The Tainted Coin

By the same author
(in sequence)

The Unquiet Bones
A Corpse at St Andrew's Chapel
A Trail of Ink
Unhallowed Ground

The Tainted Coin

The fifth chronicle of

Hugh de Singleton, surgeon

Mel Starr

Monarch
Books
Oxford, UK & Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA

Published by Monarch Books
an imprint of
Lion Hudson plc
Wilkinson House, Jordan Hill Road, Oxford OX2 8DR, England
Tel: +44 (0)1865 302750 Fax: +44 (0)1865 302757
Email: monarch@lionhudson.com
www.lionhudson.com

ISBN 978 0 85721 250 4
e-ISBN 978 0 85721 401 0

First edition 2012

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in the UK, August 2012, LH27

For Peter and Muriel Horrocks
Thanks for the wonderful memories of days spent at
Trethevy Farm

Acknowledgments

Several years ago when Dan Runyon, professor of English at Spring Arbor University, learned that I had written an as yet unpublished medieval mystery, he invited me to speak to his fiction-writing class about the trials of a rookie writer seeking a publisher. He sent sample chapters of *The Unquiet Bones* to his friend Tony Collins. Thanks, Dan.

Thanks to Tony Collins and all those at Monarch who saw Master Hugh's potential. Thanks especially to my editor, Jan Greenough, who excels at asking questions like, "Do you really want to say it that way?" and "Wouldn't Master Hugh do it this way?"

Dr. John Blair, of Queen's College, Oxford, has written several papers about Bampton history. These have been invaluable in creating an accurate time and place for Master Hugh. Tony and Lis Page have also been a wonderful source of information regarding Bampton. I owe them much.

Ms Malgorzata Deron, of Poznan, Poland, has offered to update and maintain my website. She has done a wonderful job. To see the results of her work, visit www.melstarr.net

Glossary

Alaunt: a large hunting dog.

All Saints' Day: November 1st.

All Souls' Day: November 2nd.

Almoner: monastic official in charge of charity and care of the poor.

Aloes of lamb: lamb sliced thin and rolled in a mixture of egg yolk, suet, onion, and various spices, then baked.

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

Apples in compost: apples cooked with a sauce of malmsey wine, sliced dates, sugar cinnamon, and ginger.

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

Baxter: a professional baker, usually female, who often sold on the streets.

Beadle: a manor official in charge of fences, hedges, enclosures, and curfew. Also called a hayward, he served under the reeve.

Blanc de sire: ground, cooked chicken, thickened with rice flour and cooked in almond milk.

Boon work: the extra hours of labor service villeins owed the lord at harvest.

Bruit of eggs: an egg-and-cheese custard.

Buttery: a room for storing beverages, stored in "butts" or barrels.

Cabbage with marrow: cabbage cooked with bone marrow, breadcrumbs, and spices.

Calefactory: the warming room in a monastery. Benedictines allowed the fire to be lit on November 1st. The more rigorous Cistercians had no calefactory.

Capon farced: chicken stuffed with hard-boiled egg yolks, currants, chopped pork, breadcrumbs, and various spices.

Cellarer: the monastic official in charge of food and drink.

Chapman: a merchant, particularly one who traveled from village to village with his wares.

Chardewarden: pears cooked in wine sauce with breadcrumbs and various spices.

Chauces: tight-fitting trousers, sometimes of different colors for each leg.

Compline: the seventh and last of the daytime canonical hours, observed at sunset.

Coney in cevy: rabbit stewed with onions, breadcrumbs, and spices in wine vinegar.

Coppice: to cut a tree back to the base to stimulate the growth of young shoots. These were used for anything from arrows to rafters, depending upon how much they were permitted to grow.

Cotehardie: the primary medieval outer garment. Women's were floor-length, men's ranged from thigh to ankle.

Cotter: a poor villager, usually holding five acres or less, he often had to work for wealthier villagers to make ends meet.

Cresset: a bowl of oil with a floating wick used as a lamp.

Cyueles: deep-fried fritters made of a paste of bread crumbs, ground almonds, eggs, sugar, and salt.

Demesne: land directly exploited by a lord and worked by his villeins, as opposed to land a lord might rent to tenants.

Deodand: an object which had caused a death. The item was sold and the price given to the King.

Dexter: to the right hand. Also a large, powerful war horse.

Egg leech: a thickened custard.

Extreme Unction (or Last Rites): a sacrament for the dying. It must not be premature. A recipient who recovered was considered as good as dead. He must fast perpetually, go barefoot, and abstain from sexual relations.

Farrier: a smith who specialized in shoeing horses.

Farthing: one fourth of a penny. The smallest silver coin.

Fistula: An abnormal passage developed between two organs, sometimes from an abscess to the body's surface.

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.

Groom: a lower-rank servant to a lord, often a youth and usually assistant to a valet.

Haberdasher: a merchant who sold household items such as pins, buckles, hats, and purses.

Habit: a monk's robe and cowl.

Hallmote: the manorial court. Royal courts judged free tenants accused of murder or felony. Otherwise manor courts had jurisdiction over legal matters concerning villagers. Villeins accused of murder might also be tried in a manor court.

Hamsoken: breaking and entering.

Infangenthef: the right of the lord of a manor to try and execute a thief caught in the act.

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

Kirtle: the basic medieval undergarment.

Lammastide: August 1st, when thanks was given for a successful wheat harvest. From "loaf mass".

Leach lombard: a dish of ground pork, eggs, raisins, currants, and dates, with spices added. The mixture was boiled in a sack until set, then sliced for serving.

Leech: a physician.

Liripipe: a fashionably long tail attached to a man's cap.

Lychgate: a roofed gate in a churchyard wall under which the corpse rested during the initial part of a burial service.

Maintenance: protection from punishment for misdeeds; provided for knights who served a powerful lord and wore his livery.

Mark: a coin worth thirteen shillings and four pence.

Marshalsea: the stables and their associated accoutrements.

