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Excerpt

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DESIGNS OF THE ROMAN CATHOLICS

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CHAPTER I

TITUS OATES

TITUS OATES has justly been considered one of the world's great impostors. By birth he was an Anabaptist, by prudence a clergyman, by profession a perjurer. From an obscure and beggarly existence he raised himself to opulence and an influence more than episcopal, and, when he fell, it was with the fame of having survived the finest flogging ever inflicted. De Quincey considered the murder of Godfrey to be the most artistic performance of the seventeenth century. It was far surpassed by the products of Oates' roving imagination. To the connoisseur of murder the mystery of Godfrey's death may be more exhilarating, but in the field of broad humour Oates bears the palm. There is, after all, something laughable about the rascal. His gross personality had in it a comic strain. He could not only invent but, when unexpected events occurred, adapt them on the instant to his own end. His coarse tongue was not without a kind of wit. Whenever he appears on the scene, as has been said of Jeffreys, we may be sure of good sport. Yet to his victims he was an emblem of tragic injustice. Very serious were his lies to the fifteen men whom he brought to death. The world was greedy of horrors, and Oates sounded the alarm at the crucial moment. In the game he went on to play the masterstrokes were his. Those who would reduce him to a subordinate of his associate Dr. Tonge, the hare-brained parson whose quarterly denunciations of Rome failed to arouse the interest of Protestant London, have strangely

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misunderstood his character. Tonge was a necessary go-between, but Oates the supreme mover of diabolical purpose.

In the year of the execution of King Charles the First Titus Oates was born at Oakham in the county of Rutland. His father, Samuel Oates, son of the rector of Marsham in Norfolk, had graduated from Corpus College, Cambridge, and received orders from the hands of the Bishop of Norwich. On the advent of the Puritan Revolution he turned Anabaptist, and achieved fame in the eastern counties as a Dipper of energy and sanctity. In 1650 he became chaplain to Colonel Pride's regiment, and four years later had the distinction of being arrested by Monk for seditious practices in Scotland. The Restoration returned him to the bosom of the established church, and in 1666 he was presented by Sir Richard Barker to the rectory of All Saints' at Hastings. Shortly before, his son Titus went his ways to seek education and a livelihood in the world as a scholar. Ejected in turn from Merchant Taylors' School and Gonville and Caius, Cambridge, he found a refuge at St. John's College, and some three years later was instituted to the vicarage of Bobbing in Kent. "By the same token," it was remarked, "the plague and he visited Cambridge at the same time."

Oates was a bird of passage. He obtained a license not to reside in his parish, and went to visit his father at Hastings. Long time did not pass before he took wing again. He had already once been indicted for perjury, though no further proceedings were taken in the case.¹ Now he conspired with his father to bring an odious charge against the schoolmaster of Hastings, who had incurred his enmity. The charge fell to the ground, Oates' abominable evidence was proved to be false, and he was thrown into gaol pending an action for a thousand pounds damages.² Escape from prison saved him from

¹ 7 State Trials 128. Evidence of Sir Denny Ashburnham, *ibid.* 1097.

² Anthony à Wood, *Life and Times* ii. 417. 7 State Trials 1094.

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disaster, and he fled to London. As far as is known, no attempt was made to prosecute him. The men of Hastings were probably rejoiced at his disappearance. There was no profit to be made out of such a culprit as Oates. If he were caught, it would only bring expense and trouble to the authorities. It was the business of no one else to pursue the matter. So Oates went free. Without employment, he managed to obtain the post of chaplain on board a vessel in the Royal Navy. The calling was rather more disreputable than that of the Fleet parson of later times. Discipline on board the king's ships was chiefly manifest by its absence; under the captaincy of favourites from court the efficiency of the service was maintained only by the rude ability of men who had been bred in it; and the standard expected from the chaplain was "damnably low." Nevertheless Oates failed to achieve the required measure of respectability. He was expelled upon the same grounds as he had formerly urged against the fortunate schoolmaster.¹

The mischance marked the beginning of his rise. Again adrift in London, the tide threw him upon William Smith, his former master at Merchant Taylors' School. It was Bartholomew-tide in the year 1676. With Smith was Matthew Medburne, a player from the Duke of York's theatre, and by creed a Roman Catholic. The two made friends with Oates, and on Medburne's introduction he became a member of a club which met twice a week at the Pheasant Inn in Fuller's Rents. The club contained both Catholics and Protestants, discussion of religion and politics being prohibited under penalty of a fine.² Here Oates made his first acquaintance with those of the religion which he was afterwards to turn to a source of so great profit. The rule which forbade controversy applied only to the meetings of the club, and beyond its

¹ Burnet ii. 157.

² Smith, *Intrigues of the Popish Plot* 4. Oates, *Narrative* 35, 36. It was at this house that Baxter was insulted in 1677 by a Catholic gentleman, who accused him of having been tried at Worcester for the murder of a tinker. Baxter's *Relation* iii. 179.

