

2. An Evening on Philpot Lane

Sir Thomas Smythe was in his favorite after-dinner room: a comfortable London room in a comfortable house on Philpot Lane on a foggy winter night, with thick blue drapes twined with gold thread around the edge, a thicker rug, and a fire burning hard and bright on the broad stone hearth. Before the fire, a pair of fine Venetian crystal glasses stood on a small table.

Smythe sat to one side of the table, facing the fire: a dapper, white-haired man with a neatly trimmed beard. A younger man sat beside him. Sir Thomas lifted his glass and swirled the wine, watching the firelight play through the crystal as he shook his head softly in disapproval, disbelief or indeed both. Although the crystal, the claret, the room

-- and a not inconsiderable part of London -- all belonged to him, he could take no pleasure in any of it tonight. Though he had tried to be companionable with his son-in-law in spite of his sour mood, he had failed. He knew it and regretted it. But he could hardly help it: he had not built the great trading companies for the East Indies, the Levant, the Baltic and Russia only to see his *magnus opus* fail -- and yet the Virginia Company *was* failing. A venture he had directed from the very beginning and nursed through hard years had begun to collapse from the very moment he had stepped aside as Treasurer last spring to let Sandys take that post -- *Sir* Edwin Sandys! for the love of God Almighty -- and just when the Company had finally begun to produce real returns! Smythe regretted *that* far more than his boorish demeanor at supper.

"Eighty thousand pounds of good sterling! Johnson," he muttered. "Eighty thousands! And hundreds of them mine -- along with a dozen years of my life! Yet Sandys will throw it all away like a fool, an idiot gone senile before his time. I cannot bear the thought of it, my friend...." Sir Thomas set his glass down with more force than was right and regretted that as well. He was a reasonable man, after all -- he had said so himself on many an occasion.

"Excuse me, Johnson, I have let my anger get the best of me and that will never do. Anger has not paid for this Médoc, my friend. Nor did I ever let anger get the best of me when we were launching the Levant Company...how many? Twenty-eight years ago? My God! I *am* getting old. And I can assure you that we had fools aplenty in those days, too!"

"Ordinary fools, perhaps," replied his companion, "but Sir Edwin Sandys is no ordinary fool."

"Eighty *thousands!* Johnson," repeated Sir Thomas. He leaned forward and stared at the fire, gritting his teeth

before murmuring "You are in the right of it: it takes an extraordinary fool to throw away eighty thousand pounds...."

His companion was Robert Johnson -- now *Alderman* Robert Johnson. He was an altogether simpler man than his father-in-law. If his shirt lacked flair or finery, it was not because he affected the spartan simplicity of the Puritan brethren one saw ever more frequently on London's streets these days, but because he found it a more deliberate vanity than the conventional fluffs and ruffles that the Puritans, Precisions and other hypocrites condemned so loudly. No, his dress was unselfconsciously plain, the mere reflection of the direct, transparent simplicity of a man of business: Johnson paid little attention to finery on others and none at all to lace on himself.

"The man is a fool, Sir Thomas," he repeated, "an ambitious, preening, cozening woodcock. But a brilliant and tireless fool! He throws himself into his follies one after the other with unstoppable zeal!" He stopped abruptly. "Excuse me, sir. He has been your colleague, after all. I fear I have spoken too bluntly."

"Bluntly, yes, but true. No, no. Johnson, we must be candid with each other after all." Sir Thomas set down the wine. "Robert, I have worked with the man, as you say, and closely too; but perhaps I have seen him too closely and too long to see him as he truly is. The Company's only realistic hope is the Crown's help with the tobacco contract, to keep the Spaniards' leaf out and root out plantings in England as well. We *must* have the Crown with us. You know that; I know that; and Sandys ought to know it, too. Yet all he has done since replacing me is to antagonize the King. It was a miracle that we got the Privy Council to ban planting here. But no sooner than we have that order but Sandys prepares to cross the Crown again!"

How many times does he think you may spit at any man and expect a favor in return?

"For all the years that he worked with me, never would I have thought he would run off like this! Headstrong he was, I knew; stubborn; and vigorous almost in the extreme. But he has become irresponsible, beyond measure." Sir Thomas shook his head again. "But perhaps I misjudge the man. The older I grow, the more irresponsible nearly everyone seems." He tried to chuckle, without much success. "Open your mind to me, Robert, not as my daughter's husband, but as my counselor, do! How do you see this man?"

"In all candor, then?"

"In all candor. It stays between us only."

"Forgive me if I criticize out of turn, but you have asked me in all candor." Smythe nodded. "Then I submit that you underestimate both the man and his folly. Sir Edwin Sandys is what you say, a fool and a booby - but a *great* fool and a *great* booby. It goes beyond foolery and that is his special gift: he truly believes in his chimera, whichever he is chasing at any moment. *That* is why men follow him. They are not so much charmed by his silver tongue as by the dreams themselves. He is like a City man who is clear-sighted in business but so blinded by Cupid that he sees a Florentine countess in place of his honest Southwarke whore!"

"Yes, yes! That is it!"

