

Relics

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Extract

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Chapter One

Every drunk is a magician. Or rather, there is a brief moment within drunkenness when magic is a hair's breadth from reach. As I leaned on the rough sandstone of the bridge and stared at the dark river below, I knew that, with one more effort, I could transport myself from this dismal valley to the warm riverbank of my home. A three-quarter moon rising over my shoulder picked out the sinews of the water. I squeezed my eyes shut, and in the same moment knew that I had lost my chance. The magic had gone. These things are a matter of timing. I have still to get it right.

I opened my eyes to find that, indeed, I was still in the wretched city. A northerly breeze blew cold, marshy air around my neck and ankles, and I gathered the thick worsted of my robe hard against my body. But the hiss and gurgle of the river beneath me and the moonlight overhead combined agreeably with the ale in my stomach, and for a drowsy moment I fancied I could hear the spheres of heaven turn and ring somewhere in the distance.

Enough. There was ale to be drunk, and warmth to be enjoyed. I walked to the far end of the bridge, took a couple of steps down the bank and pissed long and hard into the flood, my little stream arching over in a pretty silver thread. Arranging my robes, I made my way back towards the tavern where I had left my friends.

The Crozier, if it still stands, is a small, mean building from the outside. Its cob walls are melting back into the ground like cheese left in a hot sun. The innkeeper, whose sallow skull-face turned many would-be clients away at first sight but who was in fact a cheerful soul, once told me that an ancestor of his had built the place in the time of the last Danish king. Given the cheesy nature of the walls and the toadstools springing lavishly from the eaves, I was inclined to believe him. But once past the door – big rusting iron studs keeping warped planks in some sort of order – the brave or foolish found a big room warmed by a

fire that takes up most of one wall, long benches polished into dark mirrors by countless arses, sweet herbs among the clean rushes on the floor stones and two huge butts of strong, sweet beer. This was – and for the sake of that dismal city, I pray it still is – the finest brew in the Bishop's domain.

The Crozier's beer was the best I have ever tasted. It had . . . but no. One man's favourite drink is another's pond-water. If I could have tasted every drop described to me by thirsty bores far from home (or just far from drink) I would be drunk for all my life and half way through the life to come. Sufficient that this was honey-sweet and strong as sunlight, with a lingering something of heather in the taste.

The breeze picked up a notch and all of a sudden I was chilled. I turned into Crozier Lane and there was the tavern, just a few yards away. At that moment, the door opened and yellow light poured into the alley, along with raised voices. Three figures lurched out. By the way they staggered around each other, arms plucking at clothing and heads lifted, a fight was obviously about to happen. Cold, homesick and thirsty, the last thing I wanted at that moment was to push through a brawl, and so I turned left up the narrow passage that separated the tavern from its neighbours, keeping my feet wide apart to avoid the runnel of night-water that trickled down the middle. A right turn, and I was at the side door.

The Crozier's side entrance was a stone archway over an old iron-bound door, behind which a short, stone-floored corridor led to the tap-room. As the door squeaked shut behind me, I noticed something peculiar about the old straw that lay on the flagstones. Something was reflecting back the light from the reed spill that burned in the one wall-sconce, something bright and golden. I bent down to get a closer look.

It really was gold. Sharp-cornered pieces that had been cut from bigger coins. There were a lot of them, scattered over the rotting straw, which, now that my nose was closer, stank of mould and nameless fluids. Without thinking, I reached out to the piece nearest to me, but something made me stop. Looking back, I like to think that I was prompted by divine guidance or my own sharp senses, but in fact I had realised that the floor was alive with lice that skipped over the straw and coins like fat jumping in a hot pan. So instead, I straightened up.

The next moment I felt someone grab me from behind and the weight of a body slam me against the wall, knocking the air from my lungs. Then I was spun round. A hand clamped itself over my mouth.

'This is how you kill someone quickly and efficiently. Knife forward, your thumb on the blade. Strike upwards under the ribs and keep pushing upwards.' The voice was like wind seething across frozen snow. 'If your man is against a wall, put your hand over his mouth until he stops moving. That way, he will not cough blood into your face.'

