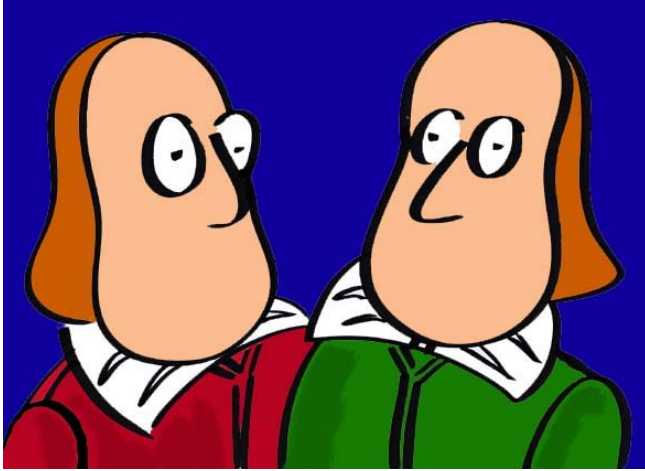


Tommaso Argento in London

by Chris Rose



Tommaso Argento looked sadly out at the many tall ships sailing down the big, wide River Thames in front of him, thinking about how beautiful the scene was. Even though the scene was beautiful, he had a strong feeling of melancholy. He knew that this would probably be the last time he would be able to sit here in Greenwich, looking out across the river to the city of London in the distance. Soon, he had to go along the river to Deptford to say goodbye to one of his best friends here in London. From Deptford he had to get on a ship to sail to the Hague, and from there, by horse across the German states and the mountains to his home in Venice. During his stay in London, this had been one of his favourite places to come when he wanted to be alone.

Ten days ago he had received a letter with some bad news. He carried the letter in his pocket. When he thought about it he felt sad and gloomy again. He tried to ignore it and think about something else, but it was impossible. Eventually he pulled the letter out and started to read it again, hoping that it would perhaps have magically changed while it was in his pocket.

*Venice,
April 20th 1593
To the Honourable Gentleman, Master Tommaso
Argento*

My son, I know how much you are enjoying yourself in London. It is a new city, full of energy and ideas, and this is a good thing. I hope also that you have studied during your stay at Oxford, and that you have made

many important acquaintances in the city, for London – I predict – will be the centre of a new trading empire in the next century. It will be important for our business. I hope your stay has been profitable.

However, my son, I have important news for you. You have been away for more than a year now, and in that time I have been very busy with our family's business. I have become, I am afraid to say, an old man. You, on the other hand, are no longer a boy. When you left our house you were still a boy, but now, after your studies and your travels, you are a man.

My son, it is time for you to come home. I need your help here, and you can no longer continue to play and waste money in London.

For this reason, I insist that you return as soon as possible. I expect you home within one month.

*Your loving father,
Gianbattista Argento*

No, the letter hadn't magically changed. It still contained its terrible news. He had one month to get back to Venice. That meant that he must leave immediately. He looked at the ships sailing down the river again, and realised that within one or two days at the most, he would be on board one of those ships. It wasn't the long journey that worried him. It was simply the fact that he now had to leave London.

His father had given him the permission, and the money, to visit England because Tommaso had promised to go to the university in Oxford to study. His father was an intelligent man, and knew that it was important for his son to travel. "Travel is education," he said. He was right – Tommaso had learned a lot. But he had not learned about trade or commerce, he had not learned about astronomy or navigation, he had learned only that he did not want to be a businessman. While he was in England, Tommaso had learned that he wanted to be a poet.

One evening when he was at the university in Oxford, Tommaso was invited to a dinner where a man named Bruno was talking. This man was another Italian, and Tommaso thought he was fascinating. During the dinner, Bruno began to

speak excitedly about the mystery, beauty and power of poetry. It was like being struck by lightning: Tommaso was fascinated and decided immediately that he didn't want to be a businessman anymore. He wanted to be a poet.

Bruno was older than Tommaso, but very interesting. Tommaso saw him frequently while he was in Oxford. He was not a friendly man, and didn't speak very much, but Tommaso nevertheless thought he was fascinating. He discovered that Bruno came from the south of Italy, and that there were a lot of rumours about him. Some people said he was a spy for the Spanish, some people said he was a spy for the Vatican, some people said he was really a spy for Queen Elizabeth. He had a lot of radical opinions and dangerous ideas – some people accused him of being a heretic. Later, Tommaso's friend Kit told him the truth – that really Bruno was a spy for everybody, and against everybody else. But it was difficult to believe Kit - Kit was always telling jokes, or telling lies.

When Tommaso decided to leave Oxford and go to London, Bruno asked Tommaso to deliver a letter to one of his friends in the capital. Tommaso was delighted, and as soon as he arrived he went to deliver the letter to Mr. Christopher Marlowe. Unfortunately, it was difficult to find Mr. Marlowe. Bruno told Tommaso that Marlowe didn't have a proper address, but usually spent most of his time in a pub called 'The Mermaid'.

