



CHAPTER ONE

Salstead

*In which Calumny Spinks carelessly provokes Mistress Ramage*

I was born to a raging Frenchy slugabed mother, sired by a sulking silk-weaver with a battered box of secrets under his floorboards. From her I got my flaming hair, so red that the scabfaced villagers of Salstead spoke of the devil's seed, spitting in the dust for salvation when I walked past. From my father came my sharp tongue, the quick wits to talk above my station, and the shoulders to take the blows that followed.

I was the lowest fellow in Salstead. I had not even been apprenticed by this seventeenth sweaty June of my life. I had to greet men by "Master This", and "Mister That", thumbing my forelock. To them I was but "Boy", a long-limbed red-haired Frenchy gawk, spinning and twisting silk like a halfwit.

The goodwives laughed behind their tippetts when they passed me at the wayside, where my father Peter made me sit outside to work. "The silk must be spun in the fresh air, but woven in the dry dark," he said. If he had his will, I would rot in that village like Squire Salstead, whose bones hung in the rusty gibbet at the crossroads.

I should have been in London, not in this Essex midden swirling with pigeon-chest men and their gossiping dry-venus wives. I was no fighter, could not read or write; but by Christ I had the smooth tongue to fool any man. And so I dreamed of becoming a city gentleman by the power of my own wit. But London was a forbidden, fading memory: of dazzling lights, the broad river bristling with sails, of laughter and scented wealth.

We once had land-title in the city, so my father was known as Mister Peter Spinks then. But he weakly let merchants cheat him from his property and his title, and now he was merely a craftsman.

My own apprenticeship had been delayed so long that in little more than two months, on my seventeenth birthday, I would lose the right to learn my craft and be called Master. And without a trade, I would never have the coin to buy my own land-title, to rise up and become Mister Calumny Spinks.

The night before Peter betrayed my dreams, the rain crushed the slender grass-stems outside my window. For a short while, I watched the fierce dawn make steam swirl from the earth, then went down into the dim workshop. I was hungry, and I had not tasted meat since the spring.

Peter had been at work since before sunrise. Silk-weaving paid less each year, and there had been no silver in our house for many a month, only copper coins, their edges jaggedly clipped by thieving merchants.

I stared at my father between the warp-threads: his long white hair split in the middle and curled inwards to his shoulders, its ends stained yellow from years of weaving-sweat. Though his neck was humbly bent, his back was pike-straight as he sat on a crossbar, his feet on the long slim treadles. He let his fingers see for him in the dark, always flitting back and forth along the weft to pull out flecks of dirt. At night the whole house was filled with his dingy smell, waking me as it rose up through my little coffin-room.

Peter was reaching the end of a fathom bolt of silk. It crept across the frame and slid sullenly over the rolling-bar in front of my thighs. Like a man taking honey from a bee's nest, he reached up and slackened the nuts that held the warp. Then he ran his cutting blade along the trailing threads, a steel butterfly's wing clenched between scarred thumb and liver-spotted forefinger. Taking care to hold the finished silk as it was cut away, he swept the bolt into neat folds in the wicker trough.

Leaning my head against the low wormy joists, I cleared my throat.

"Shall we thread the headboards? Will you show me?"

"It is forbidden by the guild law," he snapped.

"Then let me be apprenticed!" The squeaking in my voice shamed me.

My father reached down into the round basket that held my fresh-thrown silk. He pulled a thread out, running his thumb and forefinger

along it, trying to fault my work. Cack-fingered potrillo, his weaving had more flaws even than my throwing.

“Calumny, you cannot be apprenticed without we have it written in the London guild-book. Should I carve the law on the eating-table?”

“And how would I read the words?” I mumbled, picking up my other work-basket and stalking out of the front door. How indeed, when he had denied me the learning?

I was too afraid of him to say it out loud: that by Saint Matthew’s Day, the fourteenth of September, it would be too late. I’d be condemned to a life of servitude or thieving.

I sighed and put the silk-basket down next to my stool, sitting with my back against the ill-made house. Its clay daub was so watered-down that it would have fallen off if it were not held up by dark oily vines. Behind the house, marshy ground sucked the walls slowly backwards, making the windows gape in winter. It was like my God-fool father: more than sixty years old, but too stubborn to die.

Combing and sorting the waste silk was the worst task of all.

