

Painted in Blood

Pip Vaughan-Hughes

Published by Orion

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Prologue

Venice, August 1239

The blood was drying, caking on my top lip and setting hard across my mouth. My eyelashes were smarting as it began to clot and knit them together, and a burning line ran across my eyeballs from the blood trying to seep between my tight-shut lids. Cooling blood tightened the skin on my chest and itched and stung in every scratch and flea-bite. The air cracked and soughed above me, and with a gentle sigh of air the cloth settled over me.

I dared not twitch an eyelid, though the salt was stinging horribly. There was a panicked scream growing under my breast-bone, but I dared not let it out, dared do nothing but let my breath creep in and out of my nose, softly, panic growing each time the blood-soaked cloth stuck to my nostrils and cut off the tiny stream of air. The cloth began to bind itself against me, the blood sucking it tight to my skin. I was goose-flesh from my scalp to my toes. As the wet linen moulded itself to the dips of my face, as the pooled blood drew it into the sockets of my eyes, the distant red glow of torchlight that had been filtering through my lids went out.

'Just a bit longer, Patch,' said Gilles de Peyrolles, softly. I flinched as hands began to smooth the scratchy linen against the length of my body. At least they had had the courtesy to

heat the blood first, but it was beginning to cool now, in the chill of a rainy Venetian evening, made more frigid – even in August – by the ancient stones of the palace known as Ca’Kanzir, in the kitchen of which we were conducting what it pleased Captain de Montalhac to call an *experiment*.

‘Is that enough time, do you think?’ It was Gilles again.

‘I think so. Any longer and the blood will come off in flakes, won’t it?’ Captain de Montalhac didn’t sound too certain, so I tried a series of small twitches and pathetic noises in my throat to let my two friends know that it most certainly was time to peel the shroud off me. And peel it they did, starting at my feet and pulling the linen taut so that it snapped away from my skin all at once. And suddenly I was very cold, and very relieved. My eyes were still gummed shut, but I opened my mouth, lips straining against the salty glue until they came apart with a sticky kiss.

‘Sit up, quickly,’ said the Captain, gingerly taking hold of my shoulders. ‘Gilles, do you have hold of it?’

I sat up, and the Captain put the knotted end of a rope into my hands. It was slung across the main ceiling beam, and as we had planned I used it to pull myself sharply off the table on which I had been lying, so that the shroud beneath would not be smudged. Still blind, I swung myself to one side and let go, hoping not to land on anything sharp.

‘Oh, fuck,’ I gasped. ‘For mercy’s sake, get me some water.’

The image on our shroud was pitiful. We hung it up to dry from the ceiling, and there was my outline, head down and then head up again, as if I had been sliced in half and arranged end to end. I had been growing a beard, and so the face on the shroud should have been that of a young, long-haired, bearded man. But it was nothing more than a clotted daub of darkening pig’s blood, and indeed the whole affair

looked like nothing better than a child's gigantic finger painting.

'So that isn't how they did it either,' I said at last. I was standing in a tub of hot water that I had insisted be ready for me, sluicing away the last of the gore with a ewer of more water. I smelled like a blood pudding. It would take days to get it out of my hair, though, and as for my beard . . .

'I still think it was some sort of . . . you said honey, didn't you, Michel? But I think caramel,' said Gilles.

'I am *not* painting myself with honey, nor caramel either,' I said flatly. 'But it isn't right anyway. The face, for instance. Can you get . . . can you get *it* out? To compare.'

None of us wanted to, but in the end Gilles, wrinkling his nose with unease, opened the slim wooden case that lay at the far end of the room, well out of the way of sloshing water and splattering blood. He drew out a wide strip of thin, brownish cloth and hung it over a broom handle that we had suspended from the ceiling. I felt the air change, imperceptibly, as I always did when the *Mandylyon* of Edessa was brought out. For now we were in the presence of something, of – I could not quite bring myself to say it, now or at any time – of *someone*. For the ancient linen bore the image of a man, a naked, bearded man, his hands crossed to hide his manhood, his brow and side spotted and streaked with what had once been blood. All this somehow seemed to shine from what, if you got close enough, was nothing more than a faint, very faint arrangement of stains. But what the *Mandylyon* exuded, what changed the temperature in any room where it was displayed, was suffering.

