

**SWORDS OF ALBION**

The DEVIL'S  
LOOKING  
GLASS

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**MARK CHADBOURN**



**an imprint of Prometheus Books**  
**Amherst, NY**

Published 2013 by Pyr®, an imprint of Prometheus Books

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Cover illustration © Chris McGrath  
Cover design by Jacqueline Nasso Cooke

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17 16 15 14 13 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Chadbourn, Mark.

The devil's looking glass / by Mark Chadbourn.

p. cm. — (Swords of Albion ; bk. 3)

ISBN 978-1-61614-700-6 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-1-61614-701-3 (ebook)

1. Great Britain—History—Elizabeth, 1558-1603—Fiction. I. Title.

PR6053.H23D485 2013

823'.914—dc23

2012036325

Printed in the United States of America

For Elizabeth, Betsy, Joe, and Eve

*Go, Soul, the body's guest,  
Upon a thankless errand;  
Fear not to touch the best;  
The truth shall be thy warrant:  
Go, since I needs must die,  
And give the world the lie.*

—Sir Walter Raleigh, *The Lie*

# PROLOGUE

The merciless sun boiled in a silver sky. Waves of heat shimmered across the seething main deck of the becalmed galleon where seven sailors knelt, heads bowed. As blood dripped from their noses onto their sweat-sodden undershirts, they muttered prayers in Spanish, their strained voices struggling to rise above the creaking of hull timbers flexing against the green swell. Harsh light glinted off the long, curved blades pressed against their necks.

At the sailors' backs, the grey men waited in silence, still as statues, drawing out the whimpering men's agony before the swords swept down. Ghosts, not there yet there, their bone-white faces were wreathed in shadow despite the unremitting glare. Oblivious to the sweltering heat, they wore grey leather bucklers, thick woollen breeches, and heavy boots, the fabrics silver-mildewed and reeking of rot.

Captain Juan Martinez de Serrano was kneeling on the forecastle, heavy brows furrowed as he watched the row of seamen. Even now he could not bring himself to look into the terrible faces of the ones who had boarded his ship. Aft of the Spanish vessel, the other galleon's grey sails billowed and its rigging cracked, although there was no more wind today than there had been for the past three. Serrano lowered his head in desolation. What fools they had been. Though they knew the devils of the Unseelie Court were like wolves, the lure of gold had been too great. The captain cast his mind back to that night ten days past when his men had staggered out of the forest with their stolen hoard. Barely could they believe they had escaped with their lives, and their laughter had rung out across the waves as they filled the hold and dreamed of the glory that would be lavished upon them by King Philip in Madrid. They had set sail with a fair wind and thought all was well . . . until the grey sails appeared on the horizon, drawing closer by the hour.

Steel bit into his neck and he winced. They should have known better.

Now the quarterdeck was strewn with his crew's bodies and soaked with their blood, each man slaughtered within moments for all that they were among the fiercest fighters upon the Spanish Main.

A rhythmic rattling stirred him. Raising his eyes once more, he watched a strange figure cross the main deck. The sound came from trinkets and the skulls of mice and birds braided into his long gold-and-silver-streaked hair. Hollow cheeks and dark rings beneath his eyes transformed his features into a death's-head. Cloaked in grey-green robes covered with unrecognisable symbols outlined in a tracing of gold that glistened in the midday sun, he looked like one of the gypsy conjurers who performed at the fair in Seville. Sweeping out his right arm, he said in a voice like cracking ice, "You are honoured—our king approaches."

Serrano swallowed, sensing the new arrival before he saw him in a weight building behind his eyes and a queasy churning in his stomach. He closed his eyes. How long would this torment continue? A measured tread crossed the main deck and came to a halt in front of him. Silence followed.

After mouthing a prayer, the captain forced his eyes open and squinted against the sun's relentless glare. A pair of grey boots came into focus, and the fur-lined edge of a shimmering white cloak. He heaved his shaking head up, following that pristine cloth until he reached the head of the one who looked down on him. But the brutal sun hung behind the figure and his features were lost. Serrano thanked God for that small mercy.

"I am Mandraxas, of the High Family, and until my sister is brought back to the land of peace, I hold the Golden Throne."

His voice sang like the wind in high branches. Serrano could not believe it was the voice of a cruel man, until he remembered that this was not a man at all, but some eldritch creature with no understanding of compassion or gentleness or the kindnesses that tied mortals together.

