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Opening Extract from...

Dissolution

Written by C. J. Sansom

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Chapter One

I WAS DOWN IN SURREY, on business for Lord Cromwell's office, when the summons came. The lands of a dissolved monastery had been awarded to a Member of Parliament whose support he needed, and the title deeds to some woodlands had disappeared. Tracing them had not proved difficult and afterwards I had accepted the MP's invitation to stay a few days with his family. I had been enjoying the brief rest, watching the last of the leaves fall, before returning to London and my practice. Sir Stephen had a fine new brick house of pleasing proportions and I had offered to draw it for him; but I had only made a couple of preliminary sketches when the rider arrived.

The young man had ridden through the night from Whitehall and arrived at dawn. I recognized him as one of Lord Cromwell's private messengers and broke the chief minister's seal on the letter with foreboding. It was from Secretary Grey and said Lord Cromwell required to see me, immediately, at Westminster.

Once the prospect of meeting my patron and talking with him, seeing him at the seat of power he now occupied, would have thrilled me, but this last year I had started to become weary; weary of politics and the law, men's trickery and the endless tangle of their ways. And it distressed me that Lord Cromwell's name, even more than that of the king, now evoked fear everywhere. It was said in London that the beggar

gangs would melt away at the very word of his approach. This was not the world we young reformers had sought to create when we sat talking at those endless dinners in each other's houses. We had once believed with Erasmus that faith and charity would be enough to settle religious differences between men; but by that early winter of 1537 it had come to rebellion, an ever-increasing number of executions and greedy scrabblings for the lands of the monks.

There had been little rain that autumn and the roads were still good, so that although my disability means I cannot ride fast it was only mid-afternoon when I reached Southwark. My good old horse, Chancery, was unsettled by the noise and smells after a month in the country and so was I. As I approached London Bridge I averted my eyes from the arch, where the heads of those executed for treason stood on their long poles, the gulls circling and pecking. I have ever been of a fastidious disposition and do not enjoy even the bear baiting.

The great bridge was thronged with people as usual; many of the merchant classes were in mourning black for Queen Jane, who had died of childbed fever two weeks before. Tradesfolk cried their wares from the shops on the ground floors of the buildings, built so closely upon it they looked as though they might topple into the river at any moment. On the upper storeys women were hauling in their washing, for clouds were now darkening the sky from the west. Gossiping and calling to each other, they put me in mind, in my melancholy humour, of crows cawing in a great tree.

I sighed, reminding myself I had duties to perform. It was largely due to Lord Cromwell's patronage that at thirty-five I had a thriving legal practice and a fine new house. And work for him was work for Reform, worthy in the eyes of God; so then I still believed. And this must be important,

for normally work from him came through Grey; I had not seen the chief secretary and vicar general, as he now was, for two years. I shook the reins and steered Chancery through the throng of travellers and traders, cutpurses and would-be courtiers, into the great stew of London.

✝

AS I PASSED DOWN Ludgate Hill, I noticed a stall brimming with apples and pears and, feeling hungry, dismounted to buy some. As I stood feeding an apple to Chancery, I noticed down a side street a crowd of perhaps thirty standing outside a tavern, murmuring excitedly. I wondered whether this was another apprentice moonstruck from a half-understood reading of the new translation of the Bible and turned prophet. If so, he had better beware the constable.

There were one or two better-dressed people on the fringe of the crowd and I recognized William Pepper, a Court of Augmentations lawyer, standing with a young man wearing a gaudy slashed doublet. Curious, I led Chancery down the cobbles towards them, avoiding the piss-filled sewer channel. Pepper turned as I reached him.

'Why, Shardlake! I have missed the sight of you scuttling about the courts this term. Where have you been?' He turned to his companion. 'Allow me to introduce Jonathan Mintling, newly qualified from the Inns and yet another happy recruit to Augmentations. Jonathan, I present Master Matthew Shardlake, the sharpest hunchback in the courts of England.'

I bowed to the young man, ignoring Pepper's ill-mannered reference to my condition. I had bested him at the bar not long before and lawyers' tongues are ever ready to seek revenge.

'What is passing here?' I asked.

Pepper laughed. 'There is a woman within, said to have a bird from the Indies that can converse as freely as an Englishman. She is going to bring it out.'

