

*Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it.*  
Marlowe, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*



## I

*Why did I do it?*

*The years have passed and still I do not know. The sudden summons, the dart of joy, the sheer deliciousness of slipping into human shape once more, even for a short time – was that it?*

*When I saw who – or rather, what – had summoned me, and why... Well, it was a shock, to say the least. That might account for it. I expected the man – now grown wiser and willing to consider my proposal – and what did I find? A boy. A mere boy. What did he want with infinite knowledge, infinite power? That I, of all spirits, should be at the beck and call of a child no more than twelve years old!*

*Ah. I remember now. Snaring the souls of men and women – not much challenge there. Most are hell-bound long before they call for me. But an innocent – now there's a prize. An investment worth any number of grown men. How could I guess he would turn out such a fool, leaving me a job half done?*

*Yet all is not lost. The matter can wait. Down here time has no meaning. Forty years or four hundred or four thousand, it is the same. All that counts is the call when it comes.*

*I can wait.*



## CHAPTER ONE

# *How It All Began*

Walton Hall, December 1585

John Striven leaned over the half door, its wooden edge digging into his ribs. His eyes, adjusting to the dim light, picked out the horse's outline, the white diamond on its brow, the gleam in its dark pupil as the long, arched neck curved round.

'Over here,' he whispered. 'That's it.' A gentle clopping over wood and straw and a soft, velvety nose nudged the palm of his hand. 'Sorry, my beauty, I've nothing for you. Only this.' Reaching up, John patted the smooth black neck. He was so close now he could feel the horse's breath on his cheek, its warmth mingling with the smell of sweet hay that could never mask the sour odour of dung in any stables, however grand they might be – and grand these certainly were.

Giving a last pat, he stood back and looked about him. Eight loose boxes at this end alone, perhaps the same at the other, beyond the central passage, each with its own window in which the Walton coat of arms stood out in

red and blue panels amidst the clear glass. From the contented snorts and munching sounds drifting from the far end, his and his father's horses were being given a good rub-down and a mouthful of hay by Sir Richard's stable lads.

John felt his lips twist into a smile. If all went well today, Bramble and Molly might soon feel quite at home in these fine surroundings. His father had been gone – what, fifteen, twenty minutes? He must be with Sir Richard now, perhaps in that great library whose books mounted so high a special gallery had to be built to reach them; a thing unheard of anywhere before.

Turning, he leaned back against the stall, the horse's warm breath tickling his cheek. From here he could see through the wide stable door into the yard, past the brew house on the right, to the great hexagonal tower at the corner of the west wing of Walton Hall, rising into the cold January sky. Behind it the domed roof of a matching tower glinted in the sun, while closer to, the main block ran at right-angles between west and east wing, its roof sprouting smaller turrets interspersed with high chimneys.

So many tall, mullioned windows, so many rooms; now he understood the rumours among the household at Combe of a library larger than any chamber there! What books might it contain? The Roman and Greek authors, certainly; books of devotion such as, according to his father, a gentleman should possess. But – and here John felt a familiar stirring inside, an excitement he

couldn't explain – people at Combe had whispered of other subjects dear to the master's heart: strange, magical works on mathematics and natural philosophy and the movement of the stars...

*Crash.* On the far side of the yard a gate banged open. Chickens squawked and ran in all directions as a boy came charging towards him, glossy, shoulder-length black hair flying under his cap, the ends catching on his stiff white ruff. About his own age, John guessed, but much more richly dressed in his blue velvet doublet and hose. Under brows drawn together the boy's dark eyes were fixed on the stable entrance, as if searching for someone. His mouth was a thin, tight line.

John's heartbeat quickened. He shouldn't be here. Sir Richard didn't expect him, and his father, yielding to his pleas to be taken along, had warned him to keep out of the way. Yet news would have reached the house that not one, but two people had arrived at the stables. Was he about to be hauled into the master's presence for reproof? To bring shame upon his father?

Slipping to the empty stall opposite, he flattened himself against the panels. Out of sight of the doorway now he might escape notice. He held his breath.

Footsteps skidded to a halt on the threshold. 'Walt!'

