

Unhallowed
Ground

Unhallowed Ground

The fourth chronicle of
Hugh de Singleton, surgeon

MEL STARR

MONARCH
BOOKS

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By the same author:

(in sequence)

The Unquiet Bones

A Corpse at St Andrew's Chapel

A Trail of Ink

For Tony and Lis Page

Acknowledgments

In the summer of 1990 my wife Susan and I discovered a lovely B&B in the village of Mavesyn Ridware. The proprietors, Tony and Lis Page, became friends. We visited them again in 2001, after they had moved to Bampton. I saw that the village would be an ideal setting for the tales I wished to write. Tony and Lis have been a wonderful resource for the history of Bampton. I owe them much.

When Dan Runyon, Professor of English at Spring Arbor University, learned that I was writing *The Unquiet Bones*, Master Hugh's first chronicle, he invited me to speak to a fiction-writing class about the trials of a rookie writer. Dan sent some chapters to his friend, Tony Collins. Thanks, Dan.

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Malgorzata Deron, a linguistics scholar from Poznan, Poland, has graciously volunteered to maintain my website. This is much appreciated from one who is digitally challenged. See her work at www.melstarr.net

Glossary

Alaunt: A large hunting dog.

Almoner: The monk responsible for a monastery's charity, he tended the deserving poor of the neighborhood.

Angelus Bell: Rung three times each day, dawn, noon, and dusk. Announced the time for the Angelus devotional.

Ascension Day: May 14 in 1366, forty days after Easter.

Bailiff: A lord's chief manorial representative. He oversaw all operations, collected rents and fines, and enforced labor service. Not a popular fellow.

Beadle: A manor officer in charge of fences, hedges, enclosures, and curfew. Also called a hayward.

Capon: A castrated male chicken.

Cataract couching: Excising the clouded lens from a patient's eye.

Chardedate: A confection made of dates, honey, and ginger.

Childwite: A fine for having a child out of wedlock.

Coney in ceyv: A rabbit stew made with wine and a variety of spices.

Coppice: To cut a tree back to a stump to stimulate the growth of new shoots.

Corpus Christi: June 4, 1366. Celebrated on the first Thursday after Trinity Sunday, to give thanks for Holy Communion.

Cotter: A poor villager, usually holding five acres or less, he often had to labor for wealthy villagers to make ends meet.

Cow-ley: Pasture or meadow.

Cresset: A bowl of oil with a floating wick used for lighting.

- Daub:** A clay-and-plaster mix, reinforced with straw and/or horsehair.
- Demesne:** Land directly exploited by a lord, and worked by his villeins, as opposed to land a lord might rent to tenants.
- Deodand:** Any object which caused a death. The item was sold and the price awarded to the king.
- Dexter:** A war-horse, larger than pack-horses and palfreys. Also the right-hand direction.
- Dorter:** A monastery dormitory.
- Dredge:** Mixed grains planted together in a field, often barley and oats.
- Farthing:** A small coin worth one fourth of a penny.
- Gentleman:** A nobleman. The term had nothing to do with character or behavior.
- Gersom:** A fee paid to a noble to acquire or inherit land.
- God's sib:** Woman who attended another woman while she was in labor, from which comes the word "gossip."
- Groat:** A silver coin worth four pence.
- Groom:** A household servant to a lord, ranking above a page and below a valet.
- Haberdasher:** A merchant who sold household items such as pins, buckles, buttons, hats, and purses.
- Hallmote:** The manorial court. Royal courts judged free tenants accused of murder or felony; otherwise manor courts had jurisdiction over legal matters concerning villagers.
- Hamsoken:** Breaking and entering.
- Heriot:** An inheritance tax paid by an heir to a lord, usually the deceased's best animal.
- Hocktide:** The Sunday after Easter. A time for paying rents and taxes; therefore, getting "out of hock."
- Host:** Communion wafers.
- Hue and cry:** An alarm call raised by the person who discovered a crime. All who heard were expected to go

to the scene of the crime and, if possible, pursue the criminal.

King's Eyre: A royal circuit court, presided over by a traveling judge.

Ladywell: A well dedicated to the Virgin Mary, located a short distance north of Bampton Castle, the water of which was reputed to cure ills, especially of the eye.

Lammass Day: August 1, when thanks was given for a successful wheat harvest. From Old English "loaf mass."

Laudable pus: Thick white pus from a wound, which was assumed to mean healing was progressing, as opposed to watery pus, which was assumed to be dangerous.

Lauds: The first canonical hour of the day, celebrated at dawn.

Leirwite: A fine for sexual relations out of wedlock.

Let lardes: A type of custard made with eggs, milk, bacon fat, and parsley.

Lombard stew: A pork stew with wine, onions, almonds, and spices.

Lombardy custard: A custard made with the addition of dried fruit.

Lych gate: A roofed gate over the entry to a churchyard under which the deceased rested during the initial part of a funeral.

Marshalsea: The stables and associated accoutrements.

Maslin: Bread made with a mixture of grains, commonly wheat and rye or barley.

Merlon: The solid upper portion of a wall between the open crenels of a battlement.

Mews: Stables, usually with living quarters, built around a courtyard.

Mortrews: A stew made with pork, ground or chopped fine, thickened with breadcrumbs, egg yolks, and spices.

New Year: By the fourteenth century, usually January 1, but the traditional earlier date of March 25 was also often used.