"Who are you?" the king demanded.

The captain muttered his response, his mouth so dry he could barely form the words.

"Your name means nothing," the monarch replied. "Who are you, who dare to trespass on our land and steal our gold? To think yourselves our equals?" When Serrano failed to reply, Mandraxas continued, "You were damned the moment you insulted us with your arrogance. Let Deortha show you what you truly are to us." The king waved a languid hand towards the



main deck where the robed intruder waited. The one who resembled a conjurer nodded, skulls clacking in his hair, and the nearest swordsman whipped his blade into the air and plunged it into the sailor kneeling before him.

Serrano cried out as the seaman pitched forwards across the sandy boards. Deortha knelt beside the unmoving form, his lips and hands moving in harmony. The captain could comprehend neither words nor gestures, but a moment later the slain sailor twitched, jerked, and with a long shudder clawed his way upright. He swayed as if the ship was rolling in a stormy sea, his dead eyes staring.

*“Por Dios,”* Serrano exclaimed, sickened.

“Meat and bones,” Mandraxas said. “No wits remain, and so these judgering things are of little use to us beyond performing the most mundane of tasks.” He waved a fluttering hand towards Deortha. “Over the side with it,” he called. “Let it spend eternity beneath the waves.”

The captain screwed his eyes shut at the splash, silently cursing the terrible judgement that had doomed them all. “Let this be done,” he growled in his own language.

Mandraxas appeared to understand. “There will be no ending for any of you here,” he said, his voice laced with cold humour. “You will join your companion among the fishes, never sleeping, never dreaming, seeing only endless blue, never understanding what or where you are.” His words rang out for all to hear. “But for the rest of your kind, that ending is almost upon them. Listen. Can you hear the beat of my people marching to war? Listen.”

A sword plunged down; a body crashed upon the deck. And another, and another, the steady rhythm moving inexorably towards Serrano. He sobbed. Too late for him, too late for all mankind if the cold fury of these fiends was finally unleashed.

“In England now, the final act unfolds,” Mandraxas intoned above the beat of falling bodies. “And so your world winds down to dust.”

Serrano looked up in despair as the shadow fell across him.



# CHAPTER 1

**B**edlam ruled in the Eight Bells Inn. Tranquillity was for the men of the land who sat by warm firesides in winter and took to their beds early, not for those who braved seas as high and as hard as the Tower's stone walls. Here was life like the ocean, fierce and loud and dangerous. Delirious with drink, two wild-bearded sailors lurched across the rushes, thrashing mad music from fiddle and pipe. With shrieks of laughter, the pockmarked girls from the rooms upstairs whirled around in each other's arms, bare breasts drooping from their tattered dresses. The rolling sea shanty crashed against the barks of the drunken men clustered within the shadowy room. In hazy candlelight, they hunched over wine-stained tables or squatted against whitewashed walls, swearing and fighting and gambling at cards. Ale sloshed from wooden cups onto the boards and the air reeked of tallow and candle-smoke, sweat and sour beer. The raucous voices sounded lustful, but odd, melancholy notes lurked discordantly beneath the ribald discourse, betraying the hopelessness of men clinging desperately to life, knowing the harsh seas would inevitably claim them.

When the door rattled open to admit a blast of salty night air, the din never stilled and no eyes turned towards the stranger. Wrapped in a grey woollen cloak, his features were hidden beneath the wide brim of a felt hat. Behind him, across the gleaming cobbles of the Liverpool quayside, a carrack strained at its moorings, ready to sail at dawn. The creak of rigging merged with the lapping of the tide.

The new arrival closed the door behind him and demanded a mug of ale from the innkeeper's trestle. A seat in one of the shadowy corners called to him, away from the candlelight where he could watch and listen unnoticed. Had they not been addled by drink, some of the seamen might have recognised the strong face from the pamphlets, the close-clipped beard and black hair curling to the nape of his neck, the dark eyes the colour of rapier steel.

Will Swyfte was a spy—*England's greatest spy*, so those very same pamphlets called him, *the bane of the Spanish dogs*. Only the highest in the land knew his reputation was carefully constructed for a country in need of heroes to keep the sleep of goodly men and women free from nightmares of Spanish invaders and Catholic plotters, and other, darker things, too. Swyfte cared little. He did his dark work for queen and country without complaint, but kept his own machinations close.

