

Poetry, Disgrace and Cribbage

The setting is a lodging house in Paris in 1639.

Dramatis personae:

Sir John Suckling – disgraced courtier, poet and soldier

Thomas Milburn – Sir John's servant, with a Tyneside accent

Robert Nixon – a Scottish traveller from the borders

Mathilde – a housemaid

Part 1

[Noises of drunken snoring]

TM: Wake up, Sir John.

[Snuffling noises]

TM: Wake up, Sir; there's a gentleman to see you.

SJS: [Sleepily] What? What did you say?

TM: You've got a visitor, Sir.

SJS: Damn it to hell; what do you mean, waking me like this. What time is it?

TM: It's nearly noon, Sir, and I'd rather you didn't blaspheme.

SJS: You're a damned whoreson servant, Milburn, and I'll curse and blaspheme as much as I damned well want to. Who is this damned visitor anyway?

TM: It's a scotch gentleman, Sir.

SJS: Well, he's either scotch or a gentleman. He can hardly be both now, can he, man?

TM: He appears very gentlemanly to me, Sir.

SJS: Your opinion is of little account to me. A pig in a decent coat would like a gentleman to you.

TM: It isn't his just his appearance. His speech and bearing and manners mark him out as a superior sort of gentleman, Sir. Unlike some in this room.

SJS: How dare you address me like that!

TM: Well, pay me what I am due, and I'll address you with greater civility.

SJS: I'll pay you when I have some money. At present, I'm hoping my sisters will send some to me. The money is overdue.

TM: That's just it, Sir. This scotch gentleman has come with a message from your sisters.

SJS: I trust that this message includes some money. If one can trust a scotchman with money.

TM: Indeed, Sir. Now shall I assist you in getting dressed? The scotch gentleman may be getting a little restless. He's been waiting for some time already.

SJS: I think I can dress myself. Just pass me my doublet and breeches. This hose and the shirt will suffice for the company of a scotchman.

TM: I've cleaned your boots. I'll bring them to you right away.

SJS: I'm not going out, am I. Those shoes over there will do.

TM: Just as you say, Sir.

SJS: Fetch me a bowl of water. I need to wash my face. And do we have any brandy in the house?

TM: You drank it all last night. There's not a drop in the house.

SJS: Well, send the girl out for some, then.

TM: None of the taverns will part with any unless you settle your bills. I doubt you'll get any within a mile of here. They all know who you are.

SJS: None of your damned cheek. Go and fetch the water, and tell the scotch gentleman I'll be down shortly. And what does he call himself?

TM: He's a Mister Nixon. Something or other Nixon.

SJS: Damned awful name.

TM: They're an important family on the other side of the border, the Nixons are. And one more thing, Sir. You need to chew some parsley or something. Your breath smells like an uncleaned privy.

SJS: Well, then, fetch me some parsley when you bring the water.

TM: Right away, Sir.

[Sound of footsteps and door opening - follow Milburn into the other room. More echo in this room, please]

TM: Sir John will attend on you very shortly, Sir. Is there anything I can fetch for you in the meantime?

RN: No, no. I do not require anything at present. How is your master today?

TM: His health is a little delicate, as I mentioned earlier, but he will be most happy to see you, I'm sure.

[Noise of water being poured into a basin. TM returns to the bedchamber with the bowl. Noise of door being opened]

TM: Here's your water, Sir.

SJS: Very good. Tell our distinguished visitor that I shall be joining him very shortly. Leave me now.

TM: Very good, Sir. {Noise of TM exiting, door etc.]

RN: Your master rises very late.

TM: Aye, he does that, Sir. He doesn't have much that would make him rise early in the mornings.

RN: And too much to drink of an evening, by the smell of this room.

TM: That may be true, Sir. He's a disappointed man.

RN: I've come to Paris all the way from London, and your master keeps me waiting while he struggles to rise. I am to report back on him to his sisters. They are concerned about his health.

TM: Sir John is a man who should be living at court. Since he's been exiled he has been very melancholic. He lacks the company of poets and the like.