- Noble:** A gold coin worth six shillings and eight pence.
- Nones:** The fifth daytime canonical hour, sung at the ninth hour of the day, mid-afternoon.
- Palfrey:** A riding-horse with a comfortable gait.
- Poitiers:** A city in France which was the scene of the English victory over and capture of King John II of France (September 1356).
- Pottage:** Anything cooked in one pot, from the meanest oatmeal to a savory stew.
- Refectory:** A monastery dining-room.
- Rogation Sunday:** The Sunday before Ascension Day. Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday were Rogation Days, also called “gang days.” A time of beseeching God for a good growing season.
- St Botolf’s Day:** June 17.
- St George’s Day:** April 23. In 1366, a Thursday.
- St Nicholas’s Day:** December 6.
- Shilling:** Twelve pence. Twenty shillings made a pound, but there was no one pound coin.
- Solar:** A small room in a castle, more easily heated than the great hall, where lords preferred to spend time, especially in winter. Usually on an upper floor.
- Stone:** Fourteen pounds.
- Subtlety:** An elaborate confection made more for show than for consumption.
- Suffusio:** The milky, opaque matter obscuring the vision of a cataract sufferer.
- Terce:** The third canonical hour, celebrated at the third hour of the day, mid-morning.
- Toft:** Land surrounding a house, often used for growing vegetables and keeping chickens.
- Tor:** A high, conical hill.
- Trinity Sunday:** One week after Whitsunday, May 31 in 1366.
- Verderer:** The forester in charge of a lord’s forests.

Vigils: The night office, traditionally celebrated at midnight.

Villein: A non-free peasant. He could not leave his land or service to his lord, or sell animals without permission. But if he could escape his manor for a year and a day he would be free.

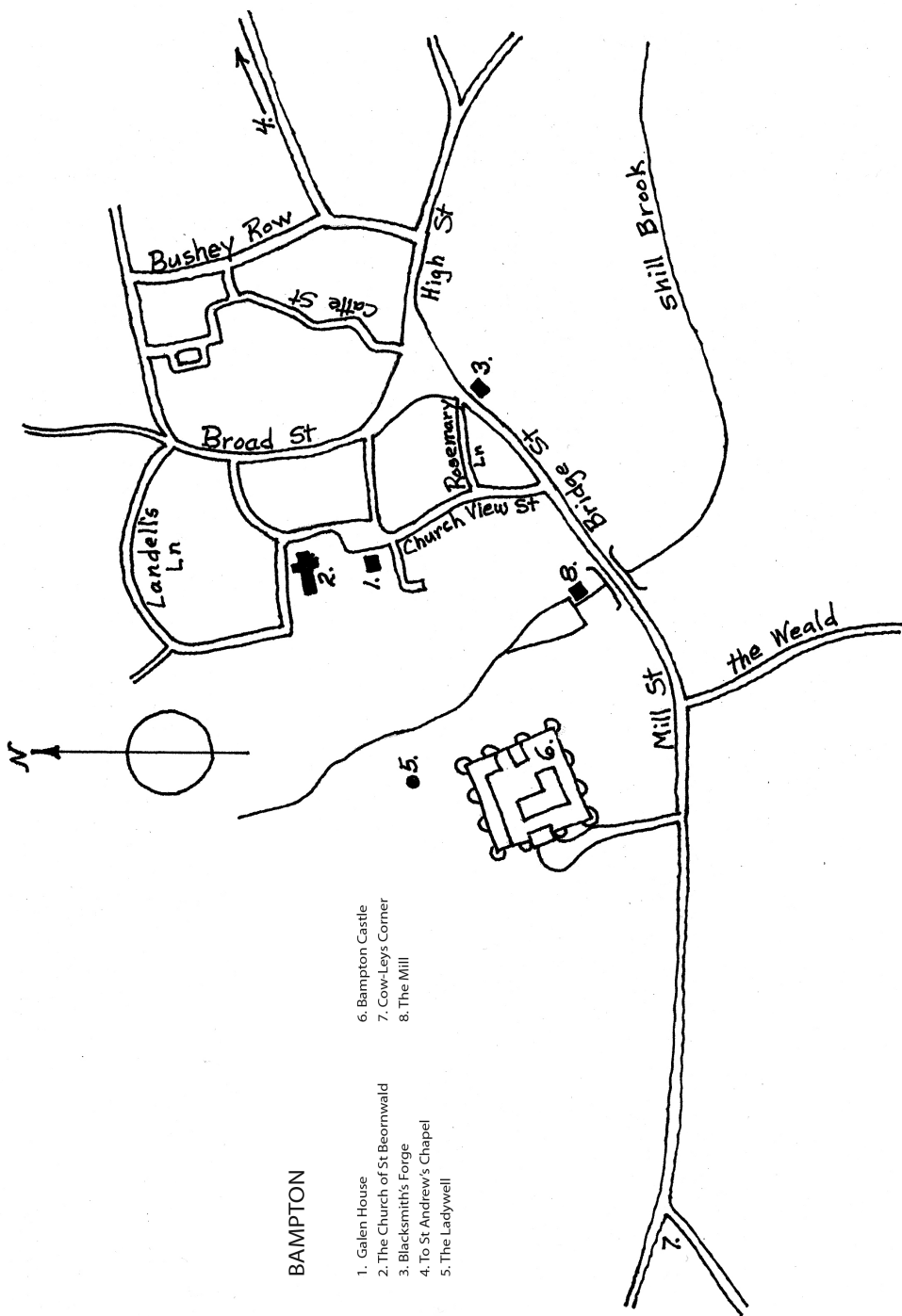
Wattle: Interlaced sticks used as a foundation and support for daub in building a wall.

Week-work: The two or three days of labor per week (more during harvest) which a villein owed to his lord.

Wether: A male sheep castrated before maturity.

Whitsunday: White Sunday; ten days after Ascension Day, seven weeks after Easter. In 1366, May 24.

Yardland: About thirty acres. Also called a virgate, and in northern England called an oxgang.