The street sloped downwards to the tavern so that despite my lack of inches I had a good enough view. A fat old woman in a greasy dress appeared in the doorway, holding an iron pole set on three legs. Balanced on a crosspiece was the strangest bird I had ever seen. Larger than the biggest crow, it had a short beak ending in a fearsome hook, and red and gold plumage so bright that against the dirty grey of the street it almost dazzled the eye. The crowd moved closer.

'Keep back,' the old woman called in shrill tones. 'I have brought Tabitha out, but she will not speak if you jostle round her.'

'Let's hear it talk!' someone called out.

'I want paying for my trouble!' the beldame shouted boldly. 'If you all throw a farthing at her feet, Tabitha will speak!'

'I wonder what trickery this is,' Pepper scoffed, but joined others in hurling coins at the foot of the pole. The old woman scooped them up from the mud, then turned to the bird. 'Tabitha,' she called out, 'say, "God save King Harry! A Mass for poor Queen Jane!"'

The creature seemed to ignore her, shifting on its scaly feet and eyeing the crowd with a glassy stare. Then suddenly it called out, in a voice very like the woman's own, 'God save King Harry! Mass for Queen Jane!' Those at the front took an involuntary step back, and there was a flurry of arms as people crossed themselves. Pepper whistled.

'What do you say to that, Shardlake?'

'I don't know. Trickery somewhere.'

'Again,' one of the bolder spirits called out. 'More!'

'Tabitha! Say, "Death to the pope! Death to the Bishop of Rome!"'

'Death to the pope! Bishop of Rome! God save King Harry!' The creature spread its wings, causing people to gasp with alarm. I saw that they had been cut cruelly short halfway down their length; it would never fly again. The bird buried its hooked beak in its breast and began preening itself.

'Come to the steps of St Paul's tomorrow,' the crone shouted, 'and hear more! Tell everyone you know that Tabitha, the talking bird from the Indies, will be there at twelve. Brought from Peru-land, where hundreds of these birds sit conversing in a great nest city in the trees!' And with that, pausing only to scoop up a couple of coins she had missed earlier, the old woman picked up the perch and disappeared inside, the bird fluttering its broken wings wildly to keep its balance.

The crowd dispersed, muttering excitedly. I led Chancery back up the lane, Pepper and his friend by my side.

Pepper's usual arrogance was humbled. 'I have heard of many wonders from this Peru the Spaniards have conquered. I have always thought you cannot believe half the fables that come from the Indies – but that – by Our Lady!'

'It is a trick,' I said. 'Did you not see the bird's eyes? There was no intelligence in them. And the way it stopped talking to preen itself.'

'But it spoke, sir,' Mintling said. 'We heard it.'

'One can speak without understanding. What if the bird just responds to the crone's words by repeating them, as a dog comes to its master's call? I have heard of jays doing such things.'

We had reached the top of the lane and paused. Pepper grinned.

'Well, 'tis true that the people in church respond to the priests' Latin mummings without understanding them.'

I shrugged. Such sentiments about the Latin Mass were not yet orthodox, and I was not going to be drawn into religious debate.

I bowed. 'Well, I fear I must leave you. I have an appointment with Lord Cromwell at Westminster.'

The boy looked impressed, and Pepper tried not to, as I mounted Chancery and headed back into the crowd, smiling wryly. Lawyers are the greatest gossips God ever placed in the world, and it would do business no harm to have Pepper mentioning it about the courts that I had had a personal audience with the chief secretary. But my pleasure did not last, for as I passed down Fleet Street fat drops began to splash in the dusty road, and by the time I passed under Temple Bar a heavy rain was falling, driven into my face by a sharp wind. I turned up the hood of my coat and held it tightly as I rode into the storm.

✝

By the time I reached Westminster Palace the rain had become torrential, gusting against me in sheets. The few horsemen who passed were, like me, hunched inside their coats, and we exclaimed to each other at the drenching we were getting.

The king had abandoned Westminster for his great new palace at Whitehall some years before, and nowadays Westminster was used mainly to house the courts. Pepper's Court of Augmentations was a new addition, set up to deal with the assets of the small religious houses dissolved the year before. Lord Cromwell and his burgeoning retinue of officials had their offices there too, so it was a crowded place.