I felt the man's breath flutter across my own face as he spoke. My eyes were so tightly shut that I was seeing stars. Somewhere in the back of my skull a small, calm voice seemed to be telling me to open them, that I was going to die anyway and that I might as well find out how and why. And so I did.

And found myself looking into a long, thin face. Copper skin stretched tight over angular bones. Thick black hair cut to wear under a helmet. A jutting beard, and dark eyebrows arching over shining slate-grey eyes. A slash of a mouth, which began to laugh. The hand left my face.

'How now, my little monk! Still alive?'

'Yes,' I squeaked with the air that remained in my chest.

'Well, well. And are you wondering why?'

I could only manage a nod.

'The reason, priestlet, is that you kept your delicate fingers away from my gold. That told me what a wonderful little fellow you must be.'

I tried to say something. I felt the sudden need to tell this man how grateful I was to him, and at the same time to stand up for myself. A word formed itself on my dry tongue.

'Fuck,' I croaked.

The dark man roared with laughter. He let me go, and my knees almost gave out beneath me. Hardly daring to look, I nevertheless saw that my attacker was tall and slim, and wore clothes of some fine green damask. Then I noticed his right hand. It held a very long, narrow and sharply pointed knife. Seeing my eyes flick down, the man whipped his blade up, holding it a finger's length from the tip of my nose. At this unwelcome distance I could see that the blade was finely chased with swirling patterns in silver, and that the handle was some pale green substance, inlaid with red stones.

'Pretty, isn't she?' said the man. 'Her name is Shauk. She and I were playing a game.'

'A game? What sort of fucking game?' I did not feel this brave. It just came out.

'A game to find the greedy people.'

'I'm not greedy.'

'No indeed. You were blind to temptation. A veritable Saint Anthony!' The man laughed coldly. 'Shauk means "Thorn" in the Mussulman tongue. She can be a sharp little thing.'

And he pressed the tip of his thumb down onto the point of the blade. It came away with a bead of blood already welling from it. He raised his hand and flicked the blood at me. I felt warm drops spatter my face.

'Now it is time for you to run along, *Brother Petroc*.'

He hissed the last two words. I hesitated for a moment, trapped by his dead blue glare, then turned and ran, kicking up straw and gold as I stumbled up the corridor, heaved open the tap-room door and burst inside.

It was like stepping into another world. Later that night, when my humours had settled into something like their normal configurations, I decided that it had felt like a story my mother used to tell, about a young man called Tom. Young Tom was a tinner, and had dug into one of the mounds that cropped up on the brown and windy slopes of Dartmoor. Deeper and deeper went Tom until his spade struck empty air. He wriggled into the hole, and tumbled into a great hall where the faery court was feasting. In the story, roguish Tom had been welcomed, given a comely faery lass to wed, and returned to the moors after a happy day underground, only to find that the seasons had turned twelve times in his absence. But here in the Crozier, no one had missed me. An eternity had passed outside, and inside time had taken its usual slovenly pace as beer levels crept down, logs turned quietly to ash, and dirty laughter faded in the rafters like smoke. This world was the same, but like Tom the tin miner I had been changed, although I did not know it then. The sparkle of gold and the wave of the steel thorn had worked on me as surely as any faery glamour, and would go on working like slow poison until the old Petroc became merely the person telling his story, a world away in distance and an age away in time.

But now I hung in the doorway like a dead crow on a gibbet, panting, waiting for my heart to burst out through my ears. Then I remembered there was a sharp knife and an open door at my back. The slam turned a few ruddy faces in my direction. I reeled over to the bench where my friends sat. Welsh Owen glanced over his shoulder, and shifted his bum over to make room for me. I sank down next to him. Suddenly I was very angry. I slammed the palm of my hand down on the table. That got the company's attention. William of Morpeth turned his pox-marked face to me.

'Where in the name of Saint Agatha's dugs did you get to?' he asked.