John jumped. The boy must be a good ten feet away, round the side of the stall, but it felt as if he'd screeched into John's ear.

'M-master Thomas!' With a hasty click of the half door a stable lad emerged from Bramble's stall on the

other side of the passage and came striding over. 'I did not—'

'No, you didn't, did you?' The boy launched himself at the stable lad, fists directed at his midriff. 'Flash has had her puppies and you never sent me word! You were to tell me at once, not leave Abel to bring the news!'

The stable lad doubled up in pain. John's jaw tightened. Walt might be taller and sturdier but his assailant certainly knew where to punch.

Walt gasped. 'Master Thomas, I – pray you, it – happened but two hours since. 'Tis best – they are not disturb—' he broke off in a yelp at a well-aimed kick to his shin.

'Out of my way!' Giving a final shove, the boy headed down the passage past the feed bins. 'Flash! *Flash!* Where are you? Ah!'

At the end of the passage a door lay ajar. John caught a glimpse of saddles racked along the wall of the room beyond, the gleam of stirrups and bridles, before the boy hurled himself through, letting the door bang behind him. A cry of delight – followed by a sound that pierced John's heart. A whimpering, pleading, animal sound.

In eight strides he reached the door and pushed it open.

On a piece of sacking in the corner of the tack room lay a spaniel, pale golden belly turned out to suckle the small, mewling things that blindly sought her swollen dugs. Her copper head, which should have been resting

on her paws, or nuzzling her newborn, instead stretched upwards, moving to and fro. A low growling came from her exhausted throat, all the resistance she could offer to the figure kneeling beside her, one hand rummaging among the puppies, the other flicking her muzzle with a shape that was long and thin.

A whip.

Darkness flooded John's vision. He was aware of nothing, not the sound of his boots stamping across the floor, nor the constriction in his lungs; only the face that swung round at him, its fine features distorted in a cry of rage, as John seized the whip and flung it away.

The boy leapt to his feet. 'By heaven! Who are you? Hobbs! *Hobbs!* An intruder!'

John took a step back. His chest rose and fell so hard it felt as if his ribs might burst. 'I'm no intruder,' he panted. 'My name is John Striven. My father is bailiff of Sir Richard Walton's manor at Combe. The master bid us – bid my father' – he corrected himself, colouring – 'here, since he is in need of a steward and thinks my father—'

He stopped. He was wasting what little breath he could spare as Thomas gazed beyond him, expecting Hobbs to answer his summons. Which was unlikely, since no sooner had the head groom welcomed John and his father than he'd been summoned to the hall for the servants' dinner.

Thomas glared at him. 'I don't care who you are,' he spat, 'you have no right to interfere with my sport.'

‘*Sport?*’ John couldn’t contain himself. ‘You call it sport to treat a poor animal like that?’

Thomas turned a deathly white. Under his right eye a muscle twitched. ‘How – *dare* – you’ – the words scraped his throat as if they choked him. He reached down to the floor.

John didn’t see it coming. A crack and a line of pain across his left cheek. Clapping a hand to his face, he felt his fingers slide on blood. He gasped as Thomas prepared to strike again with the riding crop that he – fool! – hadn’t cast far enough away, and didn’t wait. He ran from the room, down the passage and into the yard.

Footsteps thudded behind him. ‘Come back, you knave, I’m not finished yet!’

There. Straight ahead, a gate in the wall, the one by which Thomas had stormed into the yard. John raced towards it, scattering chickens, startling a solitary stable lad sweeping the cobbles, and flung it open. Too late he saw his mistake. The house surrounded him on all three sides, casting a deep shadow over bare, triangular herb beds between which a path led up to the door.

No help for it. The herb garden blurred into a grey-brown mass as John tore up the path, skidding on ice patches, the stone columns framing the entrance jiggling up and down before him. Up the steps, through the door and into the dark-panelled corridor – but where then? From the right came a murmuring, the clink of trenchers and tankards, a savoury aroma – of course, that way must lie the hall where the household was

eating dinner, and at the end of the corridor, the kitchen. They'd think him some vagabond if he came flying in among them mud-spattered, hat awry, cheek smeared with blood!

