Five Letters (None Complete)

Greg Wilson

2560 words

Anyalcze

The Sign of Three Pears

17 Chalcedony 1223

My dearest brother,

I kiss you upon your left cheek, I kiss you upon your right. And with formality satisfied I ask you, *where is my money?* You promised you would redeem me from this garlicky wasteland! We are Sarkoszys, you and I. How has the world fallen that one of us should be reduced to—oh, I cannot put it to paper, though I must hear the chamberlain say it five mornings of six. “Good morning, Your Grace. Your *tutor* is here.” That word is like a pair of iron spikes, one hammered into each ear with the gusto of a tradesman. I swear in blood, I am *this* close to throwing myself off the walls of Her so-called Grace’s so-called castle.

Her Grace… Oh brother, put out of your mind the buxom Praczny maidens in those slim volumes we discovered beneath the account books in Father’s library, so swiftly and so creatively unmaidened. Her “Grace” has the physique of a bison. She can barely speak her own tongue; decency forbids me from describing what she does to *ours*. Never have I loved our language more than I do now, when I must listen—no, must *collaborate*, may the unnamed saints forgive me—while my pupil flays it and then pisses upon its wretched remains.

To paint salt on the burn, the hopes I was so foolish as to express in my last letter regarding her brother have been most cruelly slaughtered. (Did my letter reach you? If so, then *where is my money!?*) He at least can conjugate a verb, but his intelligence is of a low and cunning sort. I admit, I mis-read him.

Oh, I can hear your guffaws now: me, mis-read a boy? Yes. That is how cloddish this crapulent wilderness has made me. Oh brother, you must rescue me. You must—

My apologies. The courier rose from his table as if to depart. It is my plan to give him this letter directly so as not to attract the attention of Her Grace’s rumormongers, who seem the only persons hereabout with more than dung for wits. I feared I had missed my chance, but he sought merely to relieve himself. I think him no keener to be out in the rain this night than the innkeeper’s pigs, who are farting and snoring by the fire not three strides from me.

But the brother. In place of verb conjugations and well-rolled R’s, I filled *his* lessons with tales of derring-do, taking care always to point out that their heroes know more than just the hewing of limbs, but are as well adept at climbing ropes and picking locks and all other manner of thieverous what-not. From there it was but a carter’s nudge to persuade him (though never in so many words) that a hero-to-be like himself had a right, nay, a *duty*, to acquire said skills. And how better to do it than by filching a few odds and ends from his sister’s chambers?

Oh, but his eyes lit up at that. His sister, who wears more gold on two fingers than he has to his name and still calls him “darling Pupsy” in front of his friends. Oh yes, he—

Another false alarm. The courier stirred once again, but only to scratch the ears of one of the innkeeper’s pigs in order to disguise his own release of flatulence. Pfah! Have I mentioned how much garlic these people eat? Oh brother, please—I will shave my head and swear my soul to the Balance, only send me fifty bezels for the carriage home and lodging on the way. Or sixty, should you love me, so that I may drink myself senseless each night so as to erase all memory of this place.

But again, the boy. I thought him caught like a sparrow in a spider’s web. He would do the skulking and scurrying (his heart pitter-pat the while, I am sure, an ear taken or worse should he be caught in the Women’s Yard uninvited), while I would dispose of whatever he brought me. And of course, should he put hands to any of Her Grace’s correspondence, well, why should *he* be the only one in the family embarrassed in front of friends? There would surely be *something* in her private letters that would be broth and barley for court gossip, and more practically, insurance for us should she realize—

\* \* \*

On the road southeast of Nevy Rav

The first week of Chrysoprase, 1224

Sweet’s words by Buckle’s hand

Mistress,

Excuse handwriting please. Master says, something hunts us. I say, I do not see its shadow, I do not hear its cry. Master says, horses know more than men what it is to be hunted, so I darken my mouth and write what he tells me to.

