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NOVELS BY RONAN BENNETT

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*Havoc, in Its Third Year*

*The Catastrophist*

*Overthrown by Strangers*

*The Second Prison*







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*Mistrust all in whom the desire to punish is imperative.*

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—GOETHE



## Author's Note

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In early seventeenth-century England—the time and place of this novel—men of property were gripped by fears. They feared enemies without and within. Massing at the gates were the fanatical, brainwashed followers of the pope and the Catholic armies of Spain and the Holy Roman Empire determined to extinguish their liberties, religion, heritage and institutions— what today we would call their very way of life. Since peaceful coexistence was unthinkable, there had to be wars, and when there were not wars, there was the inevitability of such. Vigilance was paramount; there were spies, traitors and fifth columnists among the very highest of the land and among the lowest, biding their time, waiting for the opportunity to strike.

England's external enemies greatly benefited from the lamentable condition into which the country had been allowed to sink. At least so the godly believed. Looking balefully about, they saw the poor living idle, morally suspect, semicriminal lives; women raising bastard children on the parish; disrespectful youths and apprentices shirking work and challenging authority. They viewed with a mixture of alarm and disgust the landless laborers and masterless men, mixed with impoverished Irish, Gypsies and other incomers and foreigners, who wandered in vagrant gangs through their towns and villages begging for food, searching for shelter. They were outraged by the law's failure to control thieves and robbers or punish wrongdoers with the severity their crimes merited. They wanted things settled and known.

For this new leaders were required, not the jumped-up, scandal-prone small men so indifferent to the breakdown of society and its values. And, in towns and parishes up and down the country, new men did indeed emerge as magistrates, mayors and aldermen, masters and governors. Inspired by Scripture, with a burning vision of a just, godly, disciplined community, they determined to uphold the law, reform the manners and habits of the poor, protect true religion, and maintain orthodoxy in thought and deed. They were often sincere, energetic and compassionate; they were also intolerant and merciless (their principles demanded no less). Their ideal was uniformity, and they brought to their great project fearsome dedication.

What follows is a fictionalized imagining of one such experiment in the remodeling of a community in the north of England in the early 1630s. I have seen no evidence to support the assertion that when history repeats itself it does so as farce. Tragedy, it seems, comes round again and again.



**WHEN THE WOMEN FOUND MILK IN HER BREASTS. AND OTHER** secret feminine tokens, Scaife, the constable's man, an archdolt, was dispatched across the windswept moors and icy mountains to fetch Mr. John Brigge, coroner in the wapentakes of Agbrigg and Morley.

Brigge was reluctant to answer the constable's summons. His wife was pregnant, she was bleeding, and the neighbors and gossips had been called. But the law is the law, duty is duty, and a man defrauds his own name if he but once neglects his office. And this was Brigge's office, his calling. The coroner went wherever there was a sudden or unnatural death, wherever there was a body to view.

A body, for his purposes, might be no more than a jawbone and a finger, or some parcels of rancid black meat worried up by the dogs. It might be a young man gored by a bull, his bowels hurled out, or a gummy old crone brought by despair to a rope fastened from the timbers of a barn. Or it might be, as it was in this case, a birth-smothered infant.

Brigge lived with signs and saints; they were everywhere in his life. To his mind nothing in the world was without signification: dreams were portents, phantoms real, and only a fool believed in such a thing as chance.

He could not but note the nature of this particular sudden death coming as it did so soon upon his wife's confinement. Gazing at Elizabeth huddled by the fire with her maids and the women, whispers and slow gestures of care and comfort between them, he thought it a very ill omen. He went to the window and lit candles and there under his breath said a prayer in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, as his mother had taught him he should:

*Whose candles burn clear and bright, a wondrous force and might,  
Does in these candles lie, which, if at any time they light,  
They sure believe that neither storm nor tempest dare abide,  
Nor thunder in the sky be heard, nor any devil spied,  
Nor fearful sprites that walk by night, nor hurt by frost and hail.*

John Brigge was of the old faith.

When he had said his prayer and completed his preparations, Brigge admonished Elizabeth's girl Dorcas to be assiduous about her mistress and do everything to be a good comfort to her, and of Mrs. Lacy, the wife of his neighbor, he begged the same. Then he went to his wife and slipped into her palm a little bottle of holy water so she might have consolation in the extremes of her labor. About her neck he hung three small eaglestones brought long ago by ancestors who had once traveled through the groves of Cyprus. Stones within stones, mass within mass. A body inside another body.

Brigge kissed his wife and said some tender things to her, that he did love her and that with Christ's mercy he would find her and their new child waiting on his return. Calling Adam, his clerk, from where the boy was mewed up in his chamber, he went to the stable and got ready the horses. The three men started on their way.