Through the herb garden rang his pursuer's voice. 'Base, cowardly wretch, flee and blab to the kitchen maids! Clinging to their skirts won't save you!'

John looked left. Here the corridor stretched into gloom, only partly relieved by pale light filtering through lattice panes, and he hurried down it, flinching at the tap of his boots on the floor. Surely somewhere along here he could hide... Ah! On the right, a recess, two steps up and a heavy oak door. Seizing the iron ring, he turned it, slipped through and, closing the door, leaned back, lungs pumping, ears straining for the sound of running feet outside.

Nothing. He waited, hardly daring to breathe. All was still. *Yes*. It would take his pursuer some time to hunt him through the kitchen and the service rooms around it. Perhaps he might even lose interest and return to his cruel game in the tack room. Pray Hobbs might be on hand then to give that poor bitch some protection.

Letting his fingers uncurl from where they pressed against the wood John opened his eyes.

And blinked.

## CHAPTER TWO

# *The Christmas Present*

Northwell School, about 420 years later

Well, better get it over with.

Henry Fowst hoisted his school bag more comfortably across his shoulder and walked through the gate. Keeping his eyes on the ground, he made straight for the tunnel between the dining room and music blocks, reaching the playground before any of the people streaming in on either side of him noticed. So far so good.

Looking up, he was briefly dazzled. Away to the left, beyond the river, the rising sun broke through the clouds, sending a beam that caught the tip of the turret just above him. Screwing up his eyes, he let his gaze linger, feeling his spirits lift at the sheer incongruity of the sight. How many other schools could boast a turret on their roof? Or a pair of tall, spiral-patterned chimneys, looking totally out of place with the rest of the main building, let alone the glass and concrete classroom block?

He gave a wry smile. Funny how more than a year

after winning a scholarship into this whole new world of traditions, uniforms, old-fashioned games of marbles and conkers, acres of grass and meadows rolling down to the river, the overall magic of the place could still take him by surprise. Especially when the atmosphere in some parts – the library, for instance – went, well, beyond magical. Spooky, even.

Enough. He should get a move on. Between him and the classrooms people clustered together, comparing their new gadgets, tablets – whatever. The trick was to make it past without any of them looking up.

‘Hey, Hamf – I mean, Henry – what’s the hurry?’

*Thanks Charlie,* thought Henry, *for remembering to use my real name. Eventually.* ‘Nothing,’ he said out loud. ‘It’s cold, that’s all.’ He shivered, a bit too obviously.

Not that Charlie noticed. ‘Uh-huh.’ His light brown eyes flicked back to the notice board at the mouth of the tunnel. If he bent any closer, he’d bash his nose on the glass.

‘Charlie, you *know* you’ll be in the football team,’ said Henry. ‘Give Ralph a chance to put the lists up.’

‘What, is he here?’ Charlie looked round.

Henry groaned. ‘Don’t know, I haven’t seen him. But the team’s hardly going to be fixed on the first day of term, is it?’

‘Do I hear my name?’ A tall, fair-haired figure emerged from the tunnel opening. Shirtsleeves rolled up in spite of the cold, he held his anorak across his shoulder with one hand while the other was plunged

into his trouser pocket. ‘Hi, guys,’ he smiled. ‘How was Christmas?’

‘Hi Ralph!’ said Charlie. ‘Great, thanks.’

‘Yeah,’ mumbled Henry. ‘Charlie was just wondering—’

‘Who said I was?’ Charlie cut in. ‘You were wondering, more like—’

‘Me?’ cried Henry. ‘No, I—’

‘Whoa, slow down, guys,’ Ralph put up his hand. ‘Wait for the trials, eh?’ With a wink at Charlie he strolled off towards the classroom block.

Henry gazed after Ralph’s retreating figure. ‘Well you’re in,’ he said. ‘That’s obvious.’

‘You might make it too,’ said Charlie. ‘You never know.’

‘Yeah, right. A marbles team, maybe.’ Henry’s hand went to the bag in his pocket, freshly replenished from Christmas Day with an emperor, three galaxies, a bloody Mary and a few others. Rachel must have saved her pocket money for weeks.