Maslin: bread made from a mixture of grains, commonly wheat and rye or barley and rye.

Mews: stables, often with living quarters, built around a courtyard.

Nones: the fifth canonical office, sung at the ninth hour of the day – about 3 p.m.

Page: a young male servant, often a youth learning the arts of chivalry before becoming a squire.

Palfrey: a riding horse with a comfortable gait.

Pannaging: turning hogs loose in an autumn forest to fatten on roots and acorns.

Passing bell: ringing of the parish church bell to indicate the death of a villager.

Pomme dorryce: meatballs made of ground pork, eggs, currants, flour, and spices.

Pottage: anything cooked in one pot, from soups and stews, to simple porridge.

Pottage of eggs: poached eggs in a sweet sauce of honey, sugar, and cinnamon.

Reeve: the most important manor official, although he did not outrank the bailiff. Elected by tenants from among themselves, and often the best husbandman, he had responsibility for fields, buildings, and enforcing labor service.

Reredorter: the monastery toilets.

Runcey: a common horse of lower grade than a palfrey.

Sacrist: the monastic official responsible for the upkeep of the church and vestments, and time-keeping.

St. James's Wort: ointment from this plant was used for wounds, and a syrup was added to wine for easing pain.

Sinister: to the left hand.

Solar: a small private room in a castle, more easily heated than the great hall, where lords preferred to spend time,

especially in winter. Usually on a castle's upper floor.

Soul cakes: small cakes given to children and the poor on All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day.

Stockfish: inexpensive fish, usually dried cod or haddock, consumed on fast days.

Surcoat: an overcoat.

Tenant: a free peasant who rented land from his lord. He could pay his rent in labor on the lord's demesne, or (more likely by the fourteenth century) in cash.

Terce: the canonical office at 9 a.m.

Toft: land surrounding a house. Often used for growing vegetables.

Valet: a high-ranking servant to a lord – a chamberlain, for example.

Vigils: the night office, celebrated at midnight. When the service was completed Benedictines went back to bed. Cistercians stayed up for the new day.

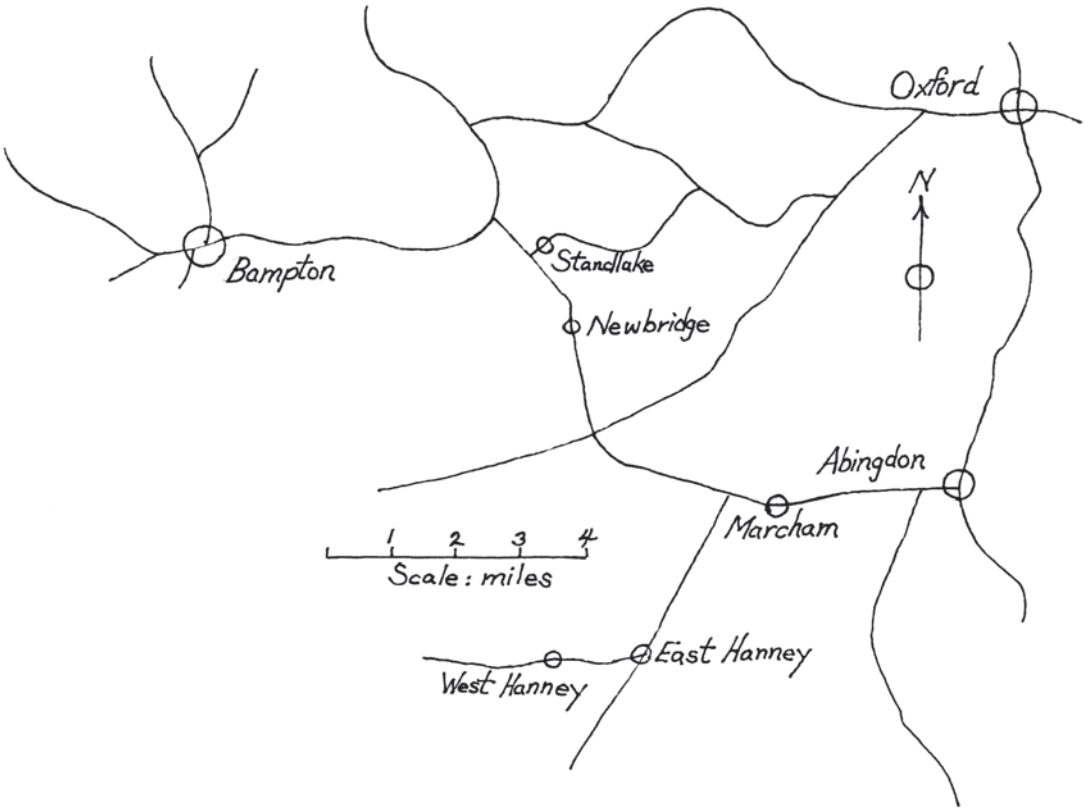
Villein: a non-free peasant. He could not leave his manor or service to his lord, or sell animals without permission. But if he could escape his manor for a year and a day, he would be free.

Wattle: interlacing sticks used as a foundation and support for daub (plaster) in building the walls of a house.

Whitsuntide: Pentecost; seven weeks after Easter Sunday.

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

Yeoman: a freeholder below the rank of gentry, generally more prosperous than a tenant.


Oxford
N
Bampton
Standlake
Newbridge
Abingdon
Marcham
1 2 3 4
Scale: miles
East Hanney
West Hanney

Chapter 1

I would have preferred to remain in bed a while longer. The October morn was cool, my bed warm, but Bessie stirred in her cradle and Kate was already up and bringing the coals to life upon our hearth. I arose, clothed myself hurriedly, and bent to lift my daughter from her cot. She smiled up at me from the woolen layers into which Kate had tucked her the night before. Elizabeth was now nearly a year old, and beginning to sleep through the night, much to Kate's joy, and my own. Children are a blessing from God, but not when they awaken before dawn and demand to be fed.