My hands and forearms were patterned with fresh scars. I took a handful of silk waste and began plucking out twigs and cocoon-pieces, ignoring the sting of scabs opening up. Then I began to comb gently, twisting the loose ends into threads around my distaff.

I thought of Sarah, the field-girl of two summers before. I had plunged my fingers into her hair’s feathery softness, soothing my skin as she bucked and panted to the beat of the harvest-fair drum, her lips brushing mine like a cloudburst. What I learned from her, I had already shared with two village goodwives in the lee of the church. A married woman will not fear to be got with child, and so may be more easily bedded.

And then there was Agnes Perment in the chestnut-glade, kissing and teasing with her knees clamped tight against me. Sweat broke on my forehead.

Peter’s ghostly voice crackled suddenly just behind me.

“I go to London today,” he said, gazing at the diseased pear orchard behind the house. He had put on a knee-length overcoat and a pair of

boots with empty spur-holes. The overcoat's ancient wool had faded to ash-grey except for a dusky line that ran crosswise from his left shoulder to his right hip. His brows looked fiercer and darker under his flat-brimmed Puritan's hat.

"Then my name can go in the guild-book!" I burst out. At last I could take the first step on the road to becoming Mister Calumny Spinks.

Peter ticked his tongue against his teeth.

"London is hell," he said. "In that city of thieves they will hang you for a drop of French blood or a prayer said wrong. And... Well, you know that the deeds to our home were taken from us by Godless merchants and money-men after the Plague and Fire. May the devil take those who put coin before honest labour –"

"But how did they –"

"Hold your tongue, lad!" snapped my father. He never would let me ask how he, Mister Spinks, lost his property and became a penniless Salstead weaver.

"You cannot come with me, Calumny. That is my word. And your mother..."

His eyes drooped like a dotard dog's. I knew what he meant. "*Your mother's chest is so weak – she has no joy in life but you...*"

"But it is only for a day or two," I protested. "Since I am to be apprenticed, you could already teach me to read and write."

Peter snorted. "Reading and writing will do you nought but ill in a place like that."

As he squinted, the wrinkles on his pale face knitted closer together. Suspicious, I persisted.

"At least say that you will write my name in the book –"

"In God's name, boy, know your place!"

"My place is in London, but you lost it!"

Peter struck out, catching my nose so hard that it bled great gobs down my shirt. I did not cry out, but nor did I have the courage to speak back as he limped his way up the lane towards the London road, shaking his head. I knew that stubborn back better than his face, so often did he spurn my wants.

Jesus Satan, I thought, must I sit all my life on a stool spinning thread like a girl, and all because of my pig-headed father and crack-chested mother? London was not twenty miles from Salstead, but if I let him go without me this time, I would be stuck here for the rest of my days.

And I wanted more than my apprenticeship. I wanted to follow my father in his true craft. For Peter was no weaver. Despite his limp, his ashen, wrinkled face and rounded shoulders, he stood like a soldier, and by God he could strike like one too. I knew he hid a bloody secret from me and my mother both, and I burned to learn it; so I followed him.

When I caught up with Peter, he had stopped at the flaky iron gibbet, drinking from a flask as he stared at the skeleton hanging in its rusty chains. The skull, eaten away to the bone save for a few mangy scraps of hair that clung to the crown, looked down at the dusty soil. A little dry circle of morning sky showed through the gaping jaw and the eyehole above it. I could not help but touch my own chin, my tongue, my eyelid, to be sure the flesh still clung to my skull.

Three years dead now, Squire Salstead was a Dissenter who had joined the rebellion against the new Catholic king, James, but was captured and given to his village to be punished. It was a scolding, such as you might give a sharp-tongued goodwife or a thieving tinker; but instead of ducking the rebel in the pond, they chained him in the gibbet and pelted him with stones and knives and dung, all the while banging their pots and pans, shrieking to high heaven. The wilder fieldsmen took their pitchforks and wrenched at his guts and hamstrings. Then the sheep farmer, a newcomer called Sand, turned his vicious eyes on my mother Mirella, calling her a traitor for her Frenchy blood. Peter swiftly took us away from Salstead and into the woods, but the screaming kept pace with us all the way.

The squire was not dead when we came back past the gibbet at nightfall. He moaned through the night, thrashing about weakly in the gibbet, barely a stone's throw from my bed. When he at last died, they left him to rot.