WINDS AND RAIN-WINDS raged around Brigge's lonely stone house. The land about was poor, that which was not marsh being nothing but cold moor, moss and stones exposed to hard frosts and biting winds. Little grew at the Winters. Brigge and his household depended on the black oats he sowed in the sloping field below the house and on the sheep and few cows he pastured on the stubble between harvest and spring planting. In years gone by he had had good profit by his wool and woolfells and tallow and grain.

His horse walked on and he took a last look over his estate. The wet snow raked them and foreboding welled up in his heart. Like all men facing uncertainty, he desperately wanted to know the future. He wanted to know how things would stand a year from now, in five years, ten. What was God's plan for him? He looked ceaselessly for signs and struggled with their meanings—a robin's return to a branch, the bud of a wildflower where none had grown before, the appearance of a strange dog with a walled blue eye. Signs might be hidden and hard to discern, and sometimes they are obvious and overlooked for trifles.

As they approached the high pass where the snow was thickest on the ground, the gray-white light began suddenly to fade as though a great shadow had crossed the face of the sun. The gloom continued its advance until it became quite dark. They dismounted, having no choice but to halt, for a blind foot in these breakneck mountains would certainly be fatal. All around them was silence and stillness, and the world began to be an empty, lost place. The horses became fearful and the men touched with trepidation and wonderment.

Scaife whispered that strange occurrences were now reported from all corners of the kingdom. His voice was credulous and fervid. Comets had been perceived in the skies and credible witnesses had seen monsters delivered to women at London, Devises, Newark and Carlisle. There were fluxes, inflammations and infirmities that men had never seen before and doctors could not cure. He and all who were his right religious friends feared all this prophesied nothing good to come, for the world was in confusion and chaos, and men said war would be the nation's fate as it was now in Germany, laid waste by the papist armies of emperor and pope.

As the darkness began again to give way to light, Brigge asked of the infant whose body he would shortly view, inquiring whether the child appeared to have come before its time. The dolt could not say and seemed to think the question a trick, regarding Brigge slyly with a stupid, popping fat blue eye. Brigge inquired of the one the constable had apprehended, taking her to be, as was the usual circumstance in these courses, a young girl who had consorted with a fellow servant, or with her master. He imagined her waiting for him already overcome by remorse of conscience, the Machine of the World collapsed and fallen in around her, her head dissolved to tears.

Scaife answered that this one was no girl but a full woman of thirty or more years who had come out of Ireland and that her name as she gave it was Katherine Shay. Her manner, Scaife continued, was not sorrowful in the least, but prideful and very brazen and uncontrite. What else could be expected



from one such as she, he asked, singing the verse of the times, one of the horde of foreigners and idle wanderers and vagrants who plagued the good people of these parts like the locusts that descended on Egypt's corn?

Brigge, his heart sentimental and volatile as that of any man soon to be a father—and more quick to extremes and turns of emotion because this was Elizabeth's first conception to come to full term—listened with abhorrence, wondering what sort of woman this could be who had killed her child and yet did not repent. The coroner filled up with loathing and revulsion for Katherine Shay.

When they were able, they mounted their horses to go through the pass. Brigge's mare grew nervous. The declivities here were very sharp, the paths perpendicular, cracked and without integrity. Stones trickled treacherously away at the side with the sound of faint, descending notes, a frozen musicality. The horse snorted and strained against him.

Scaife looked back over his shoulder and said, "You shall not fall, your worship, if you are but brave."

For this, the coroner gave him the hard words that were his due and commanded the fool to get on. Brigge was not afraid of falling, but the foreboding he had experienced as he left the Winters now gathered into dread. He could not be sure of its causes—his fears for his wife, his horror at Katherine Shay, the storms around him or the black sky above—but the apprehension was strong in him that the summons he had answered this morning was already taking him further than was safe to go. He tried to pray and he thought of the candles in his house and this thought led him into a waking dream. He could see the candles very plainly, burning in the window, Elizabeth behind them, her face all deathly white. Then a huge gust came, the air was exploded and the flames snuffed out. Through the gloom he saw Elizabeth in her white winding sheet, hands crosswise on her breast, with rosemary and rue in her fingers. A bell tolled as Dorcas and the women watched her, she senseless and without motion, as still as the child beside her.

This vision passed before his eyes. There were shadows in the mist and the hairs on his arms and neck stood up.

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THEY DESCENDED TO the new bridge. There was no settlement on the wastes on either side of the river, not even a cottage, but they came upon a band of beggars dragging furze bushes and stones to a clearing where they had erected one cabin of scratches and were beginning a second. There were some women—some young, some old—and a scattering of children, pallid and dirty, two or three with miserable, deformed limbs and dropsy bellies. Seeing the coroner, they became still as stones and watched warily, dogs disturbed in stealing scraps.