Usually the courtyard was thronged with black-clad

lawyers debating over parchments and state officials arguing or plotting in quiet corners. But today the rain had driven all indoors and it was almost empty. Only a few bedraggled, poorly dressed men stood huddled, soaked, in the doorway of Augmentations: ex-monks from the dissolved houses, come to plead for the lay parishes the Act had promised them. The official on duty must be away somewhere – perhaps it was Master Mintling. One proud-faced old man was still dressed in the habit of a Cistercian, rain dripping from his cowl. Wearing that apparel around Lord Cromwell's offices would do him little good.

Ex-monks usually had a hangdog air, but this group were looking with horrified expressions over to where some carriers were unloading two large wagons and stacking the contents against the walls, cursing at the water dripping into their eyes and mouths. At first glance I thought they were bringing wood for the officials' fires, but when I brought Chancery to a halt I saw they were unloading glass-fronted caskets, wooden and plaster statues, and great wooden crosses, richly carved and decorated. These must be the relics and images from the dissolved monasteries, whose worship all of us who believed in Reform sought to end. Brought from their places of honour and piled up in the rain, they were at last stripped of power. I suppressed a stab of pity and nodded grimly at the little group of monks before steering Chancery through the inner arch.

✞

IN THE STABLES I dried myself as best I could on a towel the ostler gave me, then entered the palace. I showed Lord Cromwell's letter to a guard, who led me from the public area into the labyrinth of inner corridors, his brightly polished pike held aloft.

He took me through a large door where two more guards stood, and I found myself in a long, narrow hall, brightly lit with candles. Once it had been a banqueting hall, but now it was filled from end to end with rows of desks at which black-clad clerks sat sifting mountains of correspondence. A senior clerk, a short plump man with fingers black from years of ink, bustled across to me.

'Master Shardlake? You are early.' I wondered how he knew me and then realized he would have been told to expect a hunchback.

'The weather was kind – until just now.' I looked down at my soaked hose.

'The vicar general told me to bring you in as soon as you arrived.'

He led me on down the hall, past the rustling clerks, the wind created by our passage making their candles flicker. I realized just how extensive was the web of control that my master had created. The church commissioners and the local magistracy, each with their own network of informers, were under orders to report all rumours of discontent or treason; each was investigated with the full rigour of the law, its penalties harsher every year. There had already been one rebellion against the religious changes; another might topple the realm.

The clerk halted before a large door at the end of the hall. He bade me stop, then knocked and entered, bowing low.

'Master Shardlake, my lord.'

In contrast to the antechamber, Lord Cromwell's room was gloomy, only one small sconce of candles by the desk lit against the dark afternoon. While most men in high office

would have had their walls adorned with the richest tapestries, his were lined from floor to ceiling with cupboards divided into hundreds of drawers. Tables and chests stood everywhere, covered with reports and lists. A great log fire roared in a wide grate.

At first I could not see him. Then I made out his stocky form, standing by a table at the far end of the room. He was holding up a casket and studying the contents with a contemptuous frown, his wide, narrow-lipped mouth down-turned above his lantern chin. His jaw held thus made me think of a great trap that at any moment might open and swallow one whole with a casual gulp. He glanced round at me and, with one of those mercurial changes of expression that came so easily to him, smiled affably and raised a hand in welcome. I bowed as low as I could, wincing, for I was stiff after my long ride.

'Matthew, come over here.' The deep, harsh voice was welcoming. 'You did well at Croydon; I am glad that Black Grange tangle is resolved.'

'Thank you, my lord.' As I approached, I noticed the shirt beneath his fur-trimmed robe was black. He caught my glance.

'You've heard the queen is dead?'

'Yes, my lord. I am sorry.' I knew that after Anne Boleyn's execution Lord Cromwell had hitched his fortunes to those of Jane Seymour's family.

He grunted. 'The king is distracted.'

I looked down at the table. To my surprise it was piled high with caskets of various sizes. All seemed to be of gold and silver; many were studded with jewels. Through ancient spotted glass I could see pieces of cloth and bone lying on velvet cushions. I looked at the casket he still held, and saw

it contained a child's skull. He held it up in both hands and shook it, so that some teeth that had come loose rattled inside. The vicar general smiled grimly.

'These will interest you. Relics brought specially to my attention.' He set the casket on the table and pointed to a Latin inscription on the front. 'Look at that.'

'*Barbara sanctissima*,' I read. I peered at the skull. A few hairs still clung to the pate.