I had placed the babe upon my shoulder and turned to the stairs, when from below I heard an unwelcome pounding upon Galen House's door. When some man wishes my attention so soon after the morning Angelus Bell has rung, it can be to no good purpose. A window was near, so rather than hasten down the stairs, I opened it to see who was at my door so early in the morn.

My visitor heard the window open above him and when I peered down I looked into the gaunt, upraised face of John Kellet, curate at St. Andrew's Chapel.

"Master Hugh," he shouted, "you must come at once. There is a man wounded and near dead at St. Andrew's Chapel. Bring your instruments and make haste!"

I did so. Kate had heard Kellet's appeal and awaited me at the foot of the stairs. She took Bessie from me, and over her shoulder I saw my breakfast awaiting upon our table – a loaf and ale. It must wait. I filled a sack with instruments and herbs from my chest, unbarred the door, and stepped into the foggy dawn.

"Quickly, Master Hugh," the skeletal priest urged,

and set off down Church View Street at a trot, his bare, boney feet raising puffs of dust from the dry dirt of the street. I flung my sack over a shoulder and followed. I had questions about this abrupt summons, but Kellet was already too far ahead to allow conversation. I loped after the priest, the sack bouncing against my back.

Kellet led me to the High Street, thence up Bushey Row to the path to St. Andrew's Chapel. The parish Church of St. Beornwald is a grand structure, but the chapel is old and small. 'Tis little more than a quarter of a mile from Bampton to the chapel, and soon the ancient building appeared in the fog. Kellet plunged through the decrepit lychgate and led me to the porch. There, upon the flags, I saw a man. The priest had placed the fellow upon a pallet so he did not rest upon the hard stones. I bent over the silent form and thought Kellet's trouble unnecessary, for the man before me seemed insensible, if not already dead.

"Found 'im here at dawn, when I rose to ring the Angelus Bell. I heard a moan, so opened the door an' found the fellow under the porch roof, just where he now lies. Put a pallet 'neath 'im an' sought you. I could see 'e was bad off, even in so little light as in the porch."

The curate lived in the chapel tower, in a bare room but four paces on a side. He need not go far from his bed to ring the bell of St. Andrew's Chapel, for the bell-rope fell through a hole in the center of his chamber to the base of the tower at ground level.

The porch lay in shadow, so the nature of the man's wounds was obscure. I asked Kellet to take one end of the pallet, and I grasped the other. Together we lifted the unconscious stranger to the churchyard where the rising sun was visible through the thinning fog and his wounds and injuries became apparent.

The man had been beaten senseless. His nose was broken and askew, his scalp lacerated just above an ear where a blow had found his skull, his lips were purple and swollen, and it seemed sure his jaw was broken and teeth were knocked loose.

"You heard him moan when you rose to ring the Angelus Bell?"

"Aye," Kellet replied.

"Did he say anything when you found him?"

"Nay. He was as you see 'im now."

Whoever this man was, he had used the last of his strength to reach sanctuary, as I think he assumed the ancient chapel to be. I looked closely at the face, but could not recognize him as any man I knew. I asked the priest if he knew the fellow.

"Nay. 'Course, he's so abused, he might be someone I know. In his state his own mother'd not know 'im, I think."

I silently agreed with the priest, then bent to examine the man's injuries more closely to learn was there anything I might do to save his life and speed healing of his wounds.

I am Hugh de Singleton, surgeon, trained at the University of Paris, and also bailiff to Lord Gilbert Talbot at his lands in Bampton. Many would find the work I must do as surgeon disagreeable, repairing men's bodies when they have done themselves harm, but I find my duties as bailiff, collecting fines and dealing with obstreperous tenants, more irksome.

With my dagger I cut away the wounded man's cotehardie and kirtle, the better to inspect his hurts, and as I did so considered that the supine form presented me with two tasks: I must treat his injuries, and discover who had dealt with him so.

The man's body presented as many wounds as his head. So many bruises covered his ribs that they might have been one great contusion. I tested one purple blemish and felt the ends of a broken rib move beneath my fingertips.

My examination roused the unconscious fellow. I saw his eyelids flicker, then open. Perhaps he saw my face above him, perhaps not. His eyes seemed not to focus, but drifted about, hesitating only briefly when they turned to me. Did he take me for a friend? Who can know? He surely did not think me one of his assailants, else he would not have spoken as he did.

With pain and effort he opened his swollen lips and said, so faintly I had to ask John Kellet if he heard the same words, "They didn't get me coin."

I had learned two things: whoso attacked the fellow had sought a coin, or perhaps many coins, and more than one had done this evil. I would learn no more from him, for as I began to inspect a bloody laceration between two ribs, his chest heaved and was then still.

"Dead?" Kellet asked after a moment.

"Aye. You must think back on finding the fellow. Is there anything you can remember of this morn which might tell who he is and who has done this?"

"I will think on it while I ring the Passing Bell. I have already offered Extreme Unction, before I sought you. I could see how ill used he was, even in the dark of the porch, and feared he might not live till I returned."

"While you do so I will fetch the coroner. Hubert Shillside must convene a jury here before we may do any other thing."

I heard Kellet ring the bell of St. Andrew's Chapel as I left the churchyard and its tumbled-down wall. I noted several places where someone – Kellet, I presume – had replaced fallen stones so as to halt the decay. My eyes traveled to a section of the wall where, three years past, I had hidden to escape Thomas atte Bridge and the priest, who intended my death. Kellet, for this felony and others, was sent on pilgrimage to Compostela. He returned a transformed man, and was assigned to assist the almoner at the Priory of St. Nicholas, in Exeter. There he was so assiduous at seeking the poor that he came near to impoverishing the priory, it not being a wealthy house, and the prior beseeched the bishop to be rid of him. As no curate had been found for St. Andrew's Chapel, Kellet was reassigned to the place. He left it three years past a corpulent hedonist, but returned a year ago an emaciated pauper, who wore no shoes at any season and gave to the poor nearly all of the meager living he was awarded as curate. I have never seen a man so reformed, and indeed, when first I learned of the change, doubted it was truly

so. May the Lord Christ forgive me for mistrusting the alteration He can work in a repentant man's life. All saints were once sinners, and any sinner may become a saint.