My friends were staring at me now. My five friends: Welsh Owen, Cornish Owen, William, Alfred and Martin de Gallis.

‘Someone get me a beer,’ I said. ‘Then I’ll tell you.’

Chapter Two

But more than one mugful of the Crozier's delectable beer nestled in my belly before I turned to my friends at last.

'Well, get on with it!' demanded Martin de Gallis.

I reached for yet another mug, and saw that my hand was shaking a little less.

'A little respect, by your leave, for one who has looked into the eyes of Death,' I said. Now I had their attention.

'I went down to the river for a piss,' I continued, 'and when I got back some drunkards were scuffling in front of the door, so I took the back entrance. I walked in and saw gold all over the floor, and then someone jumped on me.'

'Who jumped on you?' said William.

'What sort of gold?' said Alfred.

'Gold,' I said. 'Real gold. A great amount. And then that mad-man . . .' I paused. The man must really have been mad. I shivered. 'He pulled out a knife and put it to my throat – said he was waiting for the greedy people.'

'Like us!' shouted Cornish Owen. I ignored him.

'He cut his own finger and flicked blood in my face,' I said. 'Then I ran.'

William of Morpeth leaned over and stared at me.

'You do have blood on you,' he said. 'What did he look like, Patch?'

Patch was my nickname. I was christened Petroc, but as I left my mother the midwife blacked my eye with a fat finger, and I was Patch from that day forth. Although the mark faded as I grew, the name remained, and while to most folk I was Brother Petroc, to my friends I was Patch – and Will was my greatest friend. I took a long drink and described the man.

'I believe I've seen him,' said William, scowling. 'Going in and out of the Bishop's palace – I thought he looked like a man-at-arms.'

'Well for God's sake keep away from him,' I snapped. 'He has evil about him. And he has a Moorish knife,' I added, remembering.

My companions were gawping at me. All at once I felt sick inside, and sick of them. I stood up.

'I'm going,' I said.

I glanced back as I walked unsteadily to the door. They were still open-mouthed, apart from Cornish Owen, who was reaching for my beer. Outside, the air had got chillier. The moon had set, and a sky full of stars blazed above me. My lodgings were across the river, and I set out for the bridge. The streets were empty. I realised that sweat had soaked though my underclothes, and the cold was biting clammily at my goose-bumped skin. I heard quick footfalls behind me, and a hand clapped to my shoulder as I turned, my heart jumping madly for the second time that night.

'Hold up, Petroc,' said William of Morpeth.

I stared at him blindly for a long instant, while my blood cooled and drained from my throbbing head. And so we stood, each with a handful of each other's clothes, until I found my voice.

'By Christ and his virgin mother, Will! Cut my throat and have done, if I must spend the rest of my life pissing in my robes from fear.'

William gave my shoulder a hard squeeze and released me. There was worry in his pox-eaten visage, and now that my fright had passed I was glad of his company.

'You are my bait, Patch – I wish to see this Moorish knifeman for myself,' he said, linking arms with me. We started off again, towards the bridge.

As I have said, Will was my closest friend. The rest were hangers-on; friends of convenience, useful to pass the time with (and in the case of Martin de Gallis, a courtier's bastard, useful for an occasional loan), but Will was the only one with any depth. In their beer-blurred and half-formed minds the others resented this bond a little, probably because they too were not particularly fond of each other, and made sport with us at times. They called us The Tups, in honour of our sheep-rearing origins, and would sometimes bleat at us by way of greeting, which we ignored. They were not, I confess, inherently wicked in any way, but more like children who stir the bottom of clear puddles merely to see the water muddy and spoiled. I have no doubt that each of them attained fat parishes and are lording it to this day, raising the skirts of their parishioners' ripe wives and guzzling down the fruits of other folk's honest labour. Go to, my friends, go to: I wish you joy.

Will, though, pursued his pleasures single-mindedly and without

regard for the strictures of canon law. We were cut from very different cloth, he and I, he the knowing one, myself the innocent – although that is untrue. Will, in his way, was an innocent too, and threw himself into his drinking, whoring and fighting with the passion of a child, not of a fallen man. Perhaps that was why we were friends. For he never attempted to draw me into his wicked ways, and I, for my part, could not find it in my heart to scold him or even, truly, disapprove.