RN: He only has himself to blame. That attempt to free Strafford from the Tower was never going to succeed.

TM: He only did that out of loyalty to the King. The Earl was unjustly tried and sentenced. There was much malice from parliament. They can't directly hurt the king, so they attack the best of his advisors.

RN: Your king is a foolish and vain little man. Is it right to be so loyal to him, when he allows his friends to be executed?

TM: I don't know about that, Sir. My master owes his loyalty to the King, and I owe my loyalty to him.

RN: Quite so; the perfect servant. It can't be easy for you. Did you leave a wife or sweetheart back home?

TM: No, Sir. Sir John would not permit me to marry until he had found himself a suitable wife.

RN: That little servant girl down the stairs. You looked fondly on her, or did I read the signs wrong?

TM: That's Mathilde, but, begging your pardon, Sir, I cannot say more.

RN: There won't be much chance of your master marrying under the present circumstances.

TM: None, I should think, Sir. He has lost his honour as well as his fortune.

[Noise of door opening - SJS Entering]

SJS: Ah, my distinguished scotch visitor. I have forgot your name.

RN: I am Robert Nixon of Galashiels, Sir John.

SJS: I believe you have word from my sisters. Do you come from London?

RN: Indeed I do, Sir John. I come on an errand from your sisters.

SJS: And what might that errand be?

RN: I am to give you some money, but only if you agree that this is the last demand that you are to make on their purses. I am a lawyer, Sir, and I have the agreement ready.

SJS: Damn me! A scotchman and a lawyer. You won't be welcome in many houses!

RN: Possibly not, but I trust I am welcome here. From what I see, this money could be your salvation. There is not much money, and you must really consider gaining some kind of paid employment.

SJS: You demand that I soil my hands, like some common labouring man?

RN: There are many ways for a man of your talents to gain a living. I believe that you, too, trained to be a lawyer.

SJS: My father wanted me to do it after I came down from Cambridge, but I never completed my studies.

RN: Perhaps you could find a friend here at the French court; one who can make use of your knowledge of King Charles' court.

SJS: That would make me almost a spy. I could not do that. I'm loyal to the King. And besides, I'm a gentleman.

RN: A gentleman must live off his estates. You have no estate, Sir John. It is only an act of sisterly affection that causes your

sisters to make this offer. You gambled away most of their dowries. Their husbands are not wealthy men.

SJS: This is not to be borne. To be preached to by some scotch covenanter goblin lawyer.

RN: I am no covenanter, Sir. I follow the true religion.

SJS: Alright, then, a scotch papist goblin lawyer.

RN: I will not be provoked, Sir John. I shall perform the task I was hired to do and then return home, provided you sign the paper.

SJS: My language was immoderate. I apologise if I caused any offence.

RN: Thank you for that apology, Sir John. I must tell you that I have been hoping to meet you. You are still well regarded as a poet.

SJS: I'm no poet, Sir!

RN: But you write poetry, don't you?

SJS: I, Sir, am a gentleman who writes poetry. I do not write for money, so I am not a poet.

RN: We still have not worked out how you are to make a living.

TM: You could always try your hand at cards again, Sir.

SJS: The cards have not been kind to me of late, and, as I have no money to hand, I cannot join the gentlemen at their tables.

TM: I'm sure if you were to study the cards again, as you did before, your luck would turn for the better.

SJS: I had hoped to introduce a game of my own invention. It is called Cribbage. See, I have a pack of cards and the board which is used to keep score. Milburn, fetch the cards and the board!

TM: You bent and broke several of the cards last night, Sir. I'm sure we no longer have a complete pack.

SJS: We must have some cards somewhere, man!

TM: Not that I know of, Sir.

SJS: You wish me to play at cards for money and then tell me that I have no cards. How am I to show Mr Nixon how to play cribbage?

RN: It is of no consequence, Sir John. I have little interest in the cards, anyway.

SJS: But I insist, Sir. My man shall go and get some cards and we shall play.

RN: I would rather have some food, Sir. That is, if you have any.

SJS: I shall send for some food from the inn. If you have a little money on you I would be grateful for a small advance on the money you are to give me.