BAMPTON

- 1. Galen House
- 2. The Church of St Beornwald
- 3. Blacksmith's Forge
- 4. To St Andrew's Chapel
- 5. The Ladywell
- 6. Bampton Castle
- 7. Cow-Leys Corner
- 8. The Mill

Chapter 1

A fortnight after Hocktide, in the new year 1366, shouting and pounding upon the door of Galen House drew me from the maslin loaf with which I was breaking my fast. The sun was just beginning to illuminate the spire of the Church of St Beornwald. It was Hubert Shillside who bruised his knuckles against my door. He was about to set out for the castle and desired I should accompany him. The hue and cry was raised and he, as town coroner, and I as bailiff of Bampton Manor, were called to our duties. Thomas atte Bridge had been found this morn hanging from the limb of an oak at Cow-Leys Corner.

Word of such a death passes through a village swiftly. A dozen men and a few women stood at Cow-Leys Corner when Shillside and I approached. Roads to Clanfield and Alvescot here diverge; the road to Clanfield passes through a meadow, where Lord Gilbert's cattle watched serenely as men gathered before them. To the north of the corner, and along the road to Alvescot and Black Bourton, is forest. From a tree of this wood the corpse of Thomas atte Bridge hung by the neck, his body but a few paces from the road. Shillside and I crossed ourselves as we approached.

Most who gazed upon the dead man did so silently, but not his wife. Maud knelt before her husband's body, her arms wrapped about his knees. She wailed incomprehensibly, as well she might.

Atte Bridge's corpse was suspended there by a coarse hempen cord twisted about the small oak's limb and his neck. After winding about the limb the cord was fastened about the trunk at waist height. The limb was not high above my head. If I stretched a hand above me I could nearly

touch it. The man's feet dangled from his wife's embrace little more than two hand-breadths above the ground, and near the corpse lay an overturned stool.

"Who found him?" I asked the crowd. Ralph the herder stepped forward.

"Was on me way to see to the cattle. They been turned out to grass but a short time now, an' can swell up, like. Near walked into 'im, dark as it was, an' him hangin' so close to the road."

Hubert Shillside wandered about the place, then approached me and whispered, "Suicide, I think."

Spirits are known to frequent Cow-Leys Corner. Many folk will not walk the road there after dark, and those who do sometimes see apparitions. This is to be expected, for any who take their own life are buried there. They cannot be interred in the churchyard, in hallowed ground. Their ghosts rest uneasy, and are said to vex travelers who pass the place at night.

"Knew he'd be buried here," Shillside continued, "an' thought to spare poor Maud greater trouble."

That Thomas atte Bridge might wish to cause little trouble for his wife did not seem likely, given my experience of the man. He had twice attacked me in nocturnal churchyards, leaving lumps upon my skull. But I made no reply. It is not good to speak ill of the dead, even this dead man.

Kate had heard Shillside's announcement at Galen House and followed us to Cow-Leys Corner. She looked from the corpse to Maud to me, then spoke softly: "You are troubled, Hugh."

This was a statement, not a question. We had been wed but three months, but Kate is observant and knows me well.

"I will call a coroner's jury here," Shillside announced. "We can cut the fellow down and see him buried straight away."

"You must seek Father Thomas or one of the other

vicars," I reminded him. "Thomas was a tenant of the Bishop of Exeter, not of Lord Gilbert. They may wish otherwise."

Shillside set off for the town while two men lifted Maud from her knees and led her sobbing in the coroner's track.

"Wait," I said abruptly. All turned to see what caused my command. "The stool which lies at your husband's feet," I asked the grieving widow, "is it yours?"

Maud ceased her wailing long enough to whisper, "Aye."

Another onlooker righted the stool and prepared to climb to the limb with a knife, when I bid him halt. He had thought to cut the corpse down. Kate spoke true, the circumstances of this death troubled me, although I readily admit that when I first recognized the dead man I felt no sorrow.

I saw a man hanged once, in Paris, when I studied surgery there. He dangled, kicking the sheriff's dance and growing purple in the face until the constables relented and allowed his friends to approach and pull upon his legs until his torment ended. Thomas atte Bridge's face was swollen and purple, and he had soiled himself as death approached. His countenance in death duplicated the unfortunate cut-purse in Paris. It seemed as Hubert Shillside suggested: atte Bridge brought rope and stool to Cow-Leys Corner, threw the hemp about the limb and tied it to the tree and then to his neck, then kicked aside the stool he'd stood upon to fix cord to limb. All who stood peering at me and the corpse surely thought the same.

I circled the dangling corpse. The hands hung limp and were cold to the touch. A man about to die on the gallows will be securely bound, but not so a man who takes his own life. I inspected atte Bridge's hands and pushed up the frayed sleeves of his cotehardie to see his wrists.

Upon one wrist I saw a small red mark, much like a rash, or a place where a man has scratched a persistent

itch. No such scraping appeared upon the other wrist, but when I pushed up the sleeve of the cotehardie another thing caught my eye. The sleeve was of coarse brown wool, and frayed with age. Caught in the wisps of fabric which marked the end of the sleeve I found a wrinkled thread of lighter hue. I looked up to the branch above atte Bridge's glassy stare. This filament was much the same shade as the hempen cord from which the dead man hung. Perhaps it found its way to his sleeve when atte Bridge adjusted the rope about his neck.

I stood back from the corpse to survey the place. I was near convinced that Hubert Shillside must be correct. My life would have been easier had he been so. But my duties as bailiff to Lord Gilbert Talbot have made me suspicious of others and skeptical of tales they tell – whether dead or alive. It was then I noticed the mud upon Thomas atte Bridge's heels.