But nevertheless we were very different. And I had felt that difference keenly this very day. It was my habit to call on Will at his lodgings and find out from him what the evening's entertainment was likely to be – another telling indication of my own rather pious nature, that I was happier to go along with another's plans than admit to my own – and around sunset I had knocked on his door in the mean lodging house that stood rather too near the tanneries for comfort. He had bid me enter, and I strode in, to find him sitting on the edge of his pallet, arm around a girl.

I knew that Will made free with the city's whores – 'courtesans,' he delighted in calling them – but it was a shock to find one of these creatures sitting in front of me, close enough for me to smell her, a warm waft of vetiver and sweat. She was young, no older than me, with the round, pink face of a country girl, a tangled mass of yellow hair piled on top of her head in a comically inept attempt to ape the courtly fashion of the day. She was plump, and her bosom was straining the threadbare linen of her tunic.

'This is Clarissa,' said Will. 'Clarissa, this fine personage is Petroc, my brother in Jesus.'

'Come in, Petroc,' said Clarissa, with a giggle that was almost coy. Her voice confirmed that she was indeed a local girl from some outlying village. I stepped into the room and closed the door hurriedly.

'What ho, Will,' I stammered, trying but failing to sound like a man of the world.

'What ho, yourself,' he replied. 'Are we away to the Crozier?'

'I hope,' said I.

'Well then,' he said to the girl, 'I will take my leave of you, dearest.'

'You've kept me too long as it is,' she pouted, and pinched him lightly on the earlobe.

I saw then that Clarissa was arranging her clothes. So I had at least blundered in on the end of their business, not the beginning. She stood, plucked something from the top of Will's clothes-chest. I saw the flash of metal as she wound it into a fold of her skirt. Then she was standing before me, and regarding me pertly, her head cocked to one side. I

found myself searching her face for the marks of sin, but all I saw was a pretty, tired country girl.

'You're a big boy, brother Petroc,' she said, and pouted again. I realised that she was searching my face in turn. 'Do you need anything?'

'Nothing,' I blurted.

'Petroc really is good,' said Will from the pallet. 'But not in a bad way,' he added. 'Time to be off, Clarissa.' I caught a warning note in his voice.

But the girl stood before me, as if trying to decide some small but niggling problem. Then she gave a lopsided smile and hooked her thumbs into the top of her unlaced tunic. She jerked it down, and her breasts came spilling out. They were large and round, and very white. As a sea of mortification flooded over me, burning and freezing every inch of my body, I saw blue veins and brown nipples. She shook them slightly, and they juddered. Then I saw that there were flecks of white on the puckered teats. Clarissa was nursing. I tore my eyes away and glanced at Will. He sat there with a rather confused grin on his pitted face. I had never before seen him blush.

'Clarissa . . .' he said again.

The girl shrugged, and tucked herself back into her ridiculously small bodice. She put her forefinger against her thumb to make a little circle. It would not be the only time I saw that odd little gesture tonight.

'It don't cost nothing to look,' she whispered to me, and, reaching down, flicked me in the crotch with her finger. Then she was gone. I heard the door grind open and thud shut again.

It hurt between my legs where she had flicked me. Her aim had been true – my pitifully weak flesh had risen proudly to meet her. I gazed dumbly around the room. Something had changed, although what it was I could not tell. Then I understood. It was I who had changed. Something had been broken or damaged. I was like a new knife that, used carelessly for the first time, picks up a nick or a tiny twist to the blade and never fits so smoothly into its sheath again.

'Oh no,' I breathed.

'They weren't that bad,' said Will, who had stepped to my side. 'Anyway, you didn't touch anything, so you should be safe. Soul-wise,' he added. He grabbed me round the shoulders and shook me. 'Come on, boy. Don't tell me that's the first pair of bobbies you've clapped eyes on.'