RN: Very well, Sir John. [Noise of clanking of coins]. Will this suffice?

SJS: That is ample, Sir. A most generous offer. You will find the food very good, though they tend to use too much garlic. Milburn, go and tell the girl to get some food from the inn. Take this money, and tell her to bring back the coins that are left. There should be sufficient for some wine, as well.

TM: Very well, Sir John. [noise of TM leaving and going down the stairs].

SJS: Do you have any news of my sister, Mr Nixon?

RN: They do very well, Sir John, though they worry a great deal about you. They are concerned for your health.

SJS: I am glad to hear they are well. Please pass my very greatest compliments to them. You may tell them that my health is robust, though I am drinking a little too much. That is as near the truth as I can judge for myself. My condition is much reduced. I was a man of influence at court, though more with the queen than the king. My friends were rich and influential, and I was respected as a wit and as a gentleman. My disgrace has brought me down to the condition you can currently see. No-one writes to me or is willing to loan me money. It had been my hope that the king might repay just a small part of my loyalty with a letter of recommendation, but he is so fearful of the parliament that he has granted no such favour. And so I live in poverty and obscurity, waiting for the triumph of the king over parliament and a time when I may safely return. In the meantime I am bored. If I drink too much it is because there is precious little else for me to do.

RN: Could you not write a little?

SJS: My writing was to establish me as a wit at court. I find no joy in writing to order, or to feeding the greedy maw of the playhouse. And I make no pretence of being a scholar. All I can do is to write to some personages who might make a loan to me. As I have won money at cards from most of these men, they might seem less than anxious to pay my bills. Which is why any offer of money is so welcome to me.

RN: Were you not a wealthy man, Sir John? I have heard that you made a good deal of money at cards. Where did all this money go?

SJS: I spent lavishly at court and on clothes. There was never so much money as I pretended. Then came the war against the Covenanters. The king needed money and troops. I promised to raise a troop of horse. My vanity was such that this troop must all be tall, handsome men. I provided them with the best equipment and horses. They looked magnificent on parade, and should have put the fear into any enemy before any shot was fired. This enterprise cost me over twelve thousand pounds and beggared me. But I led them myself, and was determined to fight at their head.

RN: I will not pretend that I have not heard the story, but I had no idea it had cost you so dear.

SJS: I should have spent the money on good soldiers, scarred and battle-hardened. My experience in Europe with the Duke of Argyll should have told me this. My vanity was much greater than my wisdom. At the first sight of the enemy my troop fled, leaving much of their equipment on the field to be picked up by your friends, the Scotch. For all I screamed and cajoled I could not stop their flight. My disgrace was in the actions of my men, not for my own cowardice.

RN: I am no friend of the Covenanters. I follow the true religion. For my own part I wish them all in hell.

SJS: Well, it seems I have a papist as well as a scotchman in my chamber. No matter; I like papists much more than I do puritans.

RN: From what I have observed, it seems that Archbishop Laud is taking England closer to the old religion.

SJS: To be honest, Sir, I have very little interest in religious argument. To me it is all one. If a man will fight for his king, he is a good man. If he opposes the king he cannot be a good man.

RN: Is King Charles such a great man, then?

SJS: The king is a great ninny. It is not the man, but the very idea of kingship which we must defend. How can there be a kingdom without a king?

RN: Why must there be a king? Is it not possible that there are other ways to run the affairs of the country?

SJS: If there is I have yet to hear of a way. Look at the actions of all these little men in parliament. Not one of them has any care for the kingdom, and far too much care for the contents of their own coffers.

RN: If there were a better candidate for king, would you plot for him to take over from a man you call a great ninny, then?

SJS: You are speaking treason, or you would be if you were an Englishman. God has given us King Charles, and it is what we must accept.

RN: What is your opinion of the queen?

SJS: She is not blessed with much wit or judgement, and she is smaller and more handsome than her portrait might suggest. She has a good nature, and is a fond enough mother. Her favourites are good looking but worthless. What is more, she is a more loyal friend than is the king, whether her friends be worthy of her or not. I suppose a king must be married into royalty, so her being French causes no objection, though her papacy does. Provided she is discrete, she is welcome to practice her religion.