Hubert Shillside, Bampton's haberdasher, was no more pleased than I had been to open his door so early, but accepted his duty as coroner, and when told of the death at St. Andrew's Chapel, set out to assemble a jury while I walked to Church View Street and Galen House.

I told Kate of events at the chapel, hurriedly gobbled the loaf she had set out for me, swallowed a cup of ale, then set out again for the chapel. I arrived with Shillside and his coroner's jury. The haberdasher asked of the priest what he knew of the corpse, and was told what I had already heard. Kellet could think of nothing more to explain the dead man's condition.

All who viewed the corpse agreed that the death was murder, not misadventure, and so Shillside did readily declare. No weapon was to be found, so the coroner, no doubt hungry to break his fast, absolved himself and his jurymen of further responsibility in the matter and turned the death over to me.

As the coroner's jury departed the place, I told Kellet to once again take in hand an end of the pallet. Together we carried the corpse through the porch, into the chapel, and deposited it on the flags before the altar.

"I'll say a mass, have a grave dug, and bury the man this day," the priest said.

I wished to know where this stranger had been attacked, to see if there might be at the place some evidence of his assailants. It could not have been close to the chapel, for he would have cried out when attacked, and Kellet would have heard him. But the dead man had been so badly injured that he would not have crawled far. I searched the grass of the churchyard for blood and found traces which led to the lychgate. The curate saw, and followed. Beyond the gate was the path, dry from absence of rain for the past fortnight. In the dust it was easy to follow the track of a crawling man back to the east, for the sun was now

well up over the fields and meadow which bordered the narrow road. Nearly two hundred paces to the east the path entered a wood, and a few paces beyond that the marks of a crawling man disappeared into the verge.

I studied the place where the man had crawled from the forest. Why did he struggle to leave the place and crawl to St. Andrew's Chapel? In his battered condition this required much effort. Was he familiar with Bampton, so that he knew help might be found could he reach the chapel?

John Kellet had followed from the chapel and with me studied the path where marks in the dust told of the man's entry upon the road.

"Look there," the priest said, and pointed a few paces beyond. Between road and forest was a swathe of dry grass and across this patch of vegetation two parallel tracks of bent-down foliage showed where a cart or similar wheeled conveyance had turned from the road and entered a narrow opening which led into the forest. Marks of the cart wheels and a horse's hooves, and the footprints of men were visible in the dust of the path where the vehicle entered the wood, but although we searched for many paces in both directions from the place, neither Kellet nor I could find any mark where a cart might have left the wood and regained the road. Whatever had entered the forest was yet there.

The priest followed as I traced the path of the cart into the wood. Fallen leaves covered the forest floor, so the track was soon obliterated, but it was possible to guess the way by seeking openings between the trees and bushes large enough to admit passage of a horse and cart.

We had walked perhaps fifty paces from the road when I heard a horse whinny. Another forty paces brought us to a shaded clearing in the wood where before us stood a horse, harnessed to a cart, its reins tied to a small beech. The horse neighed again, no doubt pleased to see men who might offer it water and food.

"Why is this beast here, so distant from the road?" Kellet wondered aloud. "And did it belong to the man now lying dead in St. Andrew's Chapel?"

My mind had posed the same questions, and I thought it likely the answer to the second question was "yes." An inspection of the cart might confirm this. It was well made, with two wheels. A waxed cloth had covered the cart, but was drawn aside and hung from the cart to the forest floor. I peered into the cart and saw there several chests, open and upended. Their contents were strewn about. There was a packet of combs, some of wood and cheaply made, but others of fine ivory. Another small chest had held an assortment of buckles, pins, buttons, and a package of needles. These were all tossed about in the cart. A larger chest had held several yards of woolen cloth in a variety of colors. This fabric was flung about, and one bolt lay partly over the side of the cart, dragging upon the leaves. Here was a chapman's cart. The owner made his living selling goods in villages too small to have haberdashers and suchlike merchants.

I began to form an opinion of what had happened here. The chapman, I thought, had decided to sleep the night under his cart, the weather being yet mild. He led his horse deep into the wood, away from the road and felons who might prowl the countryside, but was followed. Perhaps men saw the track his cart made in the dust of the road, as did the priest and I, or mayhap he was trailed from the last town where he did business.

Here in the forest men surprised the chapman and demanded his purse. He refused to give it up, so they set upon him with a club, but yet he would not tell them where it was hid. They beat him senseless, near to death, ransacked his cart, then left him in the forest to perish.

Kellet had inspected the contents of the cart from over my shoulder. As I pondered the discovery I saw him reach for a sack and untie the cord which closed it. He examined the contents, then poured some into a wooden bucket which lay in the cart beside the sack. The horse smelled the oats, and neighed in anticipation. The priest took the bucket to the beast, which plunged its muzzle in eagerly. No doubt the animal was thirsty as well.

A fallen branch next caught my eye. It lay at the edge of the clearing, three or four paces from the cart, and seemed freshly broken. One splintered end was white in the dappled sunlight, and the limb lay atop the fallen leaves, not under, as should be had it occupied that place for a day or more.

I lifted the broken limb and saw a thing which caused me to recoil. At a place where a twig had broken from the branch and left a raised and thorn-like barb was the dark stain of blood and what appeared to be a bit of flesh. The priest saw me examining the club, and when the horse had consumed his ration of oats Kellet joined me in studying the cudgel.

"Broke it over 'is 'ead, I'd say," Kellet said.

The limb was as large around as my arm, and as long. Blows from it would easily break a man's ribs or skull.