He sipped his drink and waited. As the reel of the shanty ebbed and flowed, he caught snatches of slurred conversation. Tall tales of haunted galleons and the clutching hands of dead seamen. Of cities of gold hidden in the lush forests of the New World. Of a misty island that came and went as if it were alive. Of golden lights glimmering far out across the waves and down in the blackest deeps. Through the eyes of the sailors, the world was a far stranger place than their landlocked fellows believed, and Will Swyfte knew the sea-dogs were correct. They had sailed to the dark, distant shores where the truth abided and had paid a price for their wisdom. The spy noted the leather patches hiding missing eyes, the lost legs and hands, the scars that drew maps of the world across their skin, and felt a kinship with them. They were all marooned far from the peace and order that most experienced, for all that his own wounds were not so easily seen.

He thought back more than a week to Nonsuch Palace, a day's ride to the south-west of London's foetid streets. While the queen recovered her strength in her bed under the watchful eye of the Royal Physician, turmoil reigned throughout the grand building. Servants scoured the chambers and searched the grounds. The Privy Council had been cloistered for more than an hour when the knock at Will's chamber door finally came.

His assistant, Nathaniel Colt, had been waiting on the threshold, flushed from running through corridors warmed by the late-autumn sun. His dark-green doublet was stained with sweat under the armpits and his brown hair lay slick against his head. "Sir Robert sent word from the Privy Council meeting to summon you to his chambers," he gasped. There was fear in his eyes and his voice wavered. "Is this it, then, Will? Invasion? Our enemies are marching towards us?"

The spy hid his true thoughts with a grin. "Nat, you worry like an old maid. Do you see me rushing to arms?" Enemies approached, yes, but not the ones Nat feared. Not the Spanish, nor their Popish agitators. No, Will was

thinking of the true Enemy—those who lived by night, and treated men as men did cattle.

“I do not see you rushing to a flask of sack, and that worries me more.”

Will rested a reassuring hand on the young man’s shoulder. “England lurches from crisis to crisis as always, but we stand firm and we abide. This will pass.”

His words appeared to reassure Nat a little. Will left him resting by the open window as he made his way across the noisy palace. Lucky Nat, who still slept well at night. He saw only glimpses of the greater war. Will sheltered him from the worst horrors for the sake of his wits, and the spy would continue to do so while there was breath left in him.

The spymaster’s door was hanging open when Will arrived. Fresh from the Privy Council meeting, Sir Robert Cecil fired orders at a clutch of scribes and assistants as he marched around the chamber. The queen called him her “Little Elf” because of his small stature and his hunched back, but his sharp wits and cunning were more than a match for any other man at court. He had an instinct for the games of high office, and his ruthlessness made him powerful—and feared.

When the black-gowned secretary saw Will, he dismissed the bustling aides and closed the door behind them. “Gather your men,” he snapped, feigning calm with a lazy wave of his hand. “You ride north today in search of Doctor Dee.”

“You know his whereabouts?”

“A carriage was seen travelling along the Great North Road. I received word this morning that it has taken a turn towards Liverpool.”

“You are sure?”

“Yes.” The spymaster’s eyes blazed with an apprehension he could not contain, and he turned away to calm himself. “Doctor Dee was seen in the company of that Irish whore, Red Meg O’Shee. They must be stopped before she spirits him away to her homeland. If they reach that country of bogs and mists, we will never see Dee again. And then . . .”

*England will fall*, Will completed Cecil’s unspoken thought. Dee was the architect of the country’s defences. He worked his magics to keep at bay the supernatural forces that had tormented England for as long as men had walked its green fields, and the Irish chieftains envied that protection; they had suffered the torments of the Fair Folk for many a long year. But whatever

wall Dee had constructed around England with his ancient words of power and candles and magic circles had been crumbling. Dee was the only man who could repair those defences. Without him, the night would sweep in.

“The threat is greater than you know.” Cecil bowed his head for a moment, choosing his words carefully. “The mad alchemist has in his possession an object of great power. For years he has denied all knowledge of it, but shortly before he was spirited away, he confided in me that he had used it to commune with angels.”

“Angels?” Will laughed. “I have heard those tales, but Dee is most definitely not on their side.”

“This is a grave matter,” the spymaster snapped, a twitching hand leaping to his flushed brow. “Should this object fall into our enemies’ hands, there will be no more laughter.”