I knelt to see better, and Kate peered over my shoulder. Mud upon one's shoes is common when walking roads in springtime, but this mud was not upon the soles of atte Bridge's shoes, where it should have been, but was drying upon the backs of his heels. Kate understood readily what we saw.

“Odd, that,” she said softly, so others might not hear. She then turned to the righted stool and gazed down at it thoughtfully. I saw her brow furrow and knew the cause. I drew her from the corpse to the trunk of the tree where we might converse unheard by others.

“A man who walks to his death will have mud upon the soles of his shoes,” I whispered, “not upon the backs of his heels.”

“And he will leave muddy footprints where he stands,” Kate replied. “I see none on yon stool.”

“Walk with me,” I said. “Let us see what the road may tell us.”

It told us that many folk had walked this way. The previous week there had been much rain, and the road was

deep in mud. Footprints were many, and one man who had walked there was unshod. Occasionally the track of a cart appeared. A hundred paces and more east of Cow-Leys Corner I found what I sought. Two parallel lines, a hand's breadth apart, were drawn in the mud of the road. These tracks were no more than one pace long. Kate watched me study the grooves.

"Did the mud upon his heels come from here?" she asked.

"Perhaps. It is as if two men carried another, and one lost his grip and allowed the fellow's feet to drop briefly to the road."

"How could this be? Was he dead already?"

"Nay. I think not. His face is that of a man who has died at the end of a rope. But if he did not perish at his own hand, someone bound him or rendered him helpless so to get him to Cow-Leys Corner."

While Kate and I stood in the road inspecting suspicious furrows, Hubert Shillside and eleven men of Bampton approached. The coroner saw us studying the mud at our feet and turned his gaze there also. He saw nothing to interest him.

"What is here, Hugh? Why stand you here studying the road?"

"See there," I pointed to the twin grooves in the mud. As Shillside had not seen Thomas atte Bridge's heels, he could not know my suspicion. He shrugged and walked on. The coroner's jury he had assembled followed and would have obliterated the marks in the way had not Kate and I stood before them so that they were obliged to flow about us like Shill Brook about a rock.

There was nothing more to be learned standing in the road. Kate and I followed the jury back to Cow-Leys Corner. Shillside and those with him studied the corpse, the rope, the stool, and muttered among themselves. The coroner had already voiced his opinion that atte Bridge died at his own hand. His companions, thus set toward a conclusion

of the matter, found no reason to disagree. When a man has adopted an opinion it is difficult to dissuade him of it, but I tried.

I took Shillside to the corpse and bid him bend to inspect the stained and mud-crust-ed heels. "The tracks you saw me studying in the road... made by atte Bridge's heels, I think. Why else dirt upon the backs of a man's feet?"

"Hmmm... perhaps."

"And see the stool. If he stood upon it to fix the rope to the limb, he made no muddy footprints upon it."

Shillside glanced at the stool, then lifted his eyes to atte Bridge's lolling head.

"The fellow is dead of hanging and strangulation," he declared. "I've seen men die so, faces swollen an' purple, tongue hangin' from 'is mouth all puffy an' red."

"Aye," I agreed. "So it does seem. But if he stood upon that stool to fasten rope to tree, he left no mark. How could a man walk the road and arrive here with clean shoes... but for the backs of his heels?"

Shillside shrugged again. "Who can know? But this I'll say: not a man in Bampton or the Weald will be sorry Thomas atte Bridge is dead. He tried to kill you. Be satisfied the fellow can do no more harm to you or any other."

I saw then how it might be. Shillside drew his coroner's jury to the verge and they discussed the matter. Occasionally one or more of the group would look to the corpse, which now twisted slowly on the hemp. A breeze was rising.

Father Thomas, Father Simon, and Father Ralph, vicars of the Church of St Beornwald, arrived as the jury ended its deliberations. The vicars looked upon the corpse and crossed themselves. Those who yet milled about Cow-Leys Corner vied with each other to tell what the priests could see: a man was dead, hanging by a cord from the limb of a tree. More than this no man knew. If there was more to know, there were those who preferred ignorance.

Hubert Shillside approached me and the priests and

announced the decision of the coroner's jury. Thomas atte Bridge took his own life, choosing to do so at a place where it was well known that suicides of past years were buried. The stool was proof: Maud had identified it as belonging to their house.

The vicars looked on gravely while Shillside explained this conclusion. The stool and rope, he declared, would be deodand. What use King Edward might make of them he did not say.

Thomas atte Bridge was a tenant of the Bishop of Exeter, but was found dead on lands of Lord Gilbert Talbot. The priests and coroner's jury looked to me for direction. Lord Gilbert was in residence at Goodrich Castle. As bailiff of Bampton Manor, disposal of the corpse was now my bailiwick. My suspicions remained, but it seemed I was alone in my doubts. Other than Kate.

I saw Arthur standing at the fringe of onlookers and motioned him to approach. While he threaded his way through the crowd I spoke to Father Thomas.

"Will you allow burial in the churchyard?"

The vicar shook his head. Father Simon and Father Ralph pursed their lips and frowned in agreement. "A man who takes his own life cannot seek confession and absolution," Father Thomas explained. He had no need to do so. I knew the observances well. "He dies in his sins, unshriven. He cannot rest in hallowed ground."

Arthur had served me and Master John Wyclif well in the matter of Master John's stolen books. Now I found another duty for the sturdy fellow. I sent him to the castle to seek another groom and two spades.

There was no point in prolonging the matter. Shillside asked if the corpse might be cut down and I nodded assent. It was but the work of a moment for another of the bishop's tenants to mount the stool and slice through the rope. Thomas atte Bridge's remains crumpled to a heap at the fellow's feet. I told the man to unwind the cord from about the limb while he was on his perch. I knelt by the corpse

and did the same to the cord which encircled atte Bridge's abraded neck. I then straightened the fellow out on the verge. He was beginning to stiffen in death and it would be best to put him in his grave unbent.