I was not optimistic that I could find the felons who had done this murder. Had they taken goods from the chapman's cart, I might seek in villages nearby for men who had wares to sell, or whose wives wore new buttons upon their cotehardies or bragged of ivory combs. But if the villains did take goods from the cart, they left much behind. Why so? Unless some men boasted of this attack, I would have no clue which might lead to the assailant.

Even the horse and cart might be carried away to some town and sold. The beast would fetch ten shillings, perhaps twelve, and the cart another eight or ten shillings, for it was well made and sturdy. Whoever murdered the chapman had left here in the woods goods to the value of as much as three marks. Did the chapman cry out loudly as he was attacked, so as to frighten the felons away? Kellet had heard no such screams, but I could think of no other reason thieves might leave such loot here in the forest.

"Whose goods are these now?" Kellet asked.

"Unless we can discover some heir to the dead man, they become Lord Gilbert's possession, being found upon his land."

"Oh, aye. There is much wealth here. I had thought

some might be sold to help the poor through the winter to come."

"Lord Gilbert is not a greedy man, no more so than most of his station. Some of the buttons and buckles of the meaner sort he will give to his grooms and valets, but there may be some he will allow to be sold. I will speak to him about it."

I replaced the waxed cloth atop the cart, then led the horse through the wood to the road. Here I halted to again study the dust of the road to see if it might tell me more of what had happened here. Many men had walked this way since the last rain, and horses also. It was impossible to tell which of the tracks might have been made by the men who had slain the chapman.

We walked to St. Andrew's Chapel, where Kellet left me to set about his duty to bury the chapman in the hallowed ground of the churchyard. I led the horse and cart through the town and under the Bampton Castle portcullis to the marshalsea, where I told a page to unharness and care for the beast, but to leave the cart where it stood. I then sought John Chamberlain and requested of him an audience with Lord Gilbert. I awaited John's return in the hall, but was not long abandoned. John returned with announcement that Lord Gilbert was at leisure and would see me in the solar.

That chamber, smaller and more easily warmed than the hall, was Lord Gilbert's choice when the weather turned cool and damp. The day was mild, but a fire blazed upon the hearth when I was ushered into the solar. A great lord cares little for use of firewood, as he will always have supply. And, in truth, the warmth was pleasing. If I had such resources to hand I would this day have a blaze in all of the hearths in Galen House.

"Hugh, what news?" Lord Gilbert said, looking up from a ledger. Lord Gilbert is a bearded, square-faced man, ruddy of cheek and accustomed to squinting into the sun from atop a horse. Unlike most lords, he desires to keep abreast of financial dealings within his lands. Each year

I prepare an account for his steward, Geoffrey Thirwall, who resides at Pembroke. Thirwall visits Bampton once each year, for hallmote, when he examines my report. Most nobles allow their stewards final say in matters of business, as, in truth, does Lord Gilbert. But, unlike most, Lord Gilbert wishes to keep himself informed of profit and loss first hand, rather than rely only upon the accounts of bailiff and steward. Many great lords have lately been reduced to penury, and must sell lands to pay debts. The plague has taken many tenants, and dead men pay no rents. Lord Gilbert is not in such straightened circumstance. Perhaps his inspection of my accounts and those of his other bailiffs is reason why.

"A dead man was found this morning upon your lands," I said. "Well, he was not dead when found, but died soon after."

"A tenant, or villein?"

"Neither, m'lord. A chapman, I think. We found a place in the wood where the man was attacked, and a horse and cart were there."

"We?"

"Aye. John Kellet found the man moaning and near dead under the porch roof of St. Andrew's Chapel. I have brought horse and cart to the castle. Neither I nor Kellet recognize the dead man, nor did Hubert Shillside or any man of his coroner's jury. If no heirs can be discovered the goods in his cart are yours, m'lord."

"Oh, aye… just so. What is there?"

"Two chests of combs, buckles, buttons, pins, and such like, and another of woolen cloth of the middling sort."

"A traveler, then," said Lord Gilbert.

"Aye. 'Tis why he is unknown in Bampton. Hubert Shillside sells much the same stuff. The man has probably passed this way before, perhaps traveling from Cote to Alvescot or some such place, and this may be why he sought St. Andrew's Chapel when men set upon him."

"If thieves," Lord Gilbert wondered aloud, "why did

they not make off with his goods?"

"Before he died he looked at me and said, 'They didn't get me coin.' Poor men might find it impossible to hide possession of ivory combs for their wives. Even selling such things would raise eyebrows. But coins… even a poor cotter will have some wealth. Perhaps whoso attacked the chapman thought disposing of his goods might point to them as thieves, so wished only for his purse."

"Did you find it?"

"Nay. He had no purse fixed to his belt, nor was there one in the cart or the forest, unless it is well hid."

"Then why, I wonder, did he say the fellows had not got his coin?"

"This puzzles me, as well. Perhaps the purse was in his cart, and he was too knocked about to know that the thieves made off with it."

"Aye," Lord Gilbert agreed. "Let us have a look at the cart, and see what is there."

"John Kellet has asked, if the chapman cannot be named, and no heir found, some of the goods found in the cart might be sold and the profit dispensed to the poor, to help them through the winter to come."

Lord Gilbert is not an unjust man, but the thought of surviving a winter, or possibly not, does not enter his mind, nor do any nobles give the season much thought other than to make ready a Christmas feast. That many folk might see winter as a threat to their lives and the survival of their children was an unfamiliar thought to my employer.

"Oh, uh, well, let us see what is there and I will consider the matter."

Most great lords need an extra horse or two, even if the beast be of the meaner sort. Lord Gilbert ordered the chapman's horse placed in an empty stall, and after inspecting the contents of the cart, commanded two grooms to take the goods to John Chamberlain's office, where he might hold them secure while I sought for some heir to the unidentified chapman. The empty cart was placed beside the castle curtain wall, behind the

marshalsea, there to await disposition.