"And because *he* sees a countess and not the whore, his friends soon see a countess too -- even as she wipes her nose on her filthy sleeve and empties the poor fool's purse!"

Smythe laughed in spite of his anger, and Johnson continued. "Most men are like that in some little thing or another, failing to see the gray in their beard 'til all is white

as snow, perhaps, or forgetting a slight they have done to a friend. But with Sir Edwin, it is altogether more vast."

"By God, Johnson, you have it. He does believe his own tales; I have seen it. If Sir Edwin Sandys stood at the Globe and summoned the 'vasty fields of France', he would think *himself* in Picardy!"

Sir Thomas shook his head again and laughed at the thought; and his eyes sparkled with good humor. He was not a man who liked to be angry; it went against his grain. That was why Edwin Sandys confounded him so deeply for Sandys sowed anger as the farmer sowed corn: it was what he did -- and was forever surprised when the seeds sprang up behind him in brambles full-bristling with thorns.

"In all seriousness, though, "replied Johnson," with Sandys everything must be vast. When you founded the Virginia Company -- how many years ago, twelve? Thirteen?"

"Thirteen years ago last month! I went aboard the *Susan Constant* with Newport the night before they sailed, you know. Every year, I mark the 20th of December as a great and important day."

"Did you? Just so. It was a great adventure."

"*Was?*" exclaimed Sir Thomas. "It still *is*, Robert, if only Sir Edwin does not destroy it!"

"Just so, again. But *revenons à nos moutons*, as they say on the continent. You planned the Virginia Company as a *trading* company like the others. The first voyage was to choose a port, build a post, make a base for trade.."

"Which we did! Oh, it was harder than we had hoped. These things always are. But we planned and prepared it. Not like poor Popham's plantation for the north. Those poor souls were left to fend for themselves without supplies until they gave up and abandoned it all."

"How long did they stay in the north? What was it...two years?"

"Two years?" Smythe exclaimed again. "Closer to two months!" He caught himself shaking two fingers right in front of Johnson's nose and quickly lowered his hand – and his voice. "Two months, three, a few more perhaps; but they *planted* nothing, *built* nothing, *discovered* nothing and so *came* to nothing. Rocks, scrub grass, trees worthless for masts. Bah! They might as well have discovered *Wales!*"

Johnson laughed and took another sip. "Wales, yes," he replied, "but without the Welsh, which is not so bad a thing!"

The scowl on Smythe's face broke once again into a smile. "There is at least that, to be sure. But seriously, Robert, Popham himself told me that the north is much worse than they let generally known: like the coast of Cornwall with the winter of the Hebrides and hardly fit for civilized habitation at all. A worthless country altogether is Northern Virginia!"

"Yet there are those who would try again," said Johnson, after a pause.

"Yes, yes, yes," said Smythe with impatience. "Another of Sandys' wild schemes." His voice was rising again, in spite of himself. "But Robert, even that Southwarke whore you spoke of has more sense for business than Sandys! She knows what she sells, sir; and at least she gets paid in the bargain! But in all great seriousness, tell me what Sir Edwin Sandys looks to accomplish! As soon he succeeded me, he announced these plans to send a thousand men to Virginia this winter; a thousand more next year; and the next, and the next *and the next!* *Five thousand men in five years!* And to what end, I ask you? *To what end?* To build iron works better than Birmingham? glass works better than Venice? salt works to

shame the bay salt of Brittany? Ah! don't forget the vineyards to spring up at his command and bring forth claret better than the best from Guienne!" He rolled his eyes. "He proclaims all that even as all know that tobacco is the only crop that will pay its own freight!"

"Yet Southampton cheers him on," replied Johnson, "as does Warwick. Even Wroth and the other investors have been charmed by his sweet tales. Or blinded by their own greed."

"It is far worse than that, Robert. It's not only starry-eyed fops like Southampton who are taken in, but the guilds' men, too! They listen to him in the Company meetings, nod their heads, say nary a contrary word and seem to think they, their widows and even mere journeymen in the Guild will live in their dotage on Virginia profits running as broad as Virginia rivers, rising high as Virginia trees and swelling as great as Virginia berries and beans! Bah! It is near felony, Johnson! The Grocers are in for near five hundred pounds; the Goldsmiths, the Mercers and Tailors in for two hundred apiece or more. All told, the guilds and the towns together have put in thousands of pounds! Thousands!"

He took a deep breath and paused to sip his wine before shaking his head again in disgust. "It is always the same, Johnson. A fool is parted soon enough from his own money, but when a man ventures someone sterling from men he wouldn't even recognize outside a guild hall meeting, something that makes him mad and throw caution to the wind! It's a black tearing at your bowels when you lose *your* cargo lost in a shipwreck, but mere embarrassment when you lose someone else's goods! Governing other men's goods can change the most level-headed man – much like governing other men's lives. Sir Edwin Sandys seems never to have learned that lesson...."

Smythe ended with a forced smile. "Ah, pay me no mind, Robert. The years have made me forget my manners." He took the carafe and filled their glasses. "Sandys is brilliant, I grant you. Nonetheless, he'll beggar us all if we are not first hanged for sheer stupidity. A truly great fool, as you say; but a *wondrous* great booby."