Ten or a dozen more strangers, several armed with swords and staves and carrying the marks of recent fight on their necks and faces, came up from the direction of the town. Brigge demanded of the company who they were and what they were about, but they gave him only the usual high, pelting speeches of wanderers and vagrants. The coroner spurred his horse into their midst, knocking one to the ground and others out of the way, and then they were all *your honor this* and *your honor that*, pleading they had nowhere to go and in any case dare not attempt to travel further because the country people hereabouts had offered them violence.

Only one stood his ground, forward and dauntless. He wore dirty black breeches and a torn gray coat. ~~His hair was black and unkempt and his broad, open face streaked with dirt and blood.~~ The coroner demanded to know his name and he said he was called Exley. He and his companions had gone to the town to solicit relief, as he alleged, but the tocsin had been sounded and they were driven off with blows and abuse.

A tall, lame, wasted man with blains and sores covering his head in a great disease stumbled in front of Brigge's horse. He stretched out a bony hand, the long fingers gloved in soot and filth.

"A halfpenny, your honor," the diseased one begged, "to buy some corn."

"You are in unlawful occupation of this land," the coroner said. "You must move on."

"We are Englishmen," Exley said, "and must live somewhere."

The coroner dug his spurs into the horse's flanks and rode over to Adam and Scaife, who surveyed the disreputable company with expressions of contempt.

Brigge led them on. The hour was getting late.

The black moor stretched before them, disappearing into a dark gray wash that might have been sky or sea or the ends of the earth. The snow continued to fall, but here it did not lie. The moor was vast, malevolent and borderless, and it claimed the water for itself, for the freezing black pools into which, in time, dogs and lambs and even men and their horses would innocently stray, slide and drown. The road was mud, stones and water.



THEY CAME INTO THE TOWN OVER CLARKE BRIDGE AND SKELDER Gate where the watch challenged Brigge most uncivilly, without regard for his person or rank. The coroner demanded to know their names and said they should answer for their impertinence. To which they replied that the times were dangerous and they were doing no more than their duty, being commanded to stop all who came into the town, though they be coroners, governors or lords. To add to their insolence they gave their names, shouting them out and repeating them provokingly one after the other.

They continued on their way, passing kindling-sellers and carters bent into the wind and a swineherd herding his red barrow hogs. Brigge stared up at the dark windows of the pretty Church of St. John. The gargoyles grinned back at him, their faces full of sour hilarity; the rainwater in their throats was mocking laughter. Near the woolshops he stopped to buy a small parcel of figs and raisins from a petty chapman come from Hull on his way to Manchester. A present for Elizabeth. Little surprises like this never failed to delight his wife, and his heart lifted momentarily at the thought of her receiving them. They turned up Crown Street toward Gibbet Lane, where the gibbet stood on its solemn stone plinth.



AHEAD WERE THE high walls of the House of Correction, built two years ago to mark the coming into power of the Master and governors. It stood with imposing solidity, three stories high and thirty yards long, a simple, regular building of dark stone hewn from the local mountains and dressed by the town's masons. The governors' emblem of bay-laurel was inscribed at the four corners of the façade.

Occupying the upper two stories were the inmates, God's poor and the Devil's: vagrants and rogues and other notorious persons of disordered habits, as well the blind and maimed, the aged and decrepit, the weak widow and young orphan, those past their labor and those before it. It was both symbol and seat of the Saints who had begun the great project to bring light where there was darkness, order where there was chaos, discipline where looseness and vileness flourished. The austere arched entrance through which the coroner passed was crowned by an escutcheon bearing the legend: *And when was sin more plentiful?* It was presented not as speculation, but apodixis: it was now a universal truth that scruple was past and this was the darkest age.

The ground floor, divided by a broad stone staircase, had at the north end a hall for the holding of courts and sessions, and, on the opposing side of the stairs, a smaller chamber in which the Master and governors met to order the town's regulation and work the reformation of its people. This room was bare but for a long, simple joined table and the chairs around it. The walls were unadorned, the ceiling low, and the polished floorboards gleamed in the candlelight.

Brigge took off his gloves and cloak, pinched the breeches from his numbed thighs and went to warm himself by the hearth. The Holy Book stood propped on a stand, opened at the thirteenth chapter of Paul's letter to the Corinthians, as the Master had prescribed it should to remind them that besides

justice they were also to be compassionate: *Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up.* Charity and justice—these were the governors' business, the chief business and eternal ambition of all good government since the time of Solomon, tipping sometimes one way in the balance, then in the other, but always in good government finding eventual approximate correspondence. Darkness gathered at the windows.