'The skull of St Barbara,' Cromwell said, slapping the casket with his palm. 'A young virgin murdered by her pagan father in Roman times. From the Cluniac Priory of Leeds. A most holy relic.' He bent and picked up a silver casket set with what looked like opals. 'And here – the skull of St Barbara, from Boxgrove nunnery in Lancashire.' He gave a harsh laugh. 'They say there are two-headed dragons in the Indies. Well, we have two-headed saints.'

'By Jesu.' I peered in at the skulls. 'I wonder who they were?'

He gave another bark of laughter and clapped me soundly on the arm. 'Ha, that's my Matthew, always after an answer for everything. It's that probing wit I need now. My Augmentations man in York says the gold casket is of Roman design. But it will be melted down in the Tower furnace like all the others and the skulls will go to the dunghill. Men should not worship bones.'

'So many of them.' I looked through the window, where the rain still beat down in torrents, sweeping the courtyard as the men continued unloading. Lord Cromwell crossed the room and stood looking out. I reflected that though he was now a peer, entitled to wear scarlet, he still dressed in the same style as I, the black gown and flat black cap of legal and clerical officials. The cap was silk velvet, though; the

gown lined with beaver. I noticed his long brown hair had become flecked with grey.

'I must have those things taken in,' he said. 'I need them dry. Next time I burn a papist traitor, I want to use some of that wood.' He turned and smiled grimly at me. 'Then people will see that using the heretic's own images as fuel does not make him scream any the less, let alone make God strike out the fire.' His expression changed again, became sombre. 'Now come, sit down. We have business.' He sat behind his desk, motioning me brusquely to a chair facing him. I winced at a spasm from my back.

'You seem tired, Matthew.' He studied me with his large brown eyes. Like his face, their expression constantly changed and now they were cold.

'A little. It was a long ride.' I glanced over his desk. It was covered in papers, some with the royal seal glinting in the candlelight. A couple of small gold caskets appeared to be in use as paperweights.

'You did well to find the deeds to that woodland,' he said. 'Without them the matter could have dragged on in Chancery for years.'

'The monastery's ex-bursar had them. He took them when the house was dissolved. Apparently the local villagers wanted to claim the woods as common lands. Sir Richard suspected a local rival, but I started with the bursar as he would last have had the deeds.'

'Good. That was logical.'

'I tracked him to the village church where he had been made rector. He admitted it soon enough and gave them up.'

'The villagers paid the ex-monk, no doubt. Did you have him in charge of the justice?'

'He took no payment. I think he only wanted to help the

villagers, their land is poor. I thought it better to make no stir.'

Lord Cromwell's face hardened and he leaned back in his chair. 'He had committed a criminal act, Matthew. You should have had him in charge, as an example to others. I hope you are not becoming soft. In these times I need hard men in my service, Matthew, hard men.' His face was suddenly full of the anger I had seen in him even when we first met ten years before. 'This is not Thomas More's Utopia, a nation of innocent savages waiting only for God's word to complete their happiness. This is a violent realm, stewed in the corruption of a decadent church.'

'I know.'

'The papists will use every means to prevent us from building the Christian commonwealth, and so by God's blood I will use every means to overcome them.'

'I am sorry if my judgement erred.'

'Some say you *are* soft, Matthew,' he said quietly. 'Lacking in fire and godly zeal, even perhaps in loyalty.'

Lord Cromwell had the trick of staring fixedly at you, unblinking, until you felt compelled to drop your gaze. You would look up again to find those hard brown eyes still boring into you. I felt my heart pound. I had tried to keep my doubts, my weariness, to myself; surely I had told nobody.

'My lord, I am as against papacy as I have always been.' As I said the words I could not help thinking of all those who must have made that answer before him, under interrogation about their loyalties. A stab of fear lanced through me, and I took deep breaths to calm myself, hoping he would not notice. After a moment he nodded slowly.

'I have a task for you, one suited to your talents. The future of Reform may depend on it.'

He leaned forward and picked up a little casket, holding it up. Within, at the centre of an intricately carved silver column, lay a glass phial containing a red powder.

'This,' he said quietly, 'is the blood of St Pantaleon, skinned alive by pagans. From Devon. On his saint's day, it was said, the blood liquefied. Hundreds came every year to watch the miracle, crawling on their hands and knees and paying for the privilege. But look.' He turned the casket round. 'See that little hole in the back? There was another hole in the wall where this was set, and a monk with a pipette would push little drops of coloured water inside the phial. And lo – the holy blood, or rather burnt umber, liquefies.'