My stomach told me 'twas past time for my dinner, and as I departed the castle gatehouse the noon Angelus Bell rang from St. Beornwald's Church tower to confirm the time. Kate had prepared a roast of mutton, which I devoured manfully, though such flesh is not my favorite. I have never told this to Kate, as I dislike disappointing her. So I consumed my mutton and awaited another day and a dinner more to my pleasure.

I decided after dinner, of which a sizeable portion remained for my supper, to revisit the clearing in the forest where John Kellet and I found the cart, then travel east to Aston and Cote. Perhaps the chapman did business in the villages and some there would know of him, or perhaps his murderers lived there and might be found out.

The path to the forest took me past St. Andrew's Chapel, and as I approached the lychgate I saw the curate and another man leave the porch, the dead chapman between then upon the pallet. In a far corner of the churchyard was a mound of earth where a grave lay open to receive its unidentified tenant. I turned from the road, passed through the rotting lychgate, and became a mourner at the burial.

Kellet lifted his eyes from his task when I approached and this caused him to stumble as a toe caught some uneven turf. He tried to regain his balance while maintaining a grip on his end of the pallet, but was unable to do either. The priest was a man who, three years past, could draw a longbow and place arrows in a butt as well as any. It is unlikely he could do so now, or even break an arrow shaft across his knee. Kellet's gaunt frame seems hardly robust enough to keep him upright, much less sustain a burden, and the chapman had been a sturdy man.

Kellet had provided no shroud for the corpse. The priest gives away so much of his living that he probably had no coin with which to purchase a length of even the coarsest hemp. So when he dropped his end of the pallet the chapman rolled uncovered to the sod, face down.

I hastened to help Kellet to his feet, and together with his assistant we lifted the corpse back upon the pallet. But when the chapman's face was raised from the grass I saw there a thing which arrested my attention and caused his dying words to return to my mind. A small coin lay upon the turf where a moment before the corpse had lain face down.

When the dead man was again upon his pallet I searched in the grass and retrieved the coin. It was worn and corroded, and looked like no coin I had before seen. It was of tarnished silver, smaller than a penny, very near the size of a farthing.

Kellet and his assistant watched as I inspected the coin. The priest finally spoke, "How did that come to be here in the churchyard?"

"It fell from the dead man's lips when he was turned onto the grass," I replied.

"Is that what he meant when he said the felons had not got his coin? He had hid it in his mouth?"

"Perhaps."

"'Tis an odd thing," Kellet said.

"Aye. Words are inscribed upon it, and the profile of a king, but they are so worn I cannot make them out."

"Why would men do murder for a small silver coin?" the priest asked.

I shrugged and said, "That is the service Lord Gilbert requires of me, to find who would do such a thing on his lands, and why."

Chapter 2

When the chapman was properly buried I walked to Aston and Cote and learned there two things. The man was named John Thrale, and he visited Cote and Aston three or four times each year. October was the latest month he was likely to appear, as roads would soon be ankle-deep in mud and travel would be cold, wet, and unpleasant. No one knew of a certainty where he made his home. A crone of Aston thought he was of Abingdon, but I mistrusted her memory.

Shadows lay long upon the ground when I returned to Bampton and Galen House. Bessie had discovered that, with proper use of arms and legs, she could explore her surroundings. Without constant supervision she is likely to cause herself some harm, as the fire is warm and inviting upon the hearth on a chill autumn day. So it is with men, who must be guided by the Lord Christ, else they harm themselves with the appealing but perilous things of the world. Kate was pleased at my return, as she then had an assistant to contain our daughter's explorations, while she busied herself at the work of the house.

Kate asked what news, and I told her of the silver coin and learning the chapman's name. I showed Kate the coin, and lamented that the letters stamped upon it were illegible. Kate took the coin from me, studied it, then turned to the hearth. From a corner of the fireplace she took a dead, blackened coal, then lifted the lid from my chest and drew from it a sheet of the parchment upon which I record accounts of events in Bampton. She placed the coin upon our table, laid the parchment atop it, then lightly brushed the coal across the two. An imprint of the coin appeared, and some of the letters circling the coin became readable.

"CA_A_SIV ET F_ATR_S S_I" were discernible. With some study I was able to construe the letters which were worn away. The inscription read, "CARAVSIVS ET FRATRES SVI" – "Carausius and his brothers".

Such words I had never seen on a coin, but I knew their meaning. No wonder the letters were worn, for lying upon my table was a Roman coin more than one thousand years old. How had the murdered chapman come by it? And why would two or more men murder him for it? The coin was not likely of pure silver, and was small, so its worth to a silversmith would be slight. Few merchants would exchange goods for it as they would not know its value. Had the chapman done so, receiving the coin in trade for buttons or a comb? Mayhap, but such dealing would not lead men to slay him for possession of a coin of so little worth.

I voiced these thoughts to Kate as she bustled about, preparing our supper. I would find more mutton upon my trencher this evening, but for this I was prepared. Perhaps on the morrow Kate would prepare a custard. Hope is a dish near as tasty as any other.

"Would a man perish to save a coin from falling into the hands of thieves?" Kate asked when I had concluded my musing and fallen silent.

I had been considering why men would murder to possess such a coin. Kate wondered why a man would risk a beating and death to keep it. I could discover no ready answer to either question, for as I would not attack another man for such small gain, neither would I risk wounds from those who demanded it of me if I refused to give it up.

It is useful in solving a felony to be able to set one's self in the place of felon or victim. I could do neither.

Bessie awoke in the night, hungry, and so roused Kate from her sleep, but not me. I was already lying awake, sleepless, considering why possession of a small silver coin might lead to a man's murder. There must be, I thought, more to this death than I suspected.

The old woman of Aston had suggested Abingdon

as the chapman's home, and as this was my only clue as to his residence, I resolved next day to claim Bruce at the castle marshalsea and seek what information I might of John Thrale. The old horse was given to my use when I accepted Lord Gilbert Talbot's offer to serve as his bailiff at Bampton, and had carried me many miles in Lord Gilbert's service, once all the way to Exeter. The elderly beast seemed pleased to leave his dark stall this day, but I think he was equally happy when our journey ended at the New Inn on the market square in Abingdon.