I knelt to straighten atte Bridge's head and while I did so I looked into his staring, bulging eyes and gaping mouth. I see them yet on nights when sleep eludes me. The face was purple and bloated, so I nearly missed the swelling on atte Bridge's upper lip. There was a red bulge there. And just beneath the mark I saw in his open mouth a tooth bent back.

I reached a finger past the dead man's lips and pressed upon the bent tooth. It yielded freely. I pulled gently upon the tooth and nearly drew it from the mouth. Thomas atte Bridge had recently been in a fight and had received a robust blow. I was not surprised to learn of this. I knew Thomas atte Bridge. I would congratulate the man who served him with a fattened lip and broken tooth.

But did this discovery have to do with Thomas atte Bridge's death, suicide or not? Who could know? Perhaps only the man who delivered the blow.

Arthur returned with an assistant and set to work digging a grave at the base of the wall which enclosed Lord Gilbert's pasture. Cows chewed thoughtfully on spring grass and watched the work while their calves gamboled about. An onlooker urged Arthur to make the grave deep so the dead man might not easily rise to afflict those whose business took them past Cow-Leys Corner. Arthur did not seem pleased with the admonition.

Kate left me while the grave was yet unfinished. She wished to set a capon roasting for our dinner and was already tardy at the task. Her business served to remind me how hungry I was. Some might lose appetite after staring a hanged man in the face. I am not such a one, especially if the face be that of Thomas atte Bridge.

Hubert Shillside approached as Arthur and his assistant shoveled the last of the earth upon the burial

mound. "One less troublemaker to vex the town, eh?" he said.

"He'll not be missed," I agreed. "But for Maud."

"Hah. Them of the Weald say as how he beat her regular, like. She'll not be grieved to have that end."

"Aye, perhaps, but he provided for his family. Who will do so now?"

"There be widowers about who'll be pleased to add her lands to their holdings."

"A quarter-yardland? And four children to come with the bargain? I think Maud will find few suitors."

"Hmmm. Well, she will have to make do. Perhaps the oldest boy can do a man's work."

"Perhaps."

The throng of onlookers had begun to melt away when atte Bridge's corpse was lowered to the grave. These folks chattered noisily about the death and burial as they departed for the town. They did not seem afflicted with sorrow, but rather behaved as if a weight was lifted from their shoulders. Did Thomas atte Bridge guess this would be the response to his death, having lived as he did, at enmity with all men?

The coroner and I were among the last to leave Cow-Leys Corner. In my hand I carried the hempen rope, now sliced in two, which ended Thomas atte Bridge's life. We walked behind the vicars. I was silent while Shillside spoke of the weather, new-sown crops, and other topics of a pleasant spring day. When he found no ready response from me he grew silent, then as we reached the castle he turned and spoke again.

"The man is surely dead of his own hand, Hugh. You must not seek a felon where none is. And even was atte Bridge slain, there is no man in Bampton sorry for it. He was an evil fellow we are well rid of."

Chapter 2

Next day, near noon, I received a visitor. Maud atte Bridge appeared at my door, red-eyed from tears and a sleepless night. I opened the door for her entry and Kate, observing her condition, offered a bench by the fire. The woman sat and sighed, then looked up to me and spoke.

“They all say ’e hung hisself,” she began, “but ’e din’t.”

“Why do you say so?”

“E just wouldn’t. I know my Thomas.”

“What happened the night before he was found? Did he leave the house early in the morn, or was he away all night?”

“All night. We’d covered the fire an’ was ready to go to our bed when we ’eard hens cacklin’. They ain’t likely to do so after dark less they’re vexed. Tom thought maybe a fox was at ’em, so took a staff an’ went to the toft.”

“Did he return?”

“Nay. Hens quieted an’ I thought ’e’d run the beast off that troubled ’em. But ’e din’t come to bed. After a time I went out to seek ’im, but ’e was not to be found. Never saw ’im again ’til folk took me to Cow-Leys Corner, an’ there ’e was.”

“The stool found there... you said it was yours.”

“Aye. Went missin’ two days past. Tom was workin’ with the bishop’s plow team an’ I was plantin’ onions in the toft. When we was done an’ the day near gone we couldn’t find the stool. ’Twas there in the morn.”

“Your children saw no man enter the house and take it?”

“Nay. They was in an’ out. Oldest was helpin’ me in

toft. Babe was sleepin', an' couldn't know a man stole a stool anyway."

"Perhaps Thomas took the stool himself that day, having planned his death and the means?"

Maud looked to the flags at her feet. "Mayhap. 'E was right fierce about it bein' took, though. Said 'e was gonna watch others in the Weald to see did any have it, an' deal with 'em when 'e found it."

"Did Thomas fight with another the day before he died?"

"Fight? Nay... not that 'e spoke of."

"But he often quarreled with others, is this not so?"

"Aye, as you well know."

"But he'd been in no recent disputes?"

"Nay. He'd not spoke of any."

"And his face showed no sign of blows?"

Maud peered up at me suspiciously. "Nay. Why should 'e appear so?"

I decided to keep silent about Thomas atte Bridge's damaged lip and tooth. I was learning that knowledge can be a useful tool, and occasionally a weapon – a weapon most effective when an opponent knows nothing of its existence, like a dagger hidden in a boot.

"Vicars wouldn't bury 'im in churchyard," Maud continued. "'Ow'll 'e get to heaven?"