RN: I still wonder at your loyalty, but that is your business and not mine.

SJS: Aye, Sir, it is my business.

RN: You knew so many of the wits at court, and in London. I believe you were friends with Master Carew [pronounced Care-ee].

SJS: I knew them all, and shared many a pot of ale and cup of wine and pipe of tobacco with them. I can tell you their worth and their capacity for drink. More than the court I was to be found at the New Inn with old Ben Jonson and his friends. In comparison with the court there was much wit and entertainment.

RN: So do you think you may be called one of the 'Sons of Ben'?

SJS: Oh, no; never that. I have never considered myself to be a poet or a playwright. I was a gentleman who wrote a few poems, mostly lyrics, and a few court masks. I probably stole the plots of the plays. Mind you, Master Shakespeare stole the plots of his plays from Hollingshead, so I had a good example.

RN: I am an admirer of Master Carew's poems. What did you think of him?

SJS: Tom Carew was a particular friend of mine, and some of his poems are very fine. But his muse was always slow. Any ideas he had could only be brought forth with great strain. You may say that he suffered from a sort of poetic constipation. Will Davenant was another friend of mine. He had travelled in France and when he returned he found he had contracted a dose of pox from some French whore. This pox had the effect of making part of his nose ulcerous, and it had to be removed. Such a disfigurement made him reserved in company. There were many cruel jokes made about him. Mind you, some

of them were very funny. Old Ben Jonson held court in the New Inn. It was a good alternative to the real court, with a common, if noble monarch at the head, and witty and loyal courtiers. As for myself, I was absent as often as present. Poetry always came easily to me, and I had no need of the company more than was necessary.

RN: Yet you have written nothing since you came to France?

SJS: Hardly a word. To tell the truth, I only started writing when I found I needed to become a serious courtier. It came at a time when I was forced to live on my estates, at the King's command. So I spent my mornings studying to play cards and my afternoons scribbling witty verses. You really must share a hand at a game I invented. It's called Cribbage.

RN: I have seen too many men ruined by playing at cards, too many families impoverished and reputations lost.

SJS: You may think me a gamester, but I have profited greatly from playing cards. And I also usually won at bowls.

RN: The only men who I ever knew to win regularly at cards were cheats, and I heard a story about you. It is said that were playing bowls at Soho when your sisters came to you and begged you to stop, as you were gambling their portions away.

SJS: That was a bad day, but I won more often than I lost. I was reckoned the best man at bowls in the kingdom.

[Noises of people coming in. Enter TM and Mathilde. Table is laid, with FX in background]

SJS: Ah, excellent, all the food we could desire. Do you have the change, Milburn?

TM: I'm afraid not, Sir John. The innkeeper took it all to pay, in part, what he is owed. But he did send a bottle of wine.

SJS: I'm sorry, Nixon, it seems that your money is gone. Still, we can enjoy this repast. The mutton smells very good. Milburn, bring a chair and a napkin for Mr Nixon.

[Noises of scraping of chair leg. This followed by a squeal from Mathilde]

SJS: A comely wench, is she not, Mr Nixon?

RN: She is entitled to lay the table without your hands wandering over her privy parts. I find such behaviour most unseemly.

SJS: She's only a common girl. Enjoy her favours if you will. She is quite clean, and she bucks like an unbroken stallion. I can vouch for that.

TM: Sir John, do not say such things about Mathilde. She is a good girl, and never wished to lie with you.

SJS: Ah, you have fallen for her French charms, have you?

TM: I won't deny it. I wish to marry her, and I won't allow you to treat her in that way.

SJS: Won't allow? Come, come, I can't have that. If you want to marry you must seek my permission.

TM: Only if I am in your service. Pay me what I am owed and I shall leave. Then I shall be free to marry.

SJS: What presumption! You should know your place. You are dismissed henceforth.

TM: I'll only leave when I am paid what you owe me. You'll never get another servant unless you offer good money in hand.