Now it hung next to my own image, but compared to that, the new-made shroud was nothing more than a butcher's apron or a torturer's memento. To call it crude would have honoured it far beyond what it deserved. But why? The

Mandy lion was reputed by legends reaching far back into the murky past to be nothing less than the burial shroud of Jesus Christ, and the image was that of his body, conveyed miraculously to the cloth in the hours before His resurrection. But if it was not a bloody imprint – and the three of us in that kitchen all agreed, with our silence, that our experiment had demonstrated that it was not – what, then, could it possibly be?

Michel de Montalhac, captain of the ship *Cormaran*, was the greatest dealer of holy relics the world has ever known, although he was too modest a soul to brag of it. Gilles de Peyrolles was his oldest companion and lieutenant of our company, and I was their partner. It was I who had stolen the *Mandy lion* from its home in the Pharos Chapel in far away Constantinople, and in the five years since I had joined the company of the *Cormaran*, I had learned from these two masters everything that could be learned about holy relics: how to find them, how to sell them, and above all, how to make them to order. But Gilles and the Captain, let alone my own modest intellect, could not work out how the ancient forger had made the *Mandy lion*. For it had to be a forgery.

It had to be.

‘The cloth is ancient, agreed?’ Gilles said quietly. We nodded. ‘So who worked out how to do this, a thousand years ago?’

‘Someone cleverer than us,’ said the Captain. We always did this, studiously avoided the real question posed by the *Mandy lion*. Perhaps the three of us were daring each other to say it first:

‘What if?’

But we never did. ‘We’ve all seen the painted mummy boards in the bazaars of Cairo,’ said Gilles instead. ‘The

ancients knew how to paint a face – far better than our painters today.’

‘Yes, but they used encaustic – we tried that, remember? It looked like a . . . like a bad mummy board, except cloth.’

‘I still think it looks like scorching,’ said the Captain. ‘Perhaps an iron statue, heated until it was red hot, and the cloth just *touched* to it . . .’

‘There would be burns,’ I pointed out. ‘It would have singed right through somewhere.’

We had told each other many times of the great coffer of silver awaiting us if we could make a decent copy of this thing. But we were hiding behind our professional interest, for there was one thing the three of us agreed upon. The *Mandylion* of Edessa was no forgery.

But if not, what was it? In the world that turned outside the Ca’Kanzir, our dilemma would have been no dilemma at all. Kings were waiting to pay the worth of their kingdoms for the thing that dangled from our kitchen ceiling, if they but knew it existed; cardinals would poison each other, bishops would risk excommunication. For here was Christ’s image, made by nothing less than the emanations of His dead flesh. But none of us believed in Him. I was godless, faithless; and Captain de Montalhac was, with Gilles, a heretic of the sort they call *Albigense* and *Cathari*. An erstwhile monk who had lost his faith years before, and two men who believed Christ had been either a phantom or a lie told by the Church to bind men to its rule: such were the guardians of the *Mandylion*.

‘Put it away,’ said the Captain at last. With the help of Gilles I folded it up and closed the lid of the plain reliquary. The sun seemed to have come out, though the mists of Venice still hovered outside. ‘I will take it tomorrow, for the brothers must leave, and Bishop Marty is waiting for it.’

‘Are you sure your people need it?’ I asked. ‘It does not seem . . .’ I put the box carefully on a side table and stepped quickly away from it. ‘It tells us of nothing but pain and death.’ That was the truth, to me at least. A thin murmur seemed to come from the shroud, a whispered agony and a seeping coldness. Not malevolent, not evil: simply the absence of hope. I did not believe it had witnessed a resurrection. It was empty, like all graves are empty: their occupants, though they lie within, are not there. When I looked into the shadowy eyes of the man on the shroud, that is what I saw.

‘Marty will teach the people with it,’ said the Captain, finding his own strong voice again, for we had all been whispering. ‘It proves Christ was a man, that he suffered, and because of that was not the Son of God. The Church has lied, she has always lied, and here is the proof. Besides, do you want to keep it?’

‘I do not,’ said Gilles.

