “The bare testimony of revelation is the highest certainty.”

“It is the prophets who spoke of revelation, but it is clear from the scriptures that they were not men of great intellect or knowledge. They were not philosophers, they were pious men, often simple, sometimes with vivid imaginations.”

“Do you doubt their writings?”

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“In the same way one should doubt all writings that are the product of the imagination. Where the prophets teach love and obedience to God, there is no doubt. But where they pronounce on the natural world, on history or science, then they are not to be trusted.”

“Even upon miracles?” said Locke.

“There least of all. If what they observed to be a miracle was something the cause of which they did not understand, and which, for lack of any better knowledge, they attributed to the power of God, they merely demonstrated their own ignorance. So, from a miracle, or any event that surpasses our understanding, we can learn nothing about the essence of God or anything whatsoever concerning him.”

“I have long been a champion of reason, to the extent that it does not conflict with scripture, but you would make revelation subject to the judgement of reason,” said Locke.

“Neither should be the handmaid of the other. Contra Maimonides, revelation cannot be adjusted to fit reason. Nor can reason be adjusted to fit revelation. Each governs a separate realm.”

“Those are dangerous views, Master Spinoza. No wonder you have been excommunicated from your Sephardic people. If you would separate reason from revelation then you would separate the power of religion from the power of government. No ruler could claim divine right and would have to govern only by reason and the consent of the governed.”

“These views are common in Holland as you shall discover if your exile is prolonged. I would recommend to you the writings of Jacobus Arminius and van Limborch. It is well that rulers should restrain from interfering in the individual beliefs of those they govern. Was that not the intent of your Lord Shaftsbury’s attempt to assassinate King Charles and his brother? It seems to me we are both dangerous men.”

“I never in my life did anything undutiful towards his Majesty,” said Locke, winking at his host. “But I would not wish popery returned to England.”

Locke sat back in his chair, enjoying the warmth of the fire and the mulled wine in his belly.

“I believe I have much to learn from you Master Spinoza. I trust your library will prove a source of enlightenment.”

“I trust so too. There you will find my *Ethics*, as well as the shorter, and perhaps easier to follow, *Tractus Theologica-Politicus*.”

Locke awoke alone. The fire had burnt low in the hearth and darkness had fallen. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and stretched his neck to ease its stiffness.

“Does Mynheer require supper now?” The housekeeper entered bearing a tray upon which a steaming bowl emitted the tantalising aroma of hearty broth. She placed it upon the table and lit candles from a taper thrust into the fire.

It took a moment for Locke to recognise that he was being addressed in his own language. “Thank you, I had not realised I was hungry.” He patted his stomach in anticipation. “Your English is good Mistress Geertruyd.”

“I am from Friesland, our language and yours are distant cousins. My late husband, God rest his soul, spent many a day in Kings Lynn. I learnt from him.”

“He taught you well Mistress, although the King’s English is rarely heard in the mouths of Norfolk Dumplings.”

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Smiling, the housekeeper reached for the candle. “Your room has been prepared and the bed warmed. When you are ready, I’ll light your way, Mynheer Locke.”

“What happened to the other gentleman?”

“Which gentleman was that, Mynheer.”

“The one with whom I was conversing.”

“You arrived on your own Mynheer, and there has been none to visit.”

“This is Master Spinoza’s house?”

“Yes, Mynheer, but he passed away a good seven years ago. Your letter inquired if you might reside here for some days while you found more suitable lodgings. When I replied welcoming you, I assumed you knew Master Spinoza was no longer of this world.”

“I did. But with whom then was I speaking.”

“With none, Mynheer. After you arrived, I seated you in the parlour. It is just as the master left it. You took mulled wine in his chair. Your journey has tired you. You slept. I hesitated to wake you. You conversed in a dream perhaps?”

Locke rubbed a hand over his hair and a smile creased his lips.

“Reason says it is so. Tell me Mistress Geertruyd, amongst the master’s papers, are there copies of his *Ethics* and the *Tractus Theologica-Politicus*?”

“There are Mynheer.”

Locke raised an eyebrow. “Curious. I should wish you to fetch them to me. You have read them?”

“I do not have the Latin, Mynheer.”

“Give thanks that your soul is safe.”

“And your soul, Mynheer?”

Locke chuckled. “I have much to learn. The master has pointed out my path and I hasten to follow it. If that is a sin against God, then I am happy to answer for it. If the inferno is my reward, I shall be in the best of company amongst the philosophers in Limbo.”

“Be wary, Mynheer, recall also the Sixth Circle.”

“The doom of the heretics? Among whom many would count your former master. There too if needs be. To hold eternal discourse with the most dangerous people in the world. What better fate could one ask?”