Pain beat out its rhythm in my bloody nose as I gathered up my courage to speak, desperate for him to give me my trade.

“Father –” I began.

“They put a popish whore on the throne,” whispered Peter, sunlight glaring on his eyeballs, “after a hundred thousand died to keep this country free of Rome. And then when honest men took arms against him, they murdered them at the scaffold, every blessed one of them.”

He lifted the flask to his lips again. Gin fumes stung the air, and I thought bitterly of how much mutton he could have bought for the cost of it. He jerked his head at the corpse.

“That man was an elder at my old meeting house, know you that?”

“Father, you must not speak of that! Mother says –”

“If I wish to speak of my meeting house, I will. My goodwife thinks I should pretend I never was a Dissenter. But –”

He paused to catch his breath.

“Half the cowards in Salstead went to my meeting house before they turned it into a church! You were too young to remember it. They raised the preacher above the people, they put in a Communion rail, they raised a graven image to worship. The Church of England, so they call it. Some English Church, when its head is a Scottish Catholic whore!”

I tried to shush him, for his voice was rising loud enough to be heard from the nearest houses now. He raised his hand to strike me again, but he was too much in his cups. He swung wildly in the air and had to catch at the gibbet to break his fall, swinging just above the ground beneath the cage. The dead man’s jaw fell open, dropping a fistful of bone-shards onto my father’s head.

He brushed it off like it was barley flour.

“Stay where you are told. And trust no-one,” ordered Peter, getting to his feet. He tramped on alone for the London road, leaving me with the squire’s bones. Barely thirty years he’d lived before they ripped the life from him.

Old fool, to risk his skin for his faith while his own wife and son starved. I swore then that I would never put another man’s cause before my own. Coin, women, title: they would be my religion.

From the gibbet, the high-walled path looped towards the village, with the church spire glowering over the graveyard to my left.

The granite wall on my right was newer, barely four summers old. The fields behind it had once been grazed by pigs and sheep, whose meat and milk fed the poorer craftsmen of Salstead, but the sexton Ramage had enclosed all the common lands. Now they were ploughed and reaped by hired men from Norfolk. Since then, many right-thinking Salsteaders had packed up their carts and handed over their cottages to sour-faced Church of England folk, with their miserable wives and monstrous boil-ridden brats.

Boots tittled their way up the lane: Mistress Ramage and Mistress Sand, the gossip judges of Salstead. Quickly I stilled the squeaking gibbet.

“Boy, your father’s drunken shouting shames the village. And you must not touch the blasphemer,” hissed Mistress Ramage.

Her pale skin was drawn in tight ridges over her forehead and cheekbones, and beetle-leg hairs peeped out from under her plain snowy cuffs. She wore a fine Flemish lace scarf over her lank thundercloud hair. It was she who had condemned the squire to his vicious death, and I had not forgotten her shrieking face as she flung stones at him.

“...Touch,” echoed Mistress Sand, a soft-willed booby who followed Mistress Ramage everywhere. I liked her face well enough, her big eyes wide and childlike on her clear-skinned face, her gentle curving hair peeping out from a little teasing bonnet. She had a taste for frills and bows, but Mister Sand, her husband, was the villain who had called my mother a traitor at the scolding. Now I thought I might put the horns on him for revenge.

I kept my bony backside on the milestone, turned with what dignity I could hold, and looked them up and down. Ramage turned her bird-head away, but Sand looked down, and then up again, blushing a little. I draped my gaze around her like a sweaty arm.

“It is my Christian duty to pray for the dead,” I announced in the marbly voice of Cowans the rector. Sand looked behind her, as if the preacher himself stood in the road.

This mimicking of mine had fetched me many a blow from my father. I could make the voice, the face, the walk, of any man alive. I could give

a husband's command so well that his wife would throw a purse of coins out of her window at midnight.

But my father told me my mimicry was Satan's gift – and now, I had mocked Salstead's foremost wife with it. I cursed myself as Mistress Ramage clenched her fists, making her goatskin gloves squeak.

"This is no Christian carcass. This is a devil who raised a sword against the king."

"Raised sword," whispered Sand, pushing out her chest and making an eyelash-butterfly to hide how she stared at my lips. For though I wore the devil's hair, I was taller and broader than most men in Salstead, and my Frenchy mouth bewitched their wives.