Will poured himself a cup of Romney from a jug on a trestle table littered with charts and documents. “Then tell me the nature of this threat.”

“It is a looking glass.”

The spy peered over the rim of his cup, saying nothing.

“No ordinary glass, this, but an obsidian mirror, supposedly shaped by sorcerers of an age-old race who once inhabited the impenetrable forests of the New World.”

Will frowned. He remembered Dee showing him this mundane-looking mirror in his chamber at Christ’s College in Manchester, where he had, no doubt, been tormenting the poor brothers. “Brought back to Europe in a Spanish hoard?”

Cecil’s eyes narrowed. “Legend says it could set the world afire, if one only knew how to unlock its secrets.”

The spy drained his cup. “Very well. I will take John Carpenter, the earl of Launceston, and our new recruit, young Tobias Strangeways. We will ride hard, but Red Meg has a good start on us.”

The spymaster frowned. “You allowed Mistress O’Shee into your circle. You trusted her, though you knew she was a spy—”

“I would not use that word. Tolerated, perhaps. I understood her nature, sir, and I am no fool.”

“Is that correct? I heard that you and she were more than associates. I need assurances that this woman has not bewitched your heart or your prick. If that be so, I will dispatch another to bring her back.”

“There is no one better.”

“You have never been shy in trumpeting your own achievements, Master Swyfte,” Sir Robert said with pursed lips. “Nevertheless, I would rather send a lesser man I can trust to succeed in this most important—nay, this utterly *vital* work than one who will be led by lust to a disaster that will damn us all to hell.”

“I am no fool,” Will asserted, setting aside his own uncertainty regarding his feelings for the Irish spy. “There is too much at stake here for such distractions.”

“I am pleased to hear you say it.” The spymaster ran the gold-ringed fingers of his right hand across his furrowed brow. “If Dee leaves our protected shores, he will be prey for the Unseelie Court, and the repercussions of that are something I dare not countenance.”

Fire in his heart, Will left the cold chamber. Within the hour, he and his men were riding north as hard as their steeds could bear. Red Meg would expect him to be on her trail—she was as sly a vixen as he had ever known—and she would not make it easy for them to recover Dee. He had seen her kill without conscience. Even the affection she felt for Will would not prevent her from stealing such a great prize away to her homeland if the opportunity arose.

Braying laughter jolted Will back to the Eight Bells. The musicians had put away their instruments and were swigging malmsey wine in great gulps. The girls flopped into laps or draped themselves over shoulders in search of the night’s earnings. Arguments sparked. Punches were thrown.

Dee’s knowledge was dangerous and he had to be returned to London at all costs, that was certain. But the spy knew that the alchemist revelled in misdirection and illusion. Was this mirror truly the threat Cecil feared? Or in this time of uncertainty and danger, had the spymaster simply given in to superstition and fear? Will shrugged. The world was filled with worries, and the truth would present itself sooner or later.

He drained his ale and selected a subject, a balding seaman with wind-chapped cheeks and a scrub of white hairs across his chin. Nursing a mug, the man was leaning against the wall next to the stone hearth, eyeing the flames with the wistful gaze of someone who knew it was a sight he would not see again for many long weeks. He looked drunk enough that his guard would be low, but not so inebriated that he could not provide useful information.

Keeping the brim of his hat low, the spy demanded another drink and walked over to him.

Will rested one Spanish leather boot on the hearth and watched the fire for a moment before he said, "I have never met a man of the sea who was not interested in adding to his purse. Are you one such rare creature?"

"Depends what you need doing," the man slurred.

"All I require are words."

The sailor's gaze flickered over Will. He appeared untroubled by what he saw. "Ask your questions."

"I seek news of two new arrivals in Liverpool who may be requiring passage to Ireland. A woman with hair as fiery as her nature and a tongue that cuts sharper than any dagger, and a man . . ." The spy paused. How to describe Dr. Dee in a way that would do the magician justice? "White-haired, blazing eyes, a fierce temper, and a slippery grip on the world we all enjoy. He may have been wearing a coat of animal pelts."

"I have heard tell of them, an Abraham-Man, mad as a starved dog, accompanied by his daughter," the sailor grunted. "The woman cut off the ear of Black Jack Larch, so I was told. His only crime was to lay a hand upon her arm and ask for a piece of the comfort she promised."

"That would be Red Meg."