‘Oh yeah, let’s have a quick game.’ Charlie nodded over Henry’s shoulder. ‘Look, no one else is. What’ve you got?’

Turning, Henry hesitated. Between the sandpit on the far side of the music block and the edge of the games field lay a tempting stretch of tarmac, empty and shining in the early morning light. A few juniors had dropped their school bags to mess around in the sand – cover for him and Charlie, if they needed it. But the crowd flowed in the opposite direction towards the classrooms and no one gave that part of the playground a glance.

Charlie got there first. Rummaging in his small

drawstring bag he drew out a giant cat's eye. It flashed in the sun as he rolled it across the frozen ground to a distance about four metres away. 'Try *that*.'

Henry couldn't suppress a grin. There'd been a time when a marble that size would have taken his breath away. That Charlie should risk his best treasure at the start of a game! Now he knew better. He felt inside his own marble bag; ah, a comet. That would do.

At the sight of the medium-sized, translucent white sphere licked by tongues of red and blue Charlie gave a pitying smile. 'Come on, you've got better than that. It's half the size of mine.'

Henry crouched down, the marble between his thumb and forefinger. 'If you think' – he closed one eye – 'I'm going to risk any of the ones I got for Christmas' – he took aim – 'on your poxy, oversized cat's eye—'

'You have. Got to be. Kidding,' drawled a voice.

Henry's marble whizzed across the tarmac, missing Charlie's by a hair's breadth.

'And he can't even shoot straight.'

No mistaking that voice. No need to look up and see Jake standing there, mock-disbelief written all over his pasty face. Grabbing his marble bag, Henry jabbed it at his pocket. It refused to go in.

'Yeah, in your position I'd want to hide the evidence too. Hear that, Ralph? Hamface got *marbles* for Christmas.'

Henry froze. Not Ralph. The one person he'd been sure was safely out of the way and here he was, minus bag and anorak, walking back across the playground

towards them. A familiar, hateful warmth rushed up Henry's neck to his cheeks, reminding him – as if he needed it, right now! – of that stupid nickname. Hand clamped to his pocket he waited for Ralph's amused – or worse, pitying – reaction.

But Ralph seemed not to have heard. He walked slowly, concentrating on something in his hand. A phone, by the look of it – but not just any phone. Its slim shape and smoothly rounded edges spoke of the latest in technology and design.

Charlie paused in the act of scooping up the two marbles left on the tarmac. 'You got *that* for Christmas? Wow, Ralph! I wish my dad owned a computer company.'

'Yeah,' said Ralph. 'It was either this or a laptop. Tough call, really.'

'Hamface got marbles,' Jake repeated, even louder this time. 'How sad is that?'

*Not sad at all, actually, when your sister gave them to you because she's only seven years old. When it's the one present you get that isn't something you need, like new jeans or trainers.* Jamming the bag into his pocket, Henry held his hand over it, fist clenched.

'C'mon Henry,' Charlie murmured, giving him back his comet, 'let's go in.'

'Yeah,' said Henry. His feet itched to break into a run. But that would be stupid.

Ralph shrugged. 'If that's what he asked for, why not?' He flashed Henry a smile before going back to flicking his fingers over his phone.

Henry grinned back. *Yeah, why not?* he thought. *In your FACE, Jake!* His step lightened as he crossed the playground.

‘Sure,’ sniggered Jake. ‘I asked for marbles once. ’Bout five years ago. When I was *eight*.’

Charlie opened his eyes very wide. ‘So it can count!’ he called over his shoulder. ‘Hey, Jake, can you spell whole words too?’

It took a few seconds for Jake’s grin to fade and a red flush to spread across his cheek. He lunged forward. ‘*Shut it, you—*’

‘Let’s go,’ said Charlie. Gripping Henry’s sleeve, he steered him to the classroom block and through the door. ‘Jake’s rubbish at marbles. Gave up playing in Year Five. Reckon I’ve still got a few of his in my bag.’

‘What I can’t understand,’ said Henry, ‘is why a guy like Ralph puts up with a jerk like him.’

‘Dunno. Out of pity, maybe?’ Charlie snorted.

‘Good morning, boys.’

Henry and Charlie pulled up short.