I leaned forward, tracing the hole with my finger. 'I have heard of such deceits.'

'That is what monasticism is. Deceit, idolatry, greed, and secret loyalty to the bishop of Rome.' He turned the relic over in his hands, tiny red flakes trickling down. 'The monasteries are a canker in the heart of the realm and I will have it ripped out.'

'A start has been made. The smaller houses are down.'

'That barely scratched the surface. But they brought in some money, enough to whet the king's appetite to take the large ones where the real wealth is. Two hundred of them, owning a sixth of the country's wealth.'

'Is it truly as much as that?'

He nodded. 'Oh yes. But after the rebellion last winter, with twenty thousand rebels camped on the Don demanding their monasteries back, I have to proceed carefully. The king won't have any more forced surrenders, and he's right. What I need, Matthew, are *voluntary* surrenders.'

'But surely they'd never—'

He smiled wryly. 'There's more than one way to kill a pig. Now listen carefully, this information is secret.' He leaned forward, speaking quietly and intently.

'When I had the monasteries inspected two years ago, I made sure everything that might damage them was carefully recorded.' He nodded at the drawers lining the walls. 'It's all in there; sodomy, fornication, treasonable preaching. Assets secretly sold away. And I have more and more informers in the monasteries too.' He smiled grimly. 'I could have had a dozen abbots executed at Tyburn, but I have bided my time, kept up the pressure, issued strict new injunctions they have to follow. I have them terrified of me.' He smiled again, then suddenly tossed the relic in the air, catching it and setting it down among his papers.

'I have persuaded the king to let me pick a dozen houses on which I can bring particular pressures to bear. In the last two weeks I have sent out picked men, to offer the abbots the alternatives of voluntary surrender, with pensions for all and fat ones for the abbots, or prosecution. Lewes, with its treasonable preaching; Titchfield, where the prior has sent some choice information about his brethren; Peterborough. Once I've pressed a few into voluntary surrender, the others will realize the game is up and go quietly. I've been following the negotiations closely and everything was going well. Until yesterday.' He picked up a letter from his desk. 'Have you ever heard of the monastery of Scarnsea?'

'No, my lord.'

'No reason you should have. It's a Benedictine house, in an old silted-up Channel port on the Kent–Sussex border. There's a history of vice there and according to the local Justice of the Peace, who is one of us, the abbot is selling land off cheap. I sent Robin Singleton down there last week to see what he could stir up.'

'I know Singleton,' I said. 'I've been against him in the courts. A forceful man.' I hesitated. 'Not the best lawyer, perhaps.'

'No, it was his forcefulness I wanted. There was little concrete evidence, and I wanted to see what he could browbeat out of them. I gave him a canon lawyer to assist him, an old Cambridge reformer called Lawrence Goodhaps.' He fished among his papers, and passed a letter across to me. 'This arrived from Goodhaps yesterday morning.'

The letter was scrawled in a crabbed hand, on a sheet of paper torn from a ledger.

My Lord,

I write in haste and send this letter by a boy of the town as I dare trust none in this place. My master Singleton is foully murdered in the heart of the monastery, in a most terrible manner. He was found this morning in the kitchen, in a lake of blood, his head cut clean off. Some great enemy of Your Lordship must have done this, but all here deny it. The church has been desecrated and the Great Relic of the Penitent Thief with its bloody nails is vanished away. I have told Justice Copynger and we have adjured the abbot to keep silence. We fear the consequences if this be noised abroad.

Please send help my lord and tell me what I should do.

Lawrence Goodhaps

'A commissioner murdered?'

'So it appears. The old man seems to be in terror.'

'But if it was a monk, that would only ensure ruin for the monastery.'

Cromwell nodded. 'I know. It's some maniac, some cloistered madman who hates us more than he fears us. But can you see the implications? I seek the surrender of these monasteries as a precedent. English laws and English ways are based on precedent.'

'And this is a precedent of another sort.'

'Precisely. The king's authority struck down – literally. Old Goodhaps did the right thing to order this kept quiet. If the story got abroad, think of the notions it would give to fanatics and lunatics in every religious house in the land.'

'Does the king know?'

He stared hard at me again. 'If I tell him, there will be an explosion. He would probably send soldiers in and hang the abbot from his steeple. And that would be the end of my strategy. I need this resolved quickly and secretly.'

I could see where this was heading. I shifted in my seat, for my back pained me.