The seaman smacked his lips, eyes pointedly focused on Will's hand. The spy unfolded his fingers to reveal a palmful of pennies. Snatching the coins, the man continued, "They bought passage to Ireland aboard the *Eagle*, sailing at dawn. Wait at the quayside and you will see them."

"I would prefer to surprise them before sunrise. Where do they stay?"

"The woman took Black Jack's shell outside Moll Higgins' rooming house. You could do worse than to seek them there."

"You have earned yourself another drink. Go lightly on the waves." Will bowed his head and turned towards the door. He found his way blocked by three men, hands hanging close to their weapons.

"What 'ave we 'ere, then? A customs man come to spy on us?" the middle one growled. His left eye was milky, a jagged scar running from the corner to his jaw. He wore an emerald cap and his voice had the bark of authority. *A first mate, perhaps?* Will wondered.

"Why, you are good, honest seamen. I could find no rogues or smugglers here," Will replied, his light tone belying the shrewdness of his gaze. "Step



aside. My business here is done and I will disturb your drinking no more." He knew any sign of weakness would only encourage the drunken men further.

The sailor's one good eye flickered from left to right, and in an instant strong hands gripped Will's arms. Someone tore off his hat. The sailor whisked a dagger from the folds of his dirty linen shirt and pressed the tip under the spy's chin, forcing his head up. A blast of ale-sour breath washed over Will as the man searched his features. Silence fell across the rest of the inn as the other drinkers crowded around.

One of the women leaned in, her eyes narrowing. "I know 'im," she said in a broad local accent. "That's Will Swyfte, that is. England's greatest spy." A lascivious smile sprang to her lips. "I would see the length of your sword, chuck."

"Later, in the privacy of your chamber, perhaps. Let us not point up how dull are the blades of these fine men." He held her gaze and her smile broadened.

"The great Will Swyfte," the one-eyed man mocked. "Dewy-eyed women and witless fieldworkers might be easily dazzled by yer exploits, but 'ere yer just another sharp nose pokin' into our business."

"Your business concerns me less than the contents of your privy. I am troubled by greater matters—the security of this realm."

"Stick 'im now," another sailor said. "We'll dump 'im in the drink and no one'll be the wiser. Let 'im walk out and we'll be swarming with tax collectors like rats on the bilge-deck."

Will's dark eyes flickered over the leering, grizzled faces pressing all around him. He had been here before, too many times, and whether he was looking into the eyes of Spanish pikemen or Kentish cutthroats, he knew the signs; there was no point in further talk.

Wrenching his shoulders back, he unbalanced the two men gripping his arms. With one sharp thrust, he planted a boot in the gut of the sailor wielding the knife and the milky-eyed seaman doubled over with a forced exhalation. Will's sudden movement took the drunken sailors by surprise, and he smiled. Sober, they would be a formidable army of brigands. Soaked in ale, they wheeled around like small children.

Tearing his arms free, the spy swept one foot under a three-legged stool and heaved it into the face of his former captor. Bone shattered, blood

sprayed. A roar rang up to the rafters and squealing whores ran for the rickety stairs at the back of the inn. The seamen drew daggers and hooks, grey steel glinting dully in the candlelight. The men surged forward.

Will felt the familiar heart-rush and drew his rapier, enjoying the familiar weight of the weapon in his hand. With one bound, he leapt from a bench to the innkeeper's cluttered trestle. Cups flew. Coin jangled onto the boards.

"Who will be the first to feel the bite of my blade?" he called, kicking the barrel. The wooden tap burst free, honey-coloured ale gushing out. The keg spun off the table and into the path of the onrushing seamen.

The spy felt no desire to kill any of these rogues; he wished to save his steel for more deserving blood. But they swarmed around him like angry bees, eager to sting him to death. It was as he searched for a route past them that the flagstones began to vibrate as though the trestle was being dragged over cobbles. The sailors came to a sudden halt, eyeing each other uneasily. Across the inn, the candle-flames sputtered and shuddered as one. Shadows swooped. Breath clouded as a winter chill descended. The sailors murmured, casting anxious glances all around. One by one they put away their weapons.

Through the small, square windowpanes, distorted lantern-light danced in an unnatural manner from the carrack moored nearby. A moment later, the door crashed open and the master of the quay lurched in, hat askew, face drained of blood. "Take up your weapons and any light you can find," he croaked. "The Devil has come with the fog."