But it was – save my mother's as she fed my little brother and sister, and nursing women glimpsed and hurriedly turned away from in the streets. Clarissa, too, was a mother, and yet Will . . . I shook my head to

clear it. How easy damnation crept upon one. How simple, and how sweet. Oh, Christ. I thumped myself in the groin, and my flesh howled in protest.

'Easy, brother,' said Will. 'You need that for pissing.'

Then he was pulling me from the room and out into the dreary Balecester dusk, and we made our way to the Crozier, and I found Clarissa's breasts all too easy, after a brace of beers, to forgive, if not quite to forget.

Now Will was worrying about me yet again. 'Those oafs care for nothing but drink and women, and as they cannot lay their nasty mitts on the one, they must perforce concentrate on the other,' he was saying. 'And they are as greedy as swine: no sooner were you gone than Owen and Alfred rushed to look for the gold, but the passage was empty. Now they have returned to their slothful chatter, and I for one am tired of it. Besides, this is evidently a dangerous night to be walking about alone.'

'What kind of a man plays games with knives and gold, Will?' I said. 'Who do you suppose he is?'

'If he is the man I have seen near the palace, I would say that he is a knight returned from the Holy Land. He has been under a hot sun, and he has a fighter's look. Besides, his clothes are foreign.' I remembered the man's green cloak: it had looked like rich, patterned silk.

'He was French, I think,' I said.

'Or Norman,' said Will. 'The French are small – this fellow is tall, and his lip curls like a Norman.' He spat.

Will had no love for the Normans. His father's grandfather, or the grandfather's grandfather, was a thegne who had died in King Harold's shield-wall at Hastings. The family lost their lands and had become wool-merchants instead, growing quite rich again and building a fine house in Morpeth, a town in the far north which my friend described as 'a whorehouse for Scots and drovers, but lacking the whores'. Will, the bright third son, had been packed off to Balecester 'to become a bishop', Will would say ruefully. 'A burgher's fat soul needs a bishop in the family if it is to squeeze into heaven. My father is about as pious as his sheep. But the Lord is a shepherd, and Pater trades in wool, so the old monster feels a certain kinship with his Redeemer' – and here he would wink at me – 'but he knows you can fleece men as well as lambkins: he longs to see me with crozier in one hand, shears in the other, and my holy bum on a golden woollack.'

As we turned up Ox Lane, the street where I made my lodgings, the curfew bell sounded in the distance, and as always I strained to hear the

scurrying of feet which I always imagined must follow. In my experience, bells were rung for a purpose: to summon, to warn and to drive away storms. Here in the town, no one took much notice, until the Sheriff's men came at them with their knobbed staves. We students were meant to fight these dullards, it was expected of us, and Will boasted a long scar that divided his tonsure almost from ear to ear. Sophisticate that I was, I felt inclined to be at home and abed whilst these rumpuses took place. And now, as my landlady's door came into view, I turned and caught that twinkle in my companion's eye that meant his night was not yet over.

We reached the threshold of my lodgings. Will tapped me on the chest with a loose fist. He was grinning like a hungry fox.

'Bar your door tonight, brother, in case your crusader comes a-knocking.'

'My crusader, Will? You are more than welcome to him yourself,' I replied. I was tired now, although it was not late, and sleep seemed the most desirable thing in the world.

'Keep safe, brother,' I said. 'Don't go picking up stray coins.'

'My eyes will be on the heavens, Patch, as always.'

And he turned and loped away into the moon-shadows. I climbed the narrow, creaking stairs to my lodgings under the roof. The latch stuck, as always, and then the usual smell of mildewed thatch greeted me. I lit a candle stub and let the warm tallow reek fight off the roof's stale breath – I had decided, soon after taking up residence, that the thatch was so damp that I was unlikely to set it on fire. My pallet, too, was damp and I shivered for a while, my sheepskin mantle tight around me. The candlelight flickered yellow along the rafters and over the bilious straw. Sleep was near, and the bedbugs were hungry. I could hear their little guts rumble as I snuffed out the flame.