SJS: I apologise for my servant, Mr Nixon. Please help yourself to the food.

RN: Your servant has no need to apologise to me. This has been most instructive. Perhaps you should ask the girl what it is that she desires.

SJS: Very well, I shall do that. Come here, girl. Don't be afraid. No my man, Milburn, tells me he wants to marry you. Now tell me what it is that you want.

Mathilde: Milord?

SJS: [loudly] Well, do you want to marry him?

RN: She doesn't speak English, Sir John. Allow me to translate. Mademoiselle, voulez vous a marrier cette homme, Milburn?

Mathilde: Ah, oui, monsieur, vraiment. Je l'aime beaucoup.

RN: She says that she does want to marry him, and that she loves him very much.

SJS: Oh, very well, then. Milburn, you may marry her when you leave my service. In the meantime, I may require her to warm my bed on occasion.

TM: Do you expect me to be grateful for that? If you touch her again I will give you a beating, master or not.

SJS: You may try, if you wish. I am more than capable of defending myself.

TM: Like you were against Sir John Digby? It took you weeks to recover from that beating, and news of it travelled all over the land.

SJS: Digby is the size of a bear. Had he truly been a gentleman we would have fought with swords or pistols. It was, after all, an affair of honour.

TM: From what I heard, you both wished to marry daughter of the very rich Sir John Willoughby. He would never have taken you as a son in law. You were a young adventurer and a wastrel. Now you are older and still a wastrel.

SJS: I will not explain myself to a servant.

TM: Shall I tell Mr Nixon how you got your money, after you had spent your portion?

SJS: You will not discuss my affairs with this gentleman. I forbid it.

TM: Forbid away. That won't stop me. I'll tell you, Mr Nixon. He sent pack of marked cards to all the great houses and then went visiting. In two years he had cheated his hosts out of twenty thousand pounds. He used to practice all morning to make sure he understood the markings on all the cards. If he asks to play cards with you, make sure you have your own, clean cards.

SJS: I spent all that money, and more besides in the cause of the King.

TM: That makes you a fool as well as a wastrel. The king will show you no gratitude. You are an embarrassment to him. He needs the money that Parliament can grant him. It were better that you stayed well away from Westminster.

SJS: I was elected MP member for Bramber in 1640, nearly two years ago. And I was an active MP, not like some. I know about the Kings enemies, and advised him in a letter, via Henry Jermyn, to make more concessions than they were asking for. That would have taken the wind out of their sails.

RN: And then you plotted to release the Earl of Strafford from the Tower. Someone betrayed you, and that is why you are here.

SJS: That was Goring's work, damn his black soul. I had no choice but to flee. I would have been put in the Tower myself, or worse.

TM: It may have been Goring's evidence that condemned you, but you would never have freed Strafford. You never could keep secrets, nor good friends either.

SJS: Damn you all, do you have to list my failings? I tried my best for my King. It may not have been wise, but it was at least sincere.

RN: Have you changed your ways, Sir John? Your sisters were most insistent that I was only to give you the money if you were truly changed.

SJS: I have no choice but to change. How can I act the gentleman in a hovel like this? Can I return home, or even pay my debts? I think not. I am reliant on you, Sir. Without money I can no longer go on. See this scabbard? It is empty. The blade has been sold. I beseech you, Sir, allow me the money my sister sent.

RN: You may have half of the money now. That is only because I can see your distress. That should allow you to live in modest circumstances for some months. The rest I shall deposit with a banker with instructions to send it to you during the winter. From observing you, Sir John, I see that you are largely unrepentant.

SJS: This is scarcely a generous offer. Do you expect me to sign your piece of paper for this mere insult?

RN: I advise you to be less choleric, Sir John. You will receive no money unless you remain polite and reasonable.

SJS: Enough of your sermonising. What little pride I have, I keep. I will sign no paper. Milburn, deal with this scotch weasel!

[He storms off. Noise of door opening]

TM: I'm sorry, Sir. He seems a little upset.

