

*Christie Dickason*

THE  
MEMORY  
PALACE



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## PREFACE

Letter from John Nightingale, at Southampton, to Zeal Beester of Hawkridge Estate, near Bedgebury, Hampshire. October 1639.

*Sweetest Zeal - My messenger stands with outstretched hand. My ship is spreading its wings. I would tear out my heart and send it if I could. In its place must come mere dogged, struggling words. I want no mistaking. I meant what I said. I will stay true to you. If you now, or ever, regret your own vow to me, I beg you to tell me at once.*

*Exile is kinder than the block, for leaving can be undone while death cannot. So, farewell forever, England. But our finite parting, though scarcely bearable, must be bridged by passionate hope.*

*To pay my passage so suddenly, and with my lands and modest fortune now forfeit to the Crown, (I still swear that I am no traitor!) I was forced to sell myself as indentured labour to a M. Etienne Baulk, tobacco farmer on the island of Nevis for the usual term of seven years. Seven years. These are not beyond us to survive - a sea captain and his wife, or a soldier's family, often endure as much. On release from servitude, I am promised ten pounds - a fair beginning for the fortune I mean to make for us in the West Indies. When I can be sure of a life safe for a woman, I will send for you. I beg you, write to me often. To know that you are there, and love me, will give me strength to do whatever I must to ensure that we can be together again.*

*Oh, my beloved girl, my other self - though writ in a somewhat smaller hand - keep safe. And keep faith in me, who by the Grace of God, will be your husband - John.*

*Post scriptum Think of me whenever you see that cursed cat which still has leave to occupy your bed, and remember who gave him to you. I kiss your eyes, and must stop there with my pen but not in my thoughts.*





# 1

Philip Wentworth stepped, unsuspecting, out of the tack room into the quiet grey autumn dawn of the day that would change the rest of his life. A pleasing smell of polished leather and horse clung to his frayed, old-fashioned clothes after his night on a straw mattress among the harnesses and saddles. The world still slept. He stood for a moment listening to the hush. He might have been the only man alive and he liked it that way.

Then a drowsy blackbird sang a single muted note. Another replied. A thrush interrupted. Sparrows disagreed. Suddenly, voices in every tree, every bush, every tall tussock of grass joined the clamour until the air vibrated with their exuberant racket.

He watched the quick flicks of movement. His ear picked out a late chiff-chaff calling its own name, the repeated song of the thrush, the mellow, heart-breaking fluting of a blackbird. Then the churr of a white-throat, and the warbles of robins.

It was a trick he had learned, of paying close attention to every small detail of life. If he gripped hard enough onto the observations and sensations of each moment, he could haul himself hand over hand through the day without having to remember.

He set off across the corner of the stable yard with a sack slung over his shoulder, carrying a fishing pole stout enough to hold a twelve-pound tench. As on every other day, he meant to fish.

At the shadowed dung heap behind the horse barn, he

leaned his pole against the dung cart, took up a fork left leaning against the brick wall of the barn and began to turn over the steamy clods. From time to time, his stocky figure leaned forwards to pick out the pale squirming maggots which had been generated (so his reading of Pliny assured him) by the heat in the crumbling clumps of horse shit and straw. He dropped the maggots into a jar half-filled with damp grass cuttings. He straightened to draw in a deep breath.

The silence of the stable yard was thick with the warm smells of animals, fresh hay, dung, the damp iron of the pump by the watering trough, and a sharp yeasty punch to the back of his nose which seeped from the brew house.

But-the smell of the iron threatened to stir memories.

I much like the smell of blood.

Re forced his attention onto the feel of the polished wooden handle of the fork, the heft of the dung.

Why, he asked himself as a distraction, are horses so superior to both cattle and pigs in the quality of their excreta? Even though horses eat much the same diet as cows?

A good try. Will it work?

He put three more maggots into the jar. Made himself notice their velvety wriggle between his fingertips.

On the other hand, horses were undeniably superior to cattle in both nature and intelligence. Could there be a positive correlation between elevation of nature and quality of base elimination?

An interesting question, though not one that he could debate with just anyone. There were so many questions to be answered when a man at last began to ask them. Questions also filled the moment. As did books, if approached with care.

He put both hands in the small of his back and stretched impatiently.

-Not many men of your years can still sleep well on a tack room floor, he reassured himself.

Liar! You slept badly and your joints ache.

I'm not taking to age with good grace ...

Grace. There's an interesting thought.

Suddenly, without warning, he had arrived at another dangerous moment.

Inside the barn, aroused by his presence, the horses began to stamp and blow loose, flapping sighs.

Listen. Just listen.

In the loft of the hay barn behind him, a groom sneezed. Then he heard the murmur of sleepy voices. From the cow barn came a pained lowing and the first rattle of buckets. A rat scuttled for cover, its claws tapping the cobbles like a quick tiny shower of rain.