My father's rage filled me. I wanted to sting these women. I took a careless step towards them, wiping down the nose-blood that stained my shirt. Mistress Ramage had to back away to avoid my touch.

"It is my Christian duty," I went on brazenly, "to gaze upon this poor wretch and consider what should be my path in this world. For we may all be tempted, may we not, Mistress Sand?"

She blushed violet-red and looked to Mistress Ramage.

"Even Mister Ramage, when he is not chipping away at a coffin lid, he may be tempted, and it is a sign of his Christian nature that he has not turned away from true marriage with you, Mistress Ramage."

Her eyes went in different directions as she searched for my insult. She did not find it.

"And so I am inspired by this man who did not believe the king was chosen by God..."

"Ahhhh," hissed Ramage, believing she had caught me.

"...for we must be humble in the knowledge that even our Saviour was tempted by the devil."

This rubbish I remembered from Mister Cowans' sermon the Sunday before. Ramage pointed a finger at me.

"Insolence! Your father is a drunkard and your mother is a Sabbath-breaker. Remember you, Calumny Spinks, who is Godly in this village and who is not. Or this devil here will not be the last heretic to hang in Salstead!"

"Mistress!"



It was my mother, her voice tinged with breathy fear as she hurried up the twitchell towards us. Mistress Ramage muttered a prayer but waited for Mirella to come closer.

“Your buttons, I have them, mistress...”

Ramage held out her hand. Careful not to touch flesh, my mother placed a few buttons in the palm, carefully wrapped in deep pink thread like rose-petals. I looked away, shamed by my family’s lowness, and made a play of staring at the delicately engraved silver locket that sat pertly on Mistress Sand’s flushed chest. Nervy, she twisted it in her fingers, and I watched the sweat-mist melt from its burnished skin.

“Penny-farthing, I pray you –” began my mother.

“Boy, tell this woman that I do not make commerce on the road like a beggar. Else punishment will fall on you both,” said Ramage without meeting Mirella’s eye. She closed her dry fingers on the button and turned away.

“God willing, I will see you in the church... yard,” I teased Mistress Sand.

Not sure if she should tut at me or wiggle her apple backside, she did both as she followed Mistress Ramage to the village. Swishy tut, swooshy tut, like a robin’s mating dance.

Turning my back to Mirella, I picked away at the rusty cage until I caught a sharp flake under my nail.

“Touch not, idiot,” she buzzed, her Frenchy voice all scratched up from years of yelling at Peter.

I made a pinched face, pulling the rust from my bleeding thumb.

“Oh Calonnie, my little...”

At last she saw my puffed-up nose, and tried her best to clean my face, her fingertips flat and rough from holding the darning needle. She was so forengie, my mother. After twenty years, she still stood out in Salstead, like blood on lace. I pulled her hand off my face. Mistress Ramage’s threat had stuck in my gut. Those women and their money-hungry husbands had murdered for land before, and they would think little of hurting an ancient Dissenter and his forengie wife.

“Why do you let Peter leave me in this shitpump place, to go to London without me?”

“You are to call him by Father, not that name.” Her breath whistled like a dying man’s.

“I will go to the city by myself,” I said roughly.

“In London they will do this to you too!” she screeched, her eyes bulging wildly as she pointed at the gibbet.

“It would be a mercy,” I said cruelly.

“Oh, you are an ignorant like your father!”

“London is my place!” I shouted at her. “And we cannot go because we must stay here and look after you. We must sit and gather mould in Salstead!”

“I too want to be in London as it was promised me,” she replied. “I want not to be in Salstead. But your father...”

I let my tears flow, for I knew it would sway her.

“Can you not give me leave to follow Peter? Must I stay here and have them spit when I pass?”

“Well. One day you shall go to London again, as you did when you had five years. He will write your name in the book,” she said, walking weakly back towards our house. I ran after her and took her arm. I did not believe her fully, but she had given me a taste of hope.

Five years old. Now I remembered it a little. Climbing on Peter’s horse behind him. The great houses, lanterns and candles and fires everywhere, and sails taller than churches rising up behind the streets. The floating petticoats, the hammering of craft and the tinkling of coin...

Mirella wheezed, and I clenched her arm to hide my fear of her sickness, hearing Mistress Ramage’s voice again.

“This devil here will not be the last heretic to hang in Salstead!”

Did she mean my father?

I thought of the dying man rattling his chains. Of seeing Peter in that cage.