I had warned Kate that my task would require two days to travel to Abingdon and to search for some kin of the slain chapman (if, indeed, he had made his home there), then return, for Bruce is grey at the muzzle and will not be hurried. Bruce had carried Lord Gilbert at Poitiers, twelve years past.

I thought John Thrale might be best known among competitors and those who sold goods like his own, so I saw Bruce quartered in the mews behind the New Inn, and after I had consumed half of a roasted capon from the kitchen, I sought some business which sold items similar to those I found in the chapman's cart. I discovered such a shop and manufactory but a hundred paces from the inn, on Bridge Street, and when I asked of John Thrale my search was ended. The proprietor knew Thrale, and was, in fact, the chapman's supplier for the buttons and buckles he sold in villages about the shire.

This haberdasher of Abingdon was not pleased to learn of the death of a reliable customer, and was full of questions regarding the chapman's demise. As there was information I desired of the man, I thought the exchange of information a fair bargain. In return for my recitation of what was known of John Thrale's death, the shopkeeper pointed me to his house which, I was informed, was but a short distance away, upon East St. Helen Street.

John Thrale's house differed from most on the street in but one way: behind, in a small toft, was another structure. This was the stable where Thrale kept horse and

cart when he was not upon the roads seeking custom.

I had not thought to ask if Thrale was married, so thumped upon the door of his house to see if a wife would respond. Eventually a wife did, but not the chapman's. From the next house on the street, where a sign identified a pepperer's business, a woman appeared at the door, a child upon her hip, and said, "Ain't 'ome. On 'is rounds, is John."

"Is there no other, then, at home?" I asked.

The woman's eyes narrowed in suspicion at this. Why, she was clearly wondering, did some well-dressed man, who knew so little of John Thrale, seek him?

"Nay," she finally said. "What d'you want of 'im?"

I walked to the woman's door and replied, "I seek nothing of John Thrale. The man is dead. I am bailiff of the lands where he was found, and seek any wife or children so the goods discovered with him might be returned to them."

"Dead?" the woman frowned. "'E seemed well enough when 'e went off a week past."

"His health did not cause his death. Brigands set upon him on the road and murdered him."

The woman crossed herself at this news, and she whispered, "Murdered?"

"Aye. Had he a wife, or children?"

"'Ad a wife, but she and a child died o' plague near twenty years past, so 'e said. 'E was always on the road at 'is business an' never wed again. 'Though I have seen a woman about 'is place the past weeks. My Alfred told John 'twas dangerous work, to be on the roads alone with the goods in 'is cart. Said evil would come upon John soon or late."

"Had the chapman a brother or sister?"

"Aye, sisters, I think."

"Do they reside hereabouts?"

"Don't know. 'E never said much of 'em. Poor John only lived 'ere on the street since Lammastide. Didn't talk much, an' was never 'ome for long."

I thanked the woman for her time and turned my attention to the chapman's house. Perhaps within the dwelling there might be some evidence of the sisters to whom the contents of the chapman's cart might now belong. The windows were small, and covered by shutters which seemed fragile and easily torn aside. Prosperous families lived on East St. Helen Street, but John Thrale's house was one of the meanest, and in need of some repair.

I did not wish to call to myself the attention which pulling down a shutter would bring, so tried the door. It was securely shut, as I expected, even though there was no lock. It was barred from within. This being so, there must be another door, with a lock, at the rear, in the toft, else there would be no means of entry to the place.

I circled the house and saw my assumption correct. The rear of the house had but one small window, shuttered like those in the front, and in the middle of the wall was a door secured with a heavy iron latch. A large keyhole was centered in this lock, and when I tried the latch handle it would not move.

I had found no key in the chapman's cart, nor did Thrale carry it upon his person. Who would? Such a key is as long as my hand and the iron would weigh heavily upon a man.

My eyes found the barn at the rear of the toft and I left the house to search the place for a key. If I was the chapman, I thought, where would I hide a key that no man might discover it?

I would not hang it upon a nail, no matter how well hidden it might be. Such a place would surely be sought first.

The interior of the barn – which, in truth, was little more than a shed – was dark, stinking of manure, and shaded from the setting sun by the roof of the neighboring house. My eyes did not readily conform to the shadows, but when they did I surveyed the interior before moving to seek a key.

I saw a rusted nail, driven part-way into a corner

post, which in such place could serve no purpose but to hang upon it some object. But no key was there. Perhaps some time past Thrale, or some earlier inhabitant of the house, had hung a key there and some miscreant found it and looted the house while the owner was away. I saw no key in any other place, so began to search under beams and in hidden, shadowy places. I found no key.

Was the chapman a careless, slovenly fellow? Or had he allowed his beast's manure to accumulate upon the befouled straw so as to ensure no man was likely to plunge in his hand seeking a key beneath the filth? In a corner of the small barn I saw a shovel and rake, which tools the chapman must have used when he did clean the stable. I seized the rake and began to pull aside the fouled straw. Half-way across the shed I felt the wooden teeth of the rake strike some solid object. It was the key.

A moment later I entered the chapman's house. The interior was near pitch-black, for the autumn day was fading and the shutters over the windows were closed, permitting only narrow slivers of light to illuminate the place. The house was like those of most of King Edward's more prosperous subjects, however, so I did not require much light to find my way about.

The house had two rooms upon the ground floor, and the larger of these could be warmed by a fireplace. This was a puzzle, for itinerant chapmen do not usually possess such wealth as to afford a house of two floors, complete with fireplace, even if the house was in some disrepair.

In one corner of the larger room was a table, upon which rested a small chest and a cupboard. In another corner was the chapman's bed. A larger chest, complete with iron hasp and lock, occupied a third corner, close to the fireplace. Closer inspection of the table showed a cresset, and resting nearby, flint and steel for striking a fire.