RN: Do not concern yourself. I can see that he is a proud man and that he is distressed. Having seen him, I doubt that it would be wise to entrust him with this money. Now, I need to know, can I trust you in this matter.

TM: Of course, Sir.

RN: Very well, then. I am entrusting you with half of the money sent by Sir John's sisters. I leave it to you to manage his debts and to spend the money wisely. In many ways, this makes you the master. Now, do you think you might manage this task?

TM: You can trust me, Sir.

RN: I must go now. I have other business to attend to. Remember that the other money is at the lawyers, to be paid in due course. I shall leave you the man's address, and mine, in London, should any difficulties arise. The portion of the money that you are to have is in this bag. Sir John will have to learn to live more modestly, and

to curb his appetite for expensive wines and brandy. The money should suffice, if you are careful.

TM: I shall be very careful, Sir.

RN: One last thing. How old is Sir John?

TM: He's thirty two years of age, I believe.

RN: Really, I'd have taken him for a much older man. I suppose the drink has not helped. Very well. I shall bid you adieu, you and your young lady. Pass on my regards to Sir John. Oh, and I suggest that you enjoy this excellent food.

TM: I'll bid you good day, Sir.

[Noises of RN leaving. This followed by noises of coins being counted]

RN: It's not much, Mathilde, but it should help us to get started.

Mathilde: Eh, bien, Thomas. Mais....?

RN: What are we going to do about Sir John, eh? Well, you leave that to me. You go and pack our belongings, and we'll be out of here.

Mathilde: Mais, c'est ne pas gentil. Pauvre milord Suckling.

RN: Oh, Mathilde, that you of all people should feel kindly towards him. You have too good a heart. Best be off now, and make a start.

[Mathilde sighs. Noise of outer door opening and M's footsteps as she leaves]

SJS: [from behind the door] Has that damned scotchman left yet, Milburn.

TM: He left a few minutes ago, Sir John.

SJS: How much money did he leave?

TM: Enough to pay part of your debts, Sir, and to obtain some more credit.

[Noises of SJS entering through the door]

SJS: Right, give the money to me.

TM: Mr Nixon was most insistent that I handle this money for you, Sir.

SJS: Give me the money!

TM: This is to last three months, Sir John.

SJS: Give me the damned money!

TM: No.

SJS: [after a short break] No?

TM: So you heard what I said, then.

SJS: I insist that you give me the money right now!

TM: And I insist that I won't.

SJS: That money is for me.

TM: And what about what I am owed?

SJS: I'll give you your share. Now, give me the money.

TM: I'll give you what is left over after I have taken what I am owed.

SJS: You villain!

TM: How am I a villain?

SJS: You are my servant.

TM: I am your servant no longer. Here is the money that is left when I have taken what I am owed. You can manage your own affairs now.

[Clinking of coins]

SJS: You can't leave me like this!

TM: Yes I can. I may not be a gentleman, but I am still a man.

SJS: Please stay with me, Milburn, Thomas.

TM: I am going to marry Mathilde, and I'm going to take her away from you and your filthy desires. We cannot share a roof with you anymore.

SJS: But I cannot take care of myself, I am a gentleman. I need your services. I can bear my disgrace and failure, my thwarted ambitions and my poverty, but I don't know how to care for myself. How shall I dress myself? Where do I find food?

TM: That is your concern, Sir John. Mathilde!

[Noises of someone coming to the door]

Mathilde: Thomas, que vieux tois?

TM: We are leaving now. Put on your cloak and boots.

Mathilde: Oui, Thomas. Adieu, Sir John.

SJS: I'll increase your wages, I'll double them.

TM: And how will you do that? You see, we have found a little shop with a cheap rent. We will do very well selling lace and fripperies. The money will pay for some stock as well as the rent. I no longer need your employment, and I want it even less.

SJS: Very well, I can see you are determined to leave. When you change your mind you will find me down at the tavern.

TM: Goodbye, Sir John. I wish you well.

SJS: Get out of here, and rot in hell!

[Noises of Milburn leaving, door closing]

SJS: Milburn, Thomas, forgive me.

[Silence]