Moving swiftly now, he put the jar of maggots into the sack and collected his fishing pole. Beyond the cow barn, an explosion of cackles announced the arrival of breakfast for the hens. He walked fast to escape before anyone who still had not learned better could try to snare him in cheerful conversation. To be certain, he scowled ferociously.

However, he paused outside the gate from the kitchen garden onto the rough turf of the slope between the house and the fishponds. A radiant sliver of hot light glowed above the beech hanger to the east of the house. On the crest of the hanger, sparks of light flashed through the dark, stirring mass of the beeches. As he watched, the rising sun began to lay a flush across the water meadows upstream. Then all the trees on every side suddenly turned unnaturally vivid shades of green, punched with holes of black shadow and touched by red, orange and gold where the chilly nights had begun to bite.

A gift I don't deserve, he thought. The more poignant because I can't know how many more such gifts I may get, deserved or not.

He set off again towards the river, frowning and shaking his square, short-cropped head. If a man had to think, he should limit himself to mathematics or fish. The future was no safer than the past. For Philip Wentworth, it was a road down which death advanced at a steady pace. Even the present alarmed him just now.

Lodging here at Hawkridge, where the Scottish war and the wrangling in London between the king and his detractors seemed as distant as Caribbean thunder squalls, he had tried, with mixed success, to become as thoughtless as the frogs on the banks of the fish ponds or the silly, empty-headed hens.

Wouldn't mind being an old tomcat either, he thought now. Like you, you cocky devil. He watched the sinuous, purposeful explorations of a ginger tom.

Come from sleeping on her bed, have you? Our young mistress Zeal should know better than to woo you away from your proper profession of barn cat.

He imagined lying stretched out on a wall in the sun, filled only with heat and comfort, twitching once in a while in a dream of the hunt. As for the rest of a tom's business, well. Never mind. But, once. Oh, yes.

Silver-haired, and barrel-chested under his frayed, old-fashioned black coat, he looked a bit like an ancient greying tom. He even had the slightly stiff-legged walk as he followed the track from the house to the river.

This track led first to the lowest of the three fish ponds made two generations earlier by diverting water from the Shit A plank footbridge crossed the sluice that spilled water from the lowest pond back into the natural flow of the river. Around the banks of the ponds stood an incongruous coven of marble sea nymphs conceived for some great Italian garden. Now they tilted and yearned on their ornate marble plinths on the muddy country banks where they found themselves instead.

The old man laid his hand on the cool bare buttock of the nearest nymph. Psamanthe. Or perhaps Galatea. A pretty thing, either way, cradling her conch shell half-raised to her lips, as if to sip from it, or play it like a horn. Sir Harry, who until recently had owned Hawkridge Estate, may, in his aspirations, have confused this Hampshire backwater with a grand villa in Rome but at least he recognized a pretty woman.

All too well, as it turns out, but that's none of your affair, you old frog.

He patted the buttock and turned left up the line of ponds to continue the careful, habitual construction of his day.

As he did every morning, he first examined the carp in the top pond. They were grazing on snails among the pots of grass sunk into the clear green water. The largest of the polished golden brown shapes, four of them, each weighing as much as a medium-sized piglet, were being saved for Christmas.

Retracing his steps back downstream, he next eyed the brassy-flanked chub and black-striped perch in the middle pond, where they swam with the senseless placidity of creatures whose every need is met. Until the net and cooking pan.

'As for you, my friends. .

In the deep water of the third, lowest pond, the long still shadows of pike hung poised in the shadows of lily pads. Fresh water wolves, forced to wait for a careless duckling or reckless frog. Their natural prey in the middle pond taunted them from behind the safety of one sluice gate. Another gate below locked their cage.

He stared down into the water. The pike seemed to him to radiate a silent, waiting rage.

He turned away to head down river. These creatures were the fish man's affair. He never fished for the captives in any of the ponds.

The burnt ruins of the central hall and west wing of Hawkrige House now lay on his right. The low brick sheds of the basse-court - the dairy, the wash house and the still room - had survived the recent fire, as had the chapel and the east wing to which it was attached.

Thinking selfishly, the damage could have been worse -and he tried to spare himself the discomfort of thinking any other way. He could sleep again in his usual chamber behind the chapel, which he occupied for forty pounds a year, as

soon as the inner wall of the east wing was braced against collapse. His books and small number of other possessions were safe, although smoked like hams. The tiny globe of his present world had not been much shaken.

Someone was on the very edge of the chapel roof.

He already knew that his world had just been given a violent shove. Nevertheless, he tried to resist.

He crossed the bridge over the bottom sluice, headed for the track that followed the river downstream to the mill. Then he looked back again at the chapel.

Never look back, he told himself fiercely. Remember where it got Orpheus and Lot, all of them, heathen and otherwise.

Bright hair caught the early morning sun, as vivid as an autumn leaf.

In a flash, he abandoned ground won painfully over nineteen years. He threw down his sack and pole. Turned back. With his black coat jouncing like a loose animal pelt, he began to run.