The letter with this comes to us in Nevy Rav. There is an early storm, so I find work in the Graf’s stables to pay for master’s hay and barley and a place that I can sleep. When I tell the stablemistress we will leave on the morrow, she tells me I must speak with the postmaster. There is a law, she says. Every traveller must carry mail if there is mail to carry. She says there will be coin in it. I would say no, but it will draw eyes, a poor traveler refusing coin. And as master says many, many times, there is no letter not worth reading.

(Master asks, am I writing clearly? I say, I will write more clearly if you go more slowly. Master says, if I go slowly, we will be dinner.)

The postmaster asks me what road we take. I say, south to the Nettelin, then upriver to the Black Grass. He finds three letters to go that way, then bids me return in the morning for more. I say, to be away today. He says, no, there is a law, the criers announce which way the mail goes and I must wait the day. I weep and plead, but he says, there is a law, then gives me a shaved quarter bezel to pay for lodging. I make repairs to master’s saddle, then spend the evening in the inn you have told me of, but your agent does not come.

On the dawn, we return to the postmaster. There are no more letters, so we take the three and leave by the cattle gate. A man waits for us there with his hood pulled low, so I put my hand to my sword, but he says, good fortune that he has not missed me, for he has a letter that the postmaster is not to see, and then makes with his hand the sign I was told to watch for to show he is your agent. He gives me the letter with a half bezel of good silver and a promise of a full bezel more upon its delivery in Polgotseny. Others approach on the road, so he leaves me.

(Mistress, master says to tell you he was *skulking*. He says to tell you he almost asked, “What is the secret password?” just to see what the man would do.)

Master has me leave the Great Coast Road and follow an oxcart track after mid-day to open the letter and read it to him. The seal is easily lifted. The handwriting in the letter is that of a man, Uwsian, well-schooled and right-handed. It is good paper, but cheap ink and a poor pen. There are pinpricks in the page. The master says, it is a way of secret writing.

Excuse handwriting again please. Master is now sure we are followed, so we move more quickly than before. Master says—

\* \* \*

By the hand of Thokmay Prince Gandan (renounced)

The University, Gandan-in-Gandan

19th Malachite, 1243rd Year Since

To herself only

The Lady Kembe

Her residence

Ossisswe

Most honored lady,

Please excuse my audacity in approaching you without prior introduction, but I have recently come into possession of two letters that I believe may be of substantial interest to you, and am hopeful that some mutually agreeable arrangement can be found for their disposition or destruction.

The matter is this: I am preparing a thesis for submission to the University in pursuit of the rank of Scholar Ordinary. At the advice the Balance Petcharatiriv, I selected as its subject the causes of the recent rebellion in Uws. If I may quote the Balance directly, “Half of the survivors wound up here when it was over, so why not ask them what in the saints’ names it was all about?”

Accordingly, I have spent these past months asking exiled landgrafs and former knights-justiciar when they first heard that the Sarkoszys had raised their banner, why they decided to put on rebel ribbons, &c. During one of these visits I came into possession of the letters to which I alluded earlier, the first pages of which I have copied and appended to this of mine. In between draughts of a particularly pungent home-brewed *otrava*, their owner informed me that in the years prior to the rebellion, it had been his honor to serve as a knight-warden of Nevi Rav. In the spring of 1224, his patrol came across a badly wounded Darpani and a Gifted horse, in whose possession were several letters. In the confusion of events he set the letters aside, only thinking of them again these seven years later because of my questions.

The letters are:

Item, from a “Gentleman”, written in the style of the scurrilous travelogue, *The Customs, Laws, and Language of Northern Praczedt: A Guide For Those So Fortunate As To Have Been Born Elsewhere*. It suggests that the “Gentleman” was *Sra* Georgiy Chorichiakov Sarkoszy, later husband to Her Grace the Duchess of Anyalcze, and the message encoded in it by pinpricks would confirm that even at this early date, *Sra* Georgiy and his twin brother were recruiting allies for their later revolt.

Item, from the rider of a Gifted horse, most probably the Darpani courier mentioned above. The letter’s intended recipient is not named, but is addressed as “Mistress”, a title which, as all Cherne knows, your agents often use for you.