Tommaso spent his first day in London looking for The Mermaid. He couldn't believe how dirty the city was. People sometimes said that his hometown of Venice was dirty, and it was true, the canals in Venice smelt terrible, especially in the summer, but London was something else! London was a labyrinth of tiny, narrow streets, and buildings that seemed to grow every day. Venice, too, was a labyrinth, but the buildings in Venice were made of beautiful coloured stone, while here in London the buildings were made of wood, paper and straw. They looked very unsafe, small, dark and dirty. Thousands of people packed into these small streets and smaller buildings. Everywhere there was the smell of roasting meat and the horses that passed through the crowds. Eventually, Tommaso found The Mermaid. He went down some stairs into a

dark cellar. The only light was from a few candles, even though it was daytime. There was a group of men playing cards sitting at one table, and one other man sitting at the bar. He was asleep, probably drunk, thought Tommaso.

"Excuse me," Tommaso asked the barman. "I'm looking for Mr. Christopher Marlowe."

"There are a lot of people looking for Kit Marlowe," said the barman. "Who wants him this time?"

"I have a letter from a friend of his, from Mr. Giordano Bruno in Oxford." When Tommaso said this name, the drunk man asleep at the bar woke up.

"It's for me," he said tiredly. "Give me the letter then go away." Tommaso gave him the letter, but he didn't go away.

"Bruno told me that you are a poet, Sir. Is it true?" he asked.

Marlowe looked at Tommaso angrily.

"Of course I'm a poet! I'm the finest poet in England today! Don't you know anything! Haven't you heard of Doctor Faustus? Or Tamburlaine?"

Tommaso summoned up his courage and said, "I am a poet too, Mr. Marlowe. I would be very grateful to you if you could read some of my work." Tommaso pulled out some of the sonnets he had written recently and gave them to Marlowe.

At first Marlowe just laughed, but then he read Tommaso's sonnets.

"Well, they're not bad," he said, "but they need a bit of work..."

After that Tommaso and Marlowe became friends. Tommaso discovered a whole new world in London with Marlowe, or 'Kit' as everybody called him. Marlowe was very interested in Bruno, and asked Tommaso lots of questions about Oxford and the other people there. He wanted to know what Bruno was doing, who he was visiting, what he was writing, and what speeches he had made. Tommaso wanted to help his new friend Kit and told him everything, the rumours of heresy and atheism, the gossip that said he was a spy. Kit was very interested.

There were always a lot of other people with Kit. Tommaso met some of the most important poets in London – Sir Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser were Kit's friends – and a lot of young poets and playwrights. There was one young

man in particular who had written a play set in Verona. He asked Tommaso lots of questions about Venice and Verona and Italy. Tommaso told the young playwright lots of stories that he remembered – the one about the Moorish general in Venice who killed his wife for jealousy, the one about the Jewish merchant in Venice, then the famous old story about the two rival families in Verona. The playwright was very interested, and wrote everything down. Kit joked with Tommaso. “You’re giving him all the best stories! Anyway, you look like him – you could be twins!” Tommaso looked at the man. They both had the same little beard, it was true, and both were wearing one silver earring, both were going a bit bald, but Tommaso couldn’t see a strong resemblance. Besides, Kit made fun of the young playwright’s uneducated country accent. Tommaso didn’t speak like that! No, Tommaso thought, he didn’t look like the young writer with a strange name.

There were also a lot of other people around Kit Marlowe who Tommaso didn’t know. Tommaso didn’t really like these people. A lot of them were dirty and ugly and impolite. They looked like common thieves and criminals. Tommaso couldn’t understand why Kit liked them. When he asked, Kit replied, “A poet should know everything about life,” but Tommaso thought there was something sinister about these people. Sometimes Kit disappeared for long periods of time. Tommaso had no idea where he went. He thought that a poet’s life was very mysterious.

Things began to get more mysterious, and more complicated. One day Kit had some bad news for Tommaso. He told Tommaso that Bruno had gone back to Italy, and in Italy he had been arrested for heresy. It was a bad situation for Bruno – he risked a death penalty if he didn’t change his dangerous ideas. Tommaso didn’t really understand very much about politics – he believed that poetry was much more important.

“Times are hard for poets, for men of genius and vision,” said Kit. “Strong forces are trying to control us – but the true poet will not be restricted!” Kit Marlowe did not hide. He became more and more rebellious and wild. Very often he was drunk. When he was drunk he started to shout out his poetry at the top of his voice. Tommaso was a little bit frightened, but also

exhilarated and thrilled by the wild, crazy times in London with his new poet friends. Life seemed to be both dangerous and exciting in a way that his life in Venice had never been.