'I want you down there, Matthew, at once. I am granting you full powers as commissioner under my authority as vicar general. Power to give any order, obtain any access.'

'Would not this be a task better suited to an experienced commissioner, my lord? I have never had official dealings with the monks.'

'You were educated by them. You know their ways. My commissioners are formidable men, but they're not known for finesse and this needs delicate handling. You can trust Justice Copynger. I've never met him but we've corresponded, he is a strong reformer. But no one else in the town is to know. Fortunately Singleton had no family, so we won't be pestered by relatives.'

I took a deep breath. 'What do we know of this monastery?'

He opened a large book. I recognized a copy of the *Comperta*, the report of the monastic visitations two years before, whose riper parts had been read to Parliament.

'It is a large Norman foundation, well endowed with lands and fine buildings. There are only thirty monks and no less than sixty servants – they do themselves well, typical

Benedictines. According to the visitor the church is scandalously over-decorated, full of plaster saints, and they have – or had – what is alleged to be a relic of the Penitent Thief crucified with Our Lord. A hand nailed to a piece of wood – part of his cross, they say. Apparently people would come long distances; it was supposed to cure cripples.' He glanced involuntarily at my twisted back, as people do when cripples are mentioned.

'Presumably the relic Goodhaps referred to.'

'Yes. My visitors found a nest of sodomites at Scarnsea, as happens often enough in those filthy dog-holes. The old prior, who was the chief offender, was removed. Sodomy is punishable by death under the new Act, it's a good pressure point. I wanted Singleton to see how things stood in that regard as well as investigating the land sales Copynger wrote to me about.'

I thought a moment. 'Wheels within wheels. Complicated.'

Lord Cromwell nodded. 'It is. That's why I need a clever man. I have had your commission sent to your house, with the relevant parts of the *Comperta*. I want you to set off first thing tomorrow. That letter is three days old already and it may take you another three to travel down there. The Weald can be a quagmire this time of year.'

'It has been a dry autumn till today. It might be done in two.'

'Good. Take no servants; tell no one except Mark Poer. He still shares your house?'

'Yes. He has been looking after my affairs in my absence.'

'I want him to accompany you. He has a sharp brain, I'm told, and it may be good to have a pair of strong arms at your side.'

'But, my lord, there may be danger. And, to be frank,

Mark has no great religious zeal – he will not understand all that is at stake.'

'He does not need to. So long as he is loyal and does what you tell him. And it may help young Master Poer work his passage back to employment in the courts, after that scandal.'

'Mark was a fool. He should have known someone of his rank must not become involved with a knight's daughter.' I sighed. 'But he is young.'

Lord Cromwell grunted. 'If the king had learned what he did, he'd have had him whipped. And it showed a poor gratitude towards you, for finding him work.'

'It was a family obligation, my lord; an important one.'

'If he acquits himself well on this mission I may ask Rich to allow him back to his clerk's post – the one I found him at your request,' he added pointedly.

'Thank you, my lord.'

'Now I have to go to Hampton Court; I must try to persuade the king to attend to business. Matthew, make sure no word gets out, censor letters from the monastery.'

He rose and, coming round the desk, put his arm round my shoulder as I got to my feet. It was a recognized sign of favour.

'Find the culprit quickly, but above all quietly.' He smiled, then reached over and handed me a tiny golden box. Inside was another phial, a tiny circular one containing a gobbet of thick pale liquid that slopped against the glass. 'What do you think of this, by the way? You might be able to work out how it's done. I can't.'

'What is it?'

'It's stood in Bilston Nunnery four hundred years. Said to be the milk of the Virgin Mary.'

I exclaimed with disgust. Cromwell laughed.

'What amazes me is how they imagined anyone would *get* milk from the Virgin Mary. But look, it must have been replaced recently to stay liquid like that; I was expecting to see a hole in the back like that other, but it seems quite sealed in. What do you think? See, use this.' He passed me a jeweller's glass and I examined the box, peering for a tiny hole, but I could see nothing. I pushed and prodded for a secret hinge, then shook my head.

'I can't fathom it. It appears completely sealed.'

'Pity. I wanted to show it to the king, it would amuse him.' He walked me to the door and opened it, his arm still round me so that the clerks should see I was favoured. But as I left the chamber my eye fell again on the two grinning skulls, the candlelight playing about their ancient eye sockets. My master's arm still round me as it was, I had to suppress a shiver.