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limits discussion between members seems to have been free. It was perhaps by the agency of some of these that in the winter of the same year Oates was admitted as chaplain into the service of the Duke of Norfolk.¹ Testimony to character on the engagement of a servant in the seventeenth century was probably not severely examined.

In the house of the great Catholic noble Oates found himself in the company of priests of the forbidden church. Conversation turned on the subject of religion, and Oates lent ear to the addresses of the other side. Though he wore the gown of an English minister, his faith sat light upon him, and he did not scruple to change it for advantage. On Ash Wednesday 1677 he was formally reconciled to the Church of Rome.² The instrument for the salvation of the strayed lamb was one Berry, alias Hutchinson, a Jesuit whom Oates had afterwards the grace to describe as "a saintlike man, one that was religious for religion's sake." By others the instrument was thought to be somewhat weak-minded; at a later date he seceded to the Protestant faith and became curate in the city, later still to be welcomed back into the bosom of his previous church; withal a very pious person, removed from politics, and much given to making converts. Neither conversion nor piety alone was an end to Oates. He soon made his way to Father Richard Strange, provincial of the Society of Jesus, and notified him of a desire for admission into the order. Consulting with his fellows, Strange gave consent to the proposal, and before the end of April, Oates was shipped on a Bilboa merchantman with letters to the English Jesuit seminary at Valladolid.³

There was little that Oates could hope from a career as an English parson. Almost any other calling, especially one that took him abroad, offered better chances. He probably believed that Jesuit emissaries led a merry life and a licentious. Perhaps it is true that, as he said, vague talk in the Duke of Norfolk's household of the glorious

¹ Burnet ii. 157. 7 State Trials 1320.

² 7 State Trials 1320.

³ *Ibid.* 1096, 1320, 1321. Burnet ii. 157. Foley, *Records* v. 12.

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future for Catholicism had come to his ears. At least the times must make him credulous of Catholic machinations. To his sanguine mind the future would present unbounded possibilities. On the other side, stout recruits for the Catholic cause were not to be despised. Oates' character was tough, and he was not the man to shrink from dirty work. Had they known him well, his new patrons would hardly have welcomed him as a convert. The plausible humility he aired was the outcome of a discretion which rarely lasted longer than to save him from starvation. By nature he was a bully, brutal, sensual, avaricious, and gifted with a greed of adulation which, in a man of less impudence, would have caused his speedy ruin. From earliest youth he was a liar. Yet he was shrewd enough, and shrewdness and promptitude were qualities not without a certain value. His vices had not yet grown to be notorious. So he was taken to serve masters who generally succeeded in giving their pupils at least the outward stamp of piety. In person Oates was hideous. His body was short, his shoulders broad. He was bull-necked and bow-legged. Under a low forehead his eyes were set small and deep. His countenance was large and moon-like. So monstrous was his length of chin that the wide slit mouth seemed almost to bisect his purple face. His voice rasped inharmoniously, and he could tune it at will to the true Puritan whine or to scold on terms with such a master of abuse as Jeffreys. The pen of Dryden has drawn a matchless portrait of the man—

Sunk were his eyes, his voice was harsh and loud,
 Sure signs he neither choleric was nor proud :
 His long chin proved his wit, his saint-like grace
 A church vermilion and a Moses' face.¹

This was the tender being whom the Colegio de los Ingleses took to nurse into a Jesuit.

¹ *Absalom and Achitophel* 646-649. Father John Warner describes Oates in similar terms : "Mentis in eo summa stupiditas, lingua balbutiens, sermo e trivio, vox stridula et cautillans, plorantis quam loquentis similior. Memoria fallax, prius dicta nunquam fideliter reddens, frons contracta, oculi parvi et in occiput retracti, facies plana,

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The project failed of its mark. Five short months completed Oates' stay amid the new surroundings. On October 30, 1677 he was expelled the college and shipped home, reaching London in November.¹ The sojourn was in after days utilised to elevate him to the dignity of doctor of divinity. He had obtained the degree at Salamanca, he said. The truth was more accurately expressed in the lines—

The spirit caught him up, the Lord knows where,
And gave him his Rabbinical degree
Unknown to foreign university ;²

for none but priests were admitted by the Catholic Church to the doctorate, Oates was never a priest, and was never at Salamanca in his life.³ Though Valladolid had proved no great success, Oates was unabashed. He returned to Strange and the Jesuits in London. Protestations were renewed, and the eagerness of the expelled novice was not to be withstood. The Jesuits afterwards professed that they simply desired to keep Oates out of the way. Whatever their motive, he was given a new trial. The society furnished a new suit of clothes and a periwig, put four pounds into his pocket, and sent him to complete his education at St. Omers. On December 10 he was admitted into the seminary.⁴ For one ambitious of an ecclesiastical career the venture was not fruitful. Long evidence was given at a later date descriptive of Oates' course in the college. In important points it lies under strong suspicion,⁵ but the picture of his daily doings may in medio, lancis sive disci instar, compressa, prominentibus hic inde genis rubicundis nasus, os in ipso vultus centro, mentum reliquam faciem prope totam aequans, caput vix corporis trunco extans, in pectus declive, reliqua corporis hisce respondentia, monstro quam homini similia." MS. history 104.