‘I am sorry I ever found it,’ I said.

‘Perhaps it was waiting for you,’ said the Captain, and he levelled his eyes at me for a moment. Then he smiled. ‘There’s blood in your beard,’ he said.

‘I know.’ And at that moment the cook walked in, and at the sight of all the gore that was growing hard upon her table let out a shriek of outrage, and as for the bloody two-headed figure suspended from the rafters . . .

‘We were cooking,’ Gilles explained, gathering her up in his arms and steering her away from the carnage.

‘What in God’s name were you making?’ she breathed, fanning herself.

‘We don’t know,’ said Captain de Montalhac. ‘We do not know.’

Chapter One

Paris, summer of 1241

Do you understand heretics, Monsieur Petrus?' asked Louis Capet, King of France, rolling an acorn absently between slender fingers. It was last year's fruit, and winter had polished it until it shone, fat and brown against Louis' white skin.

Overhead, in the great canopy of the oak tree, a squirrel was chittering and a family of blackbirds were screaming at a magpie. A horsefly was attacking my neck. I grabbed for it and caught it in my fist, feeling the tiny crunch as it paid for its boldness. Opening my hand, I watched as the bright stained glass of its tiny eyes faded.

'Understand them in what sense?' I replied, scraping the bloody gut-smear of the fly from my palm. Looking up, I met the king's gaze. Somewhere above me a baby blackbird was perhaps about to become a magpie's dinner.

'Their inner workings, if you will.' He held up the acorn's smooth brown oval, turning it so that it gleamed in the dappled sunlight. 'One might consider this thing,' he went on. 'Flawless, simple, even beautiful, for are not all God's creations beautiful? But within . . .' His thumbnail whitened for an instant, and the acorn burst, raining shards of dust into the king's lap. 'Within, it is rotten.'

'So I see, Your Majesty,' I said, carefully.

‘It seemed so perfect, did it not? And so how did I know of the rottenness within? A hole, a tiny hole no bigger than a pinprick. The canker had wormed inside and laid it to waste. So it is with heretics.’

‘Your Majesty,’ I said, ‘I understand rottenness, but my experience of corruption . . .’ I paused and licked my lips. They were very dry. ‘I know more than enough of the corruption of matter. Things go bad. They rot. In a tree, a gardener might allay a canker, and in a person, a surgeon might be of use – or not.’ I glanced at the king to gauge the effect of that feeble wit, but he was staring up at the shifting leaves. ‘But you speak of an invisible canker. I believe the diagnosis and cure of that should be left to the doctors of Holy Mother Church. Indeed I would fear to understand it, in case it corrupted me in turn.’

The king chuckled, and I let myself relax a little, a very little. ‘Wisely said. But such a subtle poison. How many acorns hang from my tree? A thousand, more? Into how many of them will the canker burrow?’

‘It is a city of acorns, Your Majesty. How long would it take to examine each one, do you suppose?’

‘Do you know, Monsieur Petrus, if they were human souls I would do it, I would, no matter how long it might take. I love God so well that I would look inside every one of my subjects for signs that evil had corrupted their innocent souls. But, lo!’ He flung the last of the ruined acorn away. ‘There is no need. Happily the Holy Father in Rome has created the Inquisition to do it for me.’

‘And for that blessing Christendom should be truly thankful,’ I said hurriedly. I wiped the broken body of the horsefly onto the grass. A tiny green and red stain remained on my finger.

‘If this tree were France, I could tell you where the canker

lies,' he said. 'Those lower branches. Do you see that fat crop of nuts hanging there? The lands of Toulouse are the lower branches of my kingdom, and there the heretics cluster just as thickly.'

'So one has heard,' I said.

The king sighed and rose to his feet. As was his custom he held out a hand to me and I took it and let him haul me upright. The gold of his rings had grown warm in the sunlight.

'Enough of this gloom,' he said, brushing the dust from his robe. 'We were talking of my chapel, and what might be found to adorn it. As to my acorns, before they ripen there is hope. But one day the wind will shake the branches and they shall fall, pure and rotten alike.' He slapped the trunk lovingly.

'And then the hogs will eat them all,' I said quietly, but Louis did not hear me.