I did not reply. I saw no point in reminding the woman of her husband's many sins. The Lord Christ said the path to heaven is narrow, and few there be who find it. It seemed to me unlikely that Thomas atte Bridge would be among those few, no matter was he buried in hallowed ground or not. But Maud faced enough grief. She needed to consider no more.

"You bein' Lord Gilbert's bailiff, it'd be your part to find who slew Tom an' set things right, so he can be buried proper in the churchyard."

I looked from Maud to Kate, and saw in my bride's eyes a reflection of my own thoughts. Kate knew of Thomas

atte Bridge's assaults upon me. I had told her how he left lumps upon my skull in Alvescot Churchyard and at St Andrew's Chapel when I discovered his part in the blackmail he, his brother Henry, and the wicked priest John Kellet had visited upon transgressors who had confessed to the scoundrel priest.

So although I had ample reason to leave Thomas atte Bridge in his grave at Cow-Leys Corner, I saw in Kate's eyes that I could not. Did some other murder him, it would be a great injustice to abandon him there, lost and unshriven. Atte Bridge was himself guilty of much injustice, but holy writ says the Lord Christ died for his sins as well as mine.

Who would murder Thomas atte Bridge? Surely it would be some man wronged at his hand. Atte Bridge had few friends in Bampton and the Weald. If I was convinced the fellow was murdered, and sought the man who took his life, I would likely seek one who did what others would have wished to do, had they the stomach for it. Who, then, would assist me? Who would wish to see a friend hang for slaying a reprobate?

I had faced a similar problem when I sought who might have struck down Thomas's brother, Henry. Henry was as despised as Thomas, perhaps more so. Townsmen were pleased these brothers would trouble them no more. They would not be happy was I able to lay Thomas's death at the feet of a friend. Again I caught Kate's eye. Did I seek approval more than justice? Even justice for the unjust?

I sighed and chewed upon my lip. Perhaps, I thought, I may discover that Thomas atte Bridge did indeed take his own life, and planned it so as to suggest some other had part in the business. This would be convenient. But justice can be often inconvenient.

I promised Maud that I would examine the circumstances of her husband's death. She departed Galen House with many expressions of gratitude, as if I had already resolved the matter.

I had discarded the rope taken from Thomas atte

Bridge's neck in a corner of the chamber. My eyes fell upon it as I sat at my table and pondered the obligation I had accepted. Two lengths of hempen cord lay tangled. Three of the ends were sliced through cleanly. I had seen a knife make one of these cuts when Thomas was cut down. The fourth end was frayed with age. When the rope was one piece it had one worn end and one newly cut.

Kate had prepared a coney pie for our dinner. My mind returned to the rope while I ate. Kate saw I was preoccupied, followed my gaze, and guessed the cause.

"You are silent, Hugh. Does Maud's complaint trouble you?"

"Aye. Lord Gilbert entrusts me with justice in Bampton. If a man is murdered here I must seek whoso has slain him. But if Maud speaks true and her husband was done to death by another, there are those who would agree the murderer has done a laudable deed."

"You think the same?" she asked.

"I am troubled. Murder is a grievous sin, but I am not sorry Thomas at the Bridge lies in his grave. What if I discover he was murdered and the felon is a friend? What then will I do?"

"You will do the right. I have faith in you," Kate replied softly.

"I might sleep more soundly did I have your confidence."

"I will do what I may to see you sleep well, your burdens forgot," she smiled.

I am sure my face reflected a lightened spirit after her words.

I could not drive the discarded rope from my mind that day. It seemed there might be significance to the odd number of cut and frayed ends to the two sections. Late in the day I took a length of the hempen cord with me and called at Maud's hut.

The door was open to the warm spring afternoon but only silence greeted me. A cottage with four children

should be a noisy place. I rapped my knuckles against the door-post and heard the rustle of rushes on the floor in response. Maud appeared, her youngest child upon a hip, both of them blinking in the sunlight after the dim interior of the dwelling.

I showed her the rope. She recoiled as if I had swatted her with it, but regained composure when I told her I was about the work she begged of me. I asked if Thomas had owned rope like that in my hand. Such common stuff might be found about a cotter's house. Did a man have a field planted to hemp, it was easy enough to make. I thought Maud might produce a length of cord like it and I could compare the cut ends. She did not. Thomas, she contended, had no such rope nor had he possessed any or had need to for many years.

That Thomas atte Bridge might have owned things his wife knew not of I did not doubt. But it seemed unlikely he would keep possession of a hempen rope from her. He might, however, borrow such a cord from another and Maud know not.

If I displayed the rope, and asked if any owned the length it was cut from, word would soon find its way through Bampton and the Weald. Was Thomas murdered, as I believed, a guilty man would surely then hide any remnant. I decided to forego questioning neighbors in the Weald.

Kate was right. I fell readily to sleep that eve, and the next, but awoke two days later well before the Angelus Bell. In the pale light of early dawn, Kate's steady breathing beside me, I pondered the slashed ends of hempen rope. In my bed, before even Kate's rooster discharged his duty, it came to me where I might seek a fragment of rope like that which brought death to Thomas atte Bridge. Did I find nothing, I would know no less than I now did, but if I found a length of hempen cord it would go far to confirming my suspicions.

I rose from my bed, descended the stairs, and prodded

coals on the hearth to life. I sat on a bench and fed sticks to the growing blaze until the room was warmed. Kate appeared soon after. She produced from our cup board a maslin loaf and cup of ale for me, but declined to break her fast. She complained of an uneasy stomach.

I told her then of my plan to search for a short length of rope. Kate, for all her unease, would not consider remaining behind at Galen House. So when the sun was high enough to allow inspection of even a shadowy forest we set out for Cow-Leys Corner.