At the front of the classroom, navy blue cape draped over the back of her chair, sat Mrs James, the deputy head.

‘Where’s Mr Matthews?’ said Charlie.

‘Sit down boys. Thank you.’

Henry hung up his anorak. Collapsing on to his chair, he caught Charlie’s eye. This didn’t look good.

Mrs James began the register. Her crisp, bright tones grated on Henry’s ears. It should be Mr Matthews sitting there, long legs bent under the desk like a stick

insect, his few remaining hairs brushed across his head in wisps, his voice a vague murmur. Not this interloper who, after a full term at Northwell, still seemed incapable of pronouncing a single name correctly.

‘Now,’ said Mrs James, closing the book, ‘I’m sorry to tell you that Mr Matthews slipped on the ice over the holidays and broke his leg, which gives me the chance to do some teaching for a change.’ Under tortoiseshell glasses her smile swept the room. ‘And as my class –’

Henry winced. Her class? *Hers?*

‘– you can be the first to know the exciting news. I’ve persuaded the headmaster to revive the Northwell Prize, set up by Dr Northwell in 1920, for the best essay on the history of the school. The deadline is the Monday before half-term; the prize...’ she paused, clearly savouring the moment. ‘Twenty pounds.’

A sigh rippled round the room. It sounded like the deflating of a large gas balloon.

‘I guess twenty quid was a lot of money in 1920,’ said Ralph.

‘Yeah, right,’ scoffed Jake.

Something fluttered inside Henry. *Twenty pounds.* Peanuts to most people at Northwell but for him – hey, that was a mobile phone! A basic one, of course, and he’d have to save to top it up – but still a phone.

Not just that. In his mind’s eye he saw his father, the deep-cut lines on his forehead smoothed away and a light in his grey eyes no one had seen for months. *Go for it, Henry. You know you can do it.*

The fixed smile left Mrs James's lips. 'It's not just the money, Jeff,' she snapped. 'I expect all of you to enter. Which is why your first history lesson will be taking place in the library.'

Silence. Charlie stopped swinging his legs under his chair. All eyes in the room focussed on the deputy head who beamed back, gratified at last to have gained everyone's attention.

A slim brown arm went up. 'Mrs James, did you say the – library?' asked Meena.

Mrs James frowned. 'Of course. Surely you've had lessons there before? Goodness me, don't look so worried,' she added as Meena slowly shook her head. 'It's only books. They don't bite, you know.' She let out a tinkle of laughter.

No one joined in. People looked at each other or down at their hands.

'What on earth is the matter with you all?' cried Mrs James. 'Anyone would think I'd asked you to join me in some frightful dungeon – ah. I see. Don't tell me you believe all that business about the library being haunted?' She tapped a pencil on the desk. 'Harry, what about you? Harry!'

*Oh help, she means me.* Forgetting he was sitting down, Henry leapt to attention, banging his knee on his desk. People tittered as he felt the telltale heat creep up his neck. 'Um, n-not haunted exactly,' he said. That strange feeling he got on those rare occasions he'd braved the fierce librarian, Mrs D'Arcy, and gone in for a look

round, that sense of something – or someone – watching him: mightn't that be down to the gloomy atmosphere? Mrs D'Arcy's three-pupil rule didn't help; how could an empty library *not* feel, well, a bit spooky? Maybe if they all went in together the spookiness would melt away.

Clearly Mrs James thought so. 'Right,' she said, 'I've had quite enough of these silly rumours. I don't want to read twenty-six identical downloads from Wikipedia, I want to see some original research, using real books. You are lucky to have one of the best-preserved Elizabethan libraries in the country. And just because it's old – well, of course, it must be haunted. Utter nonsense.'

The bell went. Chairs scraped back.

'See you there, straight after assembly!' Tucking the register under her arm, Mrs James stalked out of the room.

Henry looked round. Never mind the library, what were his chances with the Northwell Prize? Obviously Jake wouldn't bother. And Ralph certainly didn't need the money. Charlie – er, no. His gaze fell on a pair of shining black plaits framing a perfectly oval face, eyes cast down in thought as their owner walked towards the door.

Meena. Yeah, she'd enter.