This second letter is what has prompted mine to you, as it suggests that you were more than just an observer to the Sarkoszy rebellion. I have found it impossible not to speculate on how the current rulers of Uws would react if they learned of that. At the least—

\* \* \*

By the hand of Thokmay Prince Gandan (renounced)

The University, Gandan-in-Gandan

Yellowsday, 3rd Tourmaline, 1243 YS

To herself only

The Lady Kembe

Her residence

Ossisswe

Most Learned,

Please excuse the soldierly language I used this morning—I am not accustomed to words writing themselves on my shaving mirror, and did myself a minor injury with my razor when they appeared. By way of apology, I hope you will accept the apple brandy that accompanies this letter; it was laid down in the last year of His Highness my grandfather’s time, and the Balance Petcharatiriv tells me that it may bring back fond memories for you.

Thank you also for the letters that had appeared on my desk. I agree, the one purporting to be from me is a creditable forgery. In answer to your questions:

Item, yes, someone *did* burst into flames a little after noon yesterday, to wit, my tutor, a Stipendiary Scholar named Andrae Ghislaine é Marcque. He came to Gandan from Araña some eight years ago and has been my occasional tutor these past two years. I have spoken to my father’s Minister of Rumors, who assures me that her agents never had any indication that Learned Andrae was other than he seemed.

Item, no, I do not recall the Learned being particularly despondent over the past few months. I agree that Gandan’s winters may seem damp and gray to someone accustomed to southern skies, but he had weathered several such with no apparent ill effect. And if I may be so bold, if he *did* find our weather, food, or conversation unbearable, a man of his intelligence could undoubtedly have found a more reliable way of committing suicide than attempting to blackmail a magician.

Having answered your questions, I would now be grateful if you would be willing to entertain some of my own. From the scorch marks on the forged letter, the Balance infers that you used it to work this morning’s spell, and wishes me to ask whether you used Idjfikan’s Long Reach or the Bantangui variant of Moescher’s Immolation. I myself am more interested in the other pages, as they bear directly upon the thesis I am indeed preparing. Many have speculated on the identity of the author of *A Guide For Those So Fortunate As To Have Been Born Elsewhere*. If the first letter is trustworthy, it would put that matter to rest.

And when read in light of the second letter, it does suggest that you may have had some prior knowledge of the events following YS 1224. If this is true—

\* \* \*

Ossisswe

Greensday 22 Sapphire ’43

To Thokmay Prince Gandan (renounced)

The University

Gandan-in-Gandan

Highness,

Received yrs of 3 Tourm. this morning. First page intact but stained, other pages missing. Deduce from this that fifty-year-old brandy was too great a temptation for at least one courier on the road between Gandan and Ossisswe. Doubt anyone at this end would open something addressed to me; suggest inquiry at your end, followed by whipping.

Regarding questions in yrs, I receive more inquiries regarding historical and genealogical matters with each passing year. Were I to answer even their tenth part I would have no hours left to devote to the present day. And even were I to answer, would you actually know more than you do now? If I said a Gifted horse named Sweet was doing my bidding in Uws at the time of the rebellion, would you then know the truth? No—you would instead have to ask yourself whether I was misleading you for some further purpose own. (You would most certainly ask yourself that if I said I did *not* have an agent there and then, would you not?)

Once you enter this jungle you are lost. Was the first letter a forgery? Some scoundrel could have impersonated *S.* Georgiy Ch’kov so as to wheedle money from his brother or embarrass his family. Or is the first letter authentic but the second a forgery intended to embarrass me, or the first two authentic and the one from the Learned Andrae a roundabout attempt to engineer your murder by my hand?

And what of yrs? That bottle of brandy—did the Balance Petcharatiriv suggest sending it to signal, “War with Lhabde seems certain,” or, “I have run out of pistachios, please send more.” You cannot know.

And what of *this* letter? Is the hand that holds the pen that of Lady Kembe, or of some rival who wishes to lead you astray for reasons of their own?

You ask, are these letters authentic? I say, as much as any: they are letters, and that is all we can know.

Kembe,

herself