

## The King James Men: Excerpt #1

Richard took another mouthful of the excellent claret.

‘You are staying with the Kemp family during your time in Westminster, I believe?’ Andrewes said.

He shifted in his chair, straightening, clearing his mind to be wary. He had not expected to talk of Ben Kemp with Andrewes: he had thought such matters lay solely with Bancroft. A puff of resentment billowed inside him that Ben’s return to England could taint even this.

‘Yes,’ he replied. ‘It is very convenient. Only a few streets away. Originally, I took a room by the river but it was damp and unwholesome ...’

While his room at Thieving Lane was warm and quiet and comfortable, he thought, its narrow window overlooking orchards and the Tyburn as it flowed on its way to meet the Thames. Dressing this morning, he had seen a pair of swans, graceful and serene against the current.

‘And how are the Kemps?’ Andrewes asked. ‘I hear that trade is going nicely. Master Kemp has invested in the Levant Company, has he not?’

Richard was impressed. No one could accuse the Dean of not being well informed. ‘They are well.’

‘And the younger Master Kemp is still working for his father?’

‘He has been in East these last seven years. He is only recently returned.’

Andrewes lifted his glass and sipped at his wine, observing his guest with shrewd, deep-set eyes. Richard shifted again under the scrutiny, a vague and ill-defined sense of guilt threading through him.

‘I met Ben Kemp, many years ago,’ the Dean said. ‘Did you know?’

He knew it well: Ben’s version of the meeting was still clear in his memory, questions in a prison cell. It was hard to match the image with the gentle man before him, but he had never once known Ben to lie. Instinct kept him silent.

‘I thought he looked like a Spaniard.’

‘Yes,’ Richard agreed. ‘His sister too,’ steering the topic away. ‘Though I don’t know where it comes from. The other sister was as fair as day.’

‘Indeed?’ Then, ‘I understand Bishop Bancroft has asked you to keep an eye on the business of the younger Master Kemp.’

Carefully, he set his expression to neutral. ‘Yes. That is so.’

‘I don’t imagine this is easy for you, Doctor Clarke.’

A moment’s hesitation before he said, ‘We were like brothers once, Mister Dean.’ Ben had always been so full of vigour, so full of passion. Even in the days before he turned to God he possessed such an ardour for life, and his fire had been hard to resist. In the cold austerity of their Cambridge college their bond had given him warmth, a human touch that sustained him when it sometimes seemed the love of God was not enough. He turned his mind from the memory.

‘And like most brothers, I assume you had your disagreements?’

‘We ...’

‘Of course you did.’ The Dean cut across him then paused, wiping his fingers and sitting back in his chair so that his face moved out of the candle’s reach and his voice came out of the shadow.

‘You have been a good friend to Kemp in the past and at no small cost to yourself.’

Tainted by association, his own loyalties questioned, overlooked for preferments: he still wondered at his own persistence, his willingness to pay that cost, the price his love for Ben demanded. But love was the greatest commandment, and he could not have turned his back.

‘You must bear him great love,’ Andrewes continued, ‘Kemp is a fortunate man indeed to have such a friend.’

‘It was many years ago.’ He doubted he would be so eager now.

Andrewes moved forward once more into the light. ‘But you must make a decision now where your loyalty lies. If – and notice I use the word if – *if* Ben Kemp still has Separatist sympathies and *if* his sojourn in the East has done nothing to cure the errors in his thinking then he represents a threat to the unity of the realm. It is really very simple. God’s Church in England under the king demands conformity. The Separatists refuse to bend to authority, threatening the hierarchy of tradition and custom that has kept our nation ordered and quiet these many years. Separatism is a path that can only lead to schism and controversy.’

‘I only ever sought to save Ben from himself. My loyalty to the Church has never wavered.’

Andrewes observed him for a moment. ‘I had hoped as much, though I’m sure you’re aware others have thought otherwise. I see very little of the Puritan in you, Doctor Clarke.’ He smiled. ‘So, no secret sympathy for Separatists?’

‘Only pity for their misguidedness.’

‘They choose a hard road,’ Andrewes agreed. ‘And it leads them nowhere. We must continue to pray they will find their way back to the Church’s fold.’

Richard nodded. ‘I do.’ Constantly, he thought. Ben in his error and his grief and his exile was always in his prayers, though scant hope remained he would ever return to the Church.

‘But the Church,’ the Dean continued, ‘and the king are asking something more from you now. It is one thing to offer comfort to a friend in extremity but it is altogether something different to ...’

‘I understand, Mister Dean,’ Richard interrupted. ‘And I will do my duty to the Church, I will do what needs to be done.’

But all the same, he thought, he did not want to hear the word.