The constable came in. Doliffe and Brigge were fellow governors but their greeting was stiff with strained politeness.

“We have not seen enough of you these three months past, Mr. Brigge,” Doliffe said. “It is almost as if you had banished yourself into exile.”

There was good nature in the constable's tone, but it was counterfeit. He was a man of peevish temper and little moment, one who imagined himself unjustly disparaged by all, including the coroner. His imaginings had made him close and reserved, and quick to discover insults where none was intended.

“I live remote from the rest of you,” Brigge answered, deploying the same false lightness. “I do apologize.”

The constable made a little forced laugh. Brigge closed his eyes in gratitude for the fire. The heat began to warm the backs of his legs and creep up through his buttocks. The winter had been hard and he had ridden little. His thighs were sore and the lower part of his back stiff. The thick smells of damp wool and wet horse and wet leather rose to his nostrils.

He was about to ask of Katherine Shay and the business of the dead child, but Doliffe put in first. “I understand you were stopped by the watch.”

“Their manner was most zealous,” Brigge said.

“They are required to be zealous,” Doliffe answered with a thin smile.

“You have not been to town for some space of time and may therefore be unaware of the difficulties we face. In spite of our labors, the people are grown wild and loose in their morals and occupy themselves in broils and disturbances. We have seen rioting and disorder in our streets. Only last market day some women of the baser sort attacked the corn merchants and overturned their carts. A great deal of grain was stolen.”

“Corn is scarce,” Brigge said, “and dear.”

“And then there are the vagrants,” Doliffe continued, “swarms of them, threatening to beggar us all. Only a few hours ago a desperate band came and threatened to fire the town before they were driven off by the watch.” Brigge thought of Exley and the squatters at the vagrant camp. “I have to tell you, Mr. Brigge,” Doliffe went on, “that the neighbors are frightened out of their wits. Already some of the better sort have left. They say we tax them but do not protect them. I wonder: are they wrong? Can we say we have done right by our best inhabitants?”

The constable peered at Brigge in expectation of a response.

“I am sure there is in this, as in all things, room for improvement,” the coroner said eventually.

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“Indeed,” Doliffe said; then added, as though in afterthought, “You should know, Mr. Brigge, that your absence from our meetings has given rise to some comment.”

“I hope the reasons for my absence have not been misunderstood. As you know, my wife is with child and her pregnancy has been difficult.”

The constable made some broad sounds to convey sympathy. “Some men attract speculation, it is inherent in them,” he said. “One man goes about his business completely unremarked while his brother attaches every kind of rumor for doing no more than the same—it cannot be avoided. Some murmur that you have become disaffected with the rigorous and scrupulous work we do here.”

“They have no reason to harbor such thoughts,” Brigge said. “I have always been, and will always remain, the Master’s faithful follower.”

“What the governors, and many of the better sort of townspeople too, begin to doubt—forgive me if I speak freely, Mr. Brigge—is your continued devotion to the great project on which we are embarked. Unfortunately, the addiction to sin and delinquency remains as general as ever it was. We thought to cure it by charity. We must now accept that our remedy was insufficient. If we are to save the town, we must be unsparing in the execution of justice. We must be a sore scourge and sharp whip of evildoers, wherever we find them.”

The refrain of the times, the foot of the song that all now sang. Brigge knew the words; every man knew them. How honest men lived in fear and their labors went unrewarded while thieves and rogues prospered. How pity and charity had enervated the poor. Sin in all its forms lurked in the imagination: theft, fornication, drunkenness, murder, rape, the immutable disorders of the poor, the multiple threats to life, property, chastity and good religion.

“But I am keeping you from your business, Mr. Coroner,” Doliffe said. “You will not find the matter difficult. The woman’s guilt is very apparent and will be easily proved.”

Brigge thanked the constable curtly for his observations.

“I shall wait for you in the sessions hall,” Doliffe said through pursed lips. “The jurymen and witnesses are ready.”

Brigge stayed by the fire though the heat had begun to scorch the backs of his thighs. He remembered as a child his mother scolding him for standing so close to the hearth, saying he would catch fire and burn like a torch, like the saints and martyrs of the holy church. Rapt by the flames, he ignored her. Eventually, his mother lost patience and snatched him away. She held him fast by his thin wrists and beat him once or twice with light strokes. “What would have happened to you,” she chided him, “had I not taken you from the fire?” She shook her son for an answer. “Would you have the flames consume you?” He had no answer then, and none now. He looked down at the fire and stretched out a hand toward the flames and wondered at the glory of immolation. He recalled the embrace of his mother’s arms, his head pulled to her breast. Brigge had always had a sense of the abyss.

He roused himself from his brooding. The witnesses and jurors were waiting, and so was Katherine Shay, who had murdered her child.

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