On May 20th 1593, he received two very bad pieces of news. The first was the letter from his father, ordering him to come home. After reading the letter, he decided to try and find his friend Kit, to tell him the bad news. He went straight to the Mermaid. The Mermaid was empty apart from the barman and the young playwright who wanted to write about Venice and Verona.

“I’m looking for Kit,” announced Tommaso. “Where is he?” The other two men looked worried.

“I’m afraid I’ve got some bad news for you,” said the barman. “Marlowe’s been arrested.”

“Arrested! Why?” shouted Tommaso.

“The charge is heresy,” said the barman. “It’s a dangerous charge. If I were you, my boy, I’d just go straight home! You shouldn’t tell anybody that you know Kit Marlowe. Deny everything!”

“Never!” shouted Tommaso and ran out of the pub. He started crying with anger, doubt and confusion, and it was some time before he noticed that the other young playwright was following him.

“Listen,” said the man with the silver earring who looked a bit like Tommaso. “Kit can get out of prison for ten days on bail before he has to have a trial. I know that next week, on the 30th, he’ll be in a house in Deptford to meet some of his old friends”. The man wrote the address of a house in Deptford on a piece of paper for Tommaso, and told him to come. “Kit needs friends at the moment, and maybe you can take something to Italy for him.”

Tommaso spent the next ten days feeling sad and gloomy. He did not want to return to Italy. He did not want to be a merchant like his father. He wanted to be a poet. He wanted to stay in London. But things in London were difficult for poets. Now his best friend was under arrest - only because he was a poet. That was what Tommaso understood. He thought about how he could possibly change his situation. He thought of lots of plans, but none of his plans seemed practical or possible. It was inevitable; he had to return to Italy.

On his last day he walked up to the hill at Greenwich to watch the tall ships sailing down the wide river for the last time, then went to find the house in Deptford to say goodbye to his friend. When he eventually found the house, Kit seemed happy to see Tommaso. They all sat down to dinner. Tommaso had expected to see a lot of their old friends there, but the only people present were three men who Tommaso had never seen before – they were part of the group of Kit's friends who Tommaso didn't like. He thought that the three men looked dangerous, possibly even criminal. The only person he knew who was there was the other playwright who had given him the address.

All the men seemed to be very serious, almost angry about something, but Tommaso could not understand what the problem was. They all drank a lot, and got more and more drunk. As they got more drunk, they got more angry. One of the men, called Ingram, started shouting, and Kit stood up and threw his plate at the man. Tommaso couldn't understand – they seemed to be arguing about the bill! Why were they becoming so violent about a stupid bill! Tommaso offered to pay for everybody in an attempt to stop the argument, but the others ignored him completely. Ingram was furious. He pulled out a knife. Tommaso was horrified, and then noticed that Kit too had a knife. Kit ran at Ingram and tried to stab him with the knife, but in the fight, Ingram stabbed Kit just above the eye. Tommaso shouted as Kit fell to the floor. But it was too late. Kit was obviously dead. Ingram looked around at the others. The other two men were obviously his friends, and said nothing. But Ingram looked at Tommaso and the playwright.

"These two have seen too much," he said. "We'll have to get rid of them as well." The men ran at Tommaso and the playwright. Tommaso saw that the knife that had stabbed Kit Marlowe now stabbed the playwright as well. He was dead. Tommaso didn't hesitate. He jumped out of the window and ran as fast as possible.

He had been running for what seemed like hours before he stopped and turned round. Ingram and the other men hadn't followed him. Even if they had followed him, they had lost him now. There

was nobody around. Tommaso had to think very quickly. The obvious thing to do was to leave as quickly as possible. His ship was ready and waiting. The people on the ship were expecting him to arrive. Nobody had seen him have dinner with Marlowe and the others. He could leave the country immediately, and be back at home soon, far away from any danger.

It was obvious – he started to walk towards the port where his ship was waiting for him. But as he walked there, he started to think about the life that was ahead of him. He could never be a poet at home. At home, he must be a businessman like his father. If he left London now, it would mean goodbye forever to his dreams. But how could he stay in London now? Terrible things had happened, things which Tommaso did not understand. He understood only that he was in serious danger. Two men were dead – he could be the third! He had now reached the port where the ship waited. He looked at the ship and started to walk towards it.

"If only I wasn't me", he thought, "if only I was somebody else, a different person."

If only he could be somebody else! A different identity - that was the solution! The other playwright with the unusual surname...what was it? Tommaso realised that he could take on the identity of the other playwright. They looked like each other, and he was a poet! He had written stories about Italy – and Tommaso could also write stories about Italy. It was perfect! Tommaso Argento could disappear completely! What was the name of that writer? William something...yes, that was it, his new name was William. William Shakespeare.