¹ *Lettre écrite de Mons à un ami à Paris*, 1679. 7 State Trials 1322.

² *Absalom and Achitophel* 657-659.

³ Sir William Godolphin to Henry Coventry, on information obtained in Spain, November 6/16, 1678. Longleat MSS. Coventry Papers lx. 264.

⁴ 7 State Trials 358, 1322. Burnet ii. 158. *Florus Anglo-Bavaricus* 93.

⁵ See below in Trials for Treason.

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be taken as faithful. Oates was not a congenial companion to his fellows. Though a separate table was provided for him at meals, he went to school with the rest and attempted to gain their intimacy. He was the source of continual quarrels, spoiled sport, tried to play the bully, and sometimes met with the retribution that falls on bullies. He was reader in the sodality, and enlivened more serious works, such as Father Worsley's *Controversies*, with interludes from that most entertaining book, *The Contempt of the Clergy*.¹ He had a pan broken over his head for insisting at a play by the novices on sitting in the place reserved for the musicians. On another occasion he excited the amusement of the college by allowing himself to be beaten up and down by a lad with a fox's brush. Still nobler was an effort in the pulpit, where he preached "a pleasant sermon," expounding his belief that "King Charles the Second halted between two opinions and a stream of Popery went between his legs."² Lurid tales of Oates' conduct were afterwards published by the Jesuit fathers.³ What is more certainly true is the fact that his presence in the seminary rapidly became embarrassing. On June 23, 1678 he was turned out of doors, and shook the dust of St. Omers from his feet. On the 27th he reached London.⁴

When Oates formed his alliance with Dr. Ezrael Tonge, rector of St. Michael's in Wood Street, is uncertain. The point is not without importance. If Oates came first to Tonge in the summer of 1678, the fact would be so far in his favour that he may have sought a good market for wares which he believed to be in some degree sound. If he took directions from Tonge before his visit to the Jesuit seminaries, the chance of his sincerity

¹ *The Grounds and Occasions of the Contempt of the Clergy and Religion enquired into*. By John Eachard, D.D., Master of Catherine Hall, Cambridge, 1670.

² 7 State Trials 360-375. 10 State Trials 1097-1132.

³ *Florus Anglo-Bavaricus* 93, 94, 95.

⁴ 7 State Trials 324, 1325. *Lettre écrite de Mons à un ami à Paris*. *Florus Anglo-Bavaricus* 95.

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would be much diminished. Simpson Tonge, the rector's son, afterwards composed a journal of these events. Unhappily his statements are without value. Hoping for reward at one time from Oates, at another from his enemies, Tonge contradicted himself flatly, urging for the informer that Oates had sought his father only after the return from St. Omers; against him, that the two had, during an intimacy of two years, designed the Popish Plot before ever Oates went abroad.¹ Judgment must therefore be suspended; but it is notable that King Charles thought the evidence as to the intrigue between Oates and Tonge unworthy of credence. Simpson Tonge was taken to Windsor in the summer of 1680 to reveal his knowledge. He left there papers in which evidence of the facts was contained. Charles examined them, and told Sydney Godolphin that "he found them very slight and immaterial," and refused to see Tonge again.² At whatever point co-operation began, acquaintance between the two men was likely enough of long standing. Tonge had been presented to his living by Sir Richard Barker, the ancient patron of Samuel Oates. A natural tie thus existed, now to be developed by circumstances into strong union. The doctor was an assiduous labourer in the Protestant vineyard. His fear of Popery amounted to mania. Volumes poured from his pen in denunciation of Catholic conspiracies. A catalogue was afterwards made of Tonge's library. Its character may be judged from the titles of the following works:—*Massacres threatened to Prevent, Temple and Tabernacle, Arguments to suppress Popery.*³ He had co-operated with John Evelyn in translating *The Mystery of Jesuitism*, a work which King Charles said he had carried for two days in his pocket and read; "at which," writes Evelyn, "I did not a little

¹ Simpson Tonge's Journal, S.P. Dom. Charles II 409: 39. Simpson Tonge to L'Estrange, *Brief Hist.* i. 38. Simpson Tonge's Case, House of Lords MSS. 246-249.

² S.P. Dom. Charles II 414: 185. Sydney Godolphin to Sir Leoline Jenkins, September 25, 1680.

³ S.P. Dom. Charles II 409: 36.