But six months past Kate had searched with me outside the wall of Canterbury Hall, in Oxford, for a broken thong. She had found the bit of leather, and now she prowled with me through the wood to the north of the road, seeking a length of hempen cord. She found it.

The rope segment was as long as my arm. It lay upon a compost of rotting leaves and broken twigs, its color blending with the forest floor. Kate knew what I sought, but not why. She held the length of hemp above her head and shouted success while I was kicking through fallen, rotting leaves twenty or so paces from where the cord lay.

“What means this?” she asked when I took the rope from her to inspect it.

“Stand here,” I replied, “where you found it.”

I walked to stand under the limb where Thomas atte Bridge hung in death. I wound the cord to a ball in my hand, then threw it toward Kate. The hemp uncoiled in flight and fell at her feet, or near so, perhaps one pace beyond where she stood watching, puzzled by this exercise.

“I found a small abrasion on Thomas atte Bridge’s wrist,” I explained, “as if perhaps his hands were tied before he died.”

“Then Maud speaks true, and your suspicion is valid; her husband did not take his own life.”

“I fear so.”

“Fear?”

“Aye. Many will resent me seeking the murderer of

one like Thomas atte Bridge from among their friends.”

“But you will do so?”

“Aye,” I sighed. “Some man tied Thomas by the neck to that oak, then threw away the cord he used to bind his wrists. ’Twas two men, I think. The man who carried his feet dropped them, hence the mud upon atte Bridge’s heels and the grooves in the road yonder.”

“Did they bind his feet also?”

“Nay, I think not. The tracks in the road are a hand’s breadth and more apart.”

“Did he not struggle and cry out?”

“He could not, I think.”

“Why so?”

“I found a great welt upon his lip when he was cut down. Beneath it a tooth was broken. Maud knew nothing of these injuries. He was knocked senseless, I think, then brought here and hanged so all would believe him a suicide.”

“You told no one of his injury?”

“Nay, and I will not, I think.”

“Not even Hubert Shillside?”

“The coroner is convinced that Thomas did away with himself... or is convinced that is what should be so and is what all men must think.”

“He will be of no assistance to us, then.”

“Us?”

“A wife’s duty is to be always at her husband’s side. And I found the rope,” Kate laughed.

“It is your duty to feed me, which now interests me most.”

“I have a leg of lamb ready to roast,” Kate replied. “After dinner we must consider how to find a murderer.”

“Such a discovery will require some effort. The man who did this planned well.”

“But he did not consider the mud,” Kate rejoined, “and he should not have cast aside that length of cord.”

“Aye. No felon considers all the ways his crime might

go awry. We have found two misjudgments already. There may be more to discover.”

We returned to Galen House past fields where men worked with dibble sticks, poking holes into the newly turned earth to plant peas and beans. Kate set to work upon our dinner, and shortly after Peter the Carpenter knocked upon our door. He had taken a gouge out of his wrist with a chisel and required my service. It was a serious wound and bled greatly. I stitched him, bathed the wound in wine from the castle buttery, and collected tuppence. I follow the practice of Henri de Mondeville, who taught that such injuries heal best when uncovered, left open to the air. I instructed Peter to keep the wound free of dirt but placed no salve or wrapping upon it. He seemed skeptical of this treatment, but I assured him good success was sure to follow, and that I would remove the stitches in a fortnight.

There was another matter I must soon raise with Peter. His daughter was heavy with child, and unwed. It was my duty to levy fines for leirwite and childwite. I resolved to await the birth. If the babe did not live I would levy leirwite only.

The leg of lamb sizzled on a spit over the coals, but Kate was not to be found. Odd, I thought, that she would not attend the spit to keep our dinner from singeing. Grease dripped to the coals and sputtered there. The smell of roasting meat caused my stomach to growl with anticipation.

Then I heard, through the open door, Kate retching in the toft behind Galen House. She had taken no loaf to break her fast, and now seemed unlikely to enjoy her dinner. I was much concerned, but when we sat to our meal Kate assured me that her belly was much improved and I was pleased to see her take a portion of lamb and wheaten loaf.

Four days later was May Day. Youth of the town were out of their beds before dawn, gathering hawthorn boughs and wildflowers from the forests of Lord Gilbert and the

Bishop of Exeter. Indeed, many, as is the custom, spent the night gamboling in forest and meadow, bringing in the May. Garlands of greenery decorated windows and doors before the third hour of the day. Hubert Shillside's son, Will, was chosen Lord of the May. His lady was a lass of the Weald whose father held a yardland of the bishop. Kate and I watched as the couple was paraded down Church View Street with singing and laughter. I would have joined the procession, but Kate was again unwell and I did not wish to celebrate the May and its carefree joy while she was afflicted so.

Hubert Shillside also observed the revelers. He watched with pride as Will, crowned with a circlet of bluebells, led marchers past his shop. The lad was becoming a man, no longer an assemblage of knees, elbows, and overgrown feet. His form was growing to fill the gaps between those adolescent enlargements.

Walking close behind the Lord and Lady of the May I saw Alice atte Bridge. She was subdued, and I knew why. No castle scullery maid would be chosen Lady of the May, no matter her comeliness. I had seen Will Shillside giving attention to Alice in the past, but this day the maid from the Weald supplanted her.

Hubert Shillside was Bampton town's haberdasher. He would want his son courting a lass who might bring a substantial dowry to the marriage. He had probably already had conversation with fathers of suitable maids in the town, and perhaps from Witney and Burford as well. The lass walking beside Will would have suited Shillside, but Alice, for all her beauty, would not.

Alice was half-sister to Thomas atte Bridge. Her father, a widower, had remarried late in life and Alice was the only offspring of that union. Near three years past the old man slipped on icy cobbles and broke his hip. I could do nothing for him but ease his pain as he made his way to the next world.