I sought no heat, but desired more light, so unraveled a few threads from Thrale's bed covering, set these alight with sparks from the flint and steel, then transferred the flame to the wick of the cresset.

I opened the small chest. I sought there some document or letter which might lead me to Thrale's sisters. Likely he could not read, for I found nothing written there. Or perhaps he kept such things in his large chest. If so, I would not see them unless the chest was not locked, or I could find another key.

The chest was locked. The key for this box would not be so large as the one which opened Thrale's door, therefore easier hid. I returned to the small chest and inspected its contents. No key was there. I removed the bed covers and shook them out, to no purpose. I inspected the mattress, to see if some seam might show where a key was hid in the straw, and pounded upon the pillow to learn if a key might be among the goose feathers. I found nothing.

Next I overturned the bed to see if a key might be fixed somewhere under the frame. None was there. I moved the table and cupboard from the wall. Perhaps Thrale had hidden the key behind the cupboard. He had not, and running my fingers under the table showed no key there. I found only a splinter from the crudely made table.

I sucked upon the offended finger and surveyed the room. Did the chapman have this smaller key with him, and it lay now buried with him in his grave, or was it yet in his cart, and I had overlooked it when I took inventory of Thrale's possessions?

I next inspected the smaller ground-floor room, beyond the stairs. It was empty – no bench or chest or bed or cupboard was there. I climbed the stairs and with the flame of the cresset examined the two upper rooms. They were as bare as the small ground-floor room. John Thrale lived in but one room of this house. Why, at Lammastide, had he moved to a house much larger than his need?

I returned to the ground floor, studied again the larger room, and saw another place a man might hide a key. I bent to the hearth and from it drew a footed iron pot. Inside the pot I found the key. Whatever the chapman had stored in the larger chest, he had taken some pains that no man would open the box and discover his secret.

The key fit the lock poorly, and I thought at first it was a key to some other lock. But eventually, after some twisting and force, I made the key to work and drew open the chest. I was stunned at what I found there.

No letters or documents lay in the chest, but I found three leather pouches, a hammer near as large as a smith might use to pound out a horseshoe, a small, hand-operated bellows, and a tiny iron box, open at its top, narrow at the base, which was about the length of a finger and half as wide and deep.

I could not guess why such objects might be hid securely in such a chest, but thought the contents of the sacks might explain. They did so, for one sack contained thirty or more coins similar to the one which had dropped from the chapman's lips in St. Andrew's Chapel churchyard. Another sack held jewelry of various and wondrous designs: wrist bands, rings, and necklaces of gold, some of these studded with precious stones.

The third sack was smaller, and when I untied the thong which closed it I found within five small ingots of silver and one of gold, and seven small stones, one of which was green and much like an emerald. One glance at the small iron box told me whence these ingots had come. I took an ingot and fitted it to the box. It was a perfect match. After prising out the jewels, the silver and gold had been melted to fit the iron mold.

A bench lay against the wall beside the cupboard. I sat upon it and pondered this discovery. Much wealth was in this house. Why was this so, and where did the gold and silver come from? The silver and gold ingots were made of coins and jewelry like that found in the other two sacks. The chapman had used the bellows to create a fire upon his hearth hot enough to melt the coins and jewelry found in the other two sacks. What then did he do with them?

Some men had followed John Thrale and beat him to death in the forest to the east of Bampton. I now knew why. They knew of his secret wealth and desired to have it for themselves. They did not know all, else they would

have come to this house and entered it while the chapman was away, as I had done. Unless they did not know where Thrale lived when he was not about the shire. But surely they knew some of what I had discovered, and battered the chapman to make him tell of what they did not know. This they had failed to do. Or had they?

Had they succeeded, this house would hold no gold or silver for me to find. No, John Thrale had died rather than give up his secret. And what was this secret? I understood some small part of the reason for the chapman's death, but there was more to know.

The day was near gone and little light now entered through the cracks between the ill-fitting shutters. Only the cresset gave illumination to the chamber. I took the three leather pouches from the larger chest, then locked it and replaced the key in the iron pot.

I then set in order the bed and its covering. When all was as it had been I departed the house with the three sacks, locked the door, replaced the key under the manure and straw, then set off for the marketplace and the New Inn. It was near time for curfew, and dark enough on the streets that the three pouches were invisible against my brown cotehardie.

I slept fitfully that night. You would have also with ten or twelve pounds' worth of gold and silver under your pillow, and a half-dozen other fellows snoring in the shared chamber. I was pleased when dawn showed through the cracks in the shutters, and I was able to rise and see to Bruce's preparation for returning to Bampton.

I fixed the three pouches to a belt under my cotehardie. This caused me to appear a trencherman, but seated upon Bruce, the effect was diminished and I was reassured that no man would guess the wealth I carried. I would return to Abingdon to seek John Thrale's sisters, but I was not prepared to leave the chapman's hidden wealth either at his house or at the inn while I searched for his family.

I drew Bruce to a halt before Galen House just past midday. The old horse would have continued down Bridge

Street, to the castle and his stall, so I was required to yank firmly upon the reins to turn him into Church View Street. Perhaps no harm would have been done had I gone first to the castle, then walked home with the three sacks. Or perhaps I might have left the bags with John Chamberlain, but I felt uneasy about doing so, for no reason I can now explain.

So I entered my house with three sacks of silver and gold, much to Kate's surprise, and took a moment to tell her how I came by such riches before I placed the pouches in my chest.

Kate was not much pleased when I told her that I had planned to return to Abingdon again on the morrow. Bruce would likely be unhappy about it as well. The old beast often seemed pleased to set out upon a journey, but was happiest when he entered the castle forecourt and knew a stall and bucket of oats awaited him. I was not enthusiastic about the journey myself. Had you spent a night amongst the snoring residents of the abbey's New Inn, you would understand. But a man was dead, murdered upon Lord Gilbert's land, and it was my duty to seek those who slew him, and return his possessions to his heirs, could they be found.