I could, however, help Alice. I found a place for the

child at the castle, free of the hatred and jealousy of her brothers. Henry and Thomas seized all of their father's few possessions after his death. Alice escaped to the castle with what she might carry, no more. Her father's hut now mouldered, derelict, in the Weald, beside the houses of Emma and Maud, the widows of Henry and Thomas.

I followed the merrymakers to the Broad Street and Cheapside, where they busied themselves raising a maypole at the marketplace. I found Hubert Shillside there, observing the youth of Bampton with a proud smile upon his face.

"Will is well chosen," I congratulated him. "And the lass also. Her father has a yardland of the bishop, does he not?"

"Aye. She has two brothers."

With four words the haberdasher had told me neither he, nor Will, I assumed, was interested in the maid. The lass might bring coin and some possessions to her marriage, but the land would stay with the older brother. And should he die, another heir was in place.

"Bampton has several comely maids."

"Hmmm. 'Tis so. But most will bring little to their husbands. You did well with Kate... a house in Oxford."

"Aye, but measured against her other virtues the house is of scant value."

"Hah. So you say now. When you are wed some years such a dowry will loom larger. Beauty does not last, houses and lands will."

"Perhaps."

Shillside must know of his son's attraction to Alice atte Bridge and be displeased. I thought to bait him on the matter. "Will seems more interested these days in pleasing his eye than his purse," I laughed.

Shillside peered at me and frowned.

"I have seen him in company with a comely maid who will bring nothing to her husband but herself."

"Ah," the haberdasher smiled. "You speak of Alice

atte Bridge. 'Tis true... Will is smitten with the lass. But she is not so poor as all think."

This was a surprise to me. When three years past I sent her to the castle I thought she owned nothing. Indeed, Alice believed so as well.

Shillside saw my astonishment and continued. "Alice's mother, Isabel, was second wife to the elder Henry atte Bridge, as you know. Isabel's dowry from her first husband was a half-yardland in the Weald. When she died, an' then Henry, the land came to Alice."

"Alice did not speak of this."

"She was but a child... perhaps she knew nothing of it."

"Isabel had no children of her first husband?"

"None," Shillside smiled.

"Henry and Thomas atte Bridge claimed their father's lands when he died."

"Aye, so they did. But not all of it was theirs to have."

"How did you learn this?"

"Isabel's sister is wed to William Walle. His brother Randall is haberdasher in Witney. We do business."

"Does Alice know?"

"Aye, she does."

"And the vicars of St Beornwald? Disputes in the Weald are their bailiwick. Do they know of this?"

"Aye. The matter is to be brought before hallmote."

"Thomas atte Bridge will not attend to defend his taking."

"Nay," Shillside smiled again. "Alice will gain her due, I've no doubt."

"And her husband, whoso that may be, will add a half-yardland and pasture rights to his holdings."

"Just so. Alice will not stand in the church porch so penniless as many would think of a scullery maid."

"Did Thomas atte Bridge know of Alice's suit to regain her mother's dowry lands?"

“Aye, he did. And was ready to dispute the matter, but I think Maud will not refuse Alice her due as Thomas would.”

“’Tis convenient, then, for Alice and whoso she may wed, that Thomas hanged himself at Cow-Leys Corner.”

“Aye, it is so.”

Revelry continued that fine spring day but I felt no wish to join it. My Kate was unwell, and distasteful images flashed through my mind. As I retreated to Galen House I saw in my mind’s eye Hubert Shillside prowling about in Thomas atte Bridge’s toft, intentionally disturbing his hens. I saw atte Bridge stumble from his hut to investigate the uproar, and saw Shillside swing a cudgel to deliver a blow to the back of Thomas’s head. I saw Thomas catch a glimpse of movement in the darkened toft, and turn so that Shillside’s blow caught him in the face, upon his mouth.

I envisioned Shillside and his son binding Thomas by the wrists, leaving a strand of hempen cord upon atte Bridge’s frayed sleeve, then taking him by shoulders and heels to carry him off to Cow-Leys Corner. I imagined the lad losing grip of Thomas’s heels, allowing them to drag briefly in the mud. I saw the youth sneaking in to atte Bridge’s hut some days earlier to make off with the stool, which would prove then to all that Thomas atte Bridge took his own life.

These images caused me much distress, for Hubert Shillside was my friend.

I entered Galen House in somber mood. What I found there did little, at first, to improve my dour outlook. Kate heard me enter and left our bed, where she had withdrawn. She was half-way down the stairs, coming to greet me, when she grew light-headed and fell. It was my good fortune that I heard her descending, so was at the foot of the steps when she stumbled. I caught her before she could do harm to herself, and carried her to a bench.

Kate came quickly to her senses, although I admit I did not. I took a cup of water from the ewer upon our

cup board and splashed it into her face. She spluttered and protested and demanded I cease, which I did.

Kate dried her face with her apron, then began to giggle. I thought my wife had come unhinged. I found no humor in the scene. I sat beside her upon the bench to comfort her, and put an arm about her shoulder to support her should she again swoon. I did not wish to apply my surgical skills to repair her broken scalp should she fall back upon the flags.

"You are unwell," I said. "I will take you to bed, where you may rest."

"I have just come from there," she said. "I rose when I heard you enter, and did so too quickly. 'Tis why I became giddy on the stairs."

"You have not been well for many days."

"I am very well, or would be did you not dash cold water in my face. My illness is but what is common to women."

I am a surgeon, not a physician, and in surgical training I had learned nothing of swooning being customary female behavior. I said so.

"I will be quite well in a fortnight, or perhaps a little longer," she assured me. "This sickness which now afflicts me will pass, as it does with all womankind who are with child."