

# ***Chevauchee***

**by Ian Cooper,**

**Published: 2014**



## **Table of Contents**

**Part I ...**

**Part II ...**

**Part III ...**

\* \* \* \* \*

The following is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to any person living or deceased, or to any places or events, is purely coincidental. Names, places, settings, characters and incidents are the product of the author's imagination. The author's moral rights to the proceeds of this work have been asserted.



## Part I

“Bless me Father, for I have sinned. It has been a long time since my last confession.”

Sir Thomas Jolly, full of years, face and body ravaged by time and hard living, was on his deathbed. As far as Father Hardie knew, he'd never been to confession.

“In persona Christi, I am here to take your confession and grant you absolution. Bless you, my son.”

“Thank you, Father, for I have been an inveterate sinner.”

Father Hardie thought he might be looking at a long night. The old warrior was not long for this world. Thomas had always had the reputation of a vigorous knight. In the affairs of great men and the landed gentry, Thomas was a bit of a brawler where his legal rights were concerned. All of that was forgotten now.

“Take your time, my son.” Sir Thomas had all of eternity ahead of him, and a final resting place in the church he had built from his winnings in France and which he had dedicated to St. Michael.

“I want you to understand...please forgive me Father.”

Father Hardie had been there himself. When he was a young man, before he had taken up holy orders. He'd seen the carnage at Crecy. Sir Thomas was a bit young for that, ravaged by consumption in this, only his forty-third year.

He'd seen enough, though. Like many a man, he'd saved baptism and the washing away of all sin right up until the last moment. Shriven of all Earthly concerns and plainly not having much time left, he was ready to talk.

“God the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. Go on, Thomas, son of woman, father of men. Perhaps it would be better if you start at the beginning.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Larkin found the young archer with the horses.

Thomas had his face buried in the neck of his mount, and he was whispering fiercely to it when Larkin came into the barn.

The screams and the shouts from a peasant house fifty yards away were muted, distant, but no less disturbing. There was a long round of raucous laughter and then it got real quiet.

“Come lad, get yourself some sleep. Have you had anything to eat?”

The shrill scream of a young woman in extremis cut through the soft evening air, and the fire in the yard sparked and popped as men drank, cursed and laughed in the moonlight.

Larkin’s arm was about to drop off. He held up the mail shirt, with its attached hood. He reckoned the thing would fit Thomas. While there was strict accounting for loot and plunder, as long as the serjeant and the butiniers duly noted it, approved of it and initialed it in their little book, it could be considered an advance against pay.

“Here. See if this fits you.”

Thomas tore himself away from Chestnut.

He rubbed his eyes, not caring if Larkin saw it or not. He had no idea why a tough old bird like Larkin would take him under his wing. He wasn’t even a serjeant. Whatever the motivation, he was grateful. Larkin knew his way around armies and camps and foreign French towns. Places where the people would smile in your face one minute, and then sell you bread that rotted in your hands, and then stab you in the guts the moment your back was turned.

There was a huge gush of emotion. He wasn’t alone—not really. They were all alone, but together. He’d seen his own look on a few other faces, to the extent that he knew what they must be thinking, even as they flung the burning brand onto another roof or barn or haystack.

The hubbub of voices from the front of the yard was dying down. Sir John and his senior men had assigned guard duty. The voice was instantly recognizable. The wine was apparently cut off judging by the shouts, jeers and catcalls. The women would be quickly disposed of. Larkin didn’t mention it to Thomas.

“Come on, let’s find you something to eat.”

Thomas nodded glumly.

“Sure.” He really wasn’t that hungry, not after the events of the day, and yet he knew enough by now to force himself to eat.

The first couple of days had been so shocking. He’d been sick to his stomach, more than once at what he saw, and what he had to do—and every time he turned around, there was Chestnut. The horse was his most prized possession. And he had signed articles of war, agreeing to serve for the campaign. He’d taken Sir John’s good silver and he owed him good service. He’d sent most of the money home and they would expect him to honour his commitments.

When they said war, he’d never expected anything like this.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thomas had woken up in the morning, stepped outside and went around behind the barn to relieve himself. The flow was just beginning, steam starting to rise from the dewy grass, when he recognized the significance of the huddled, half nude forms roughly strewn in frozen attitudes of death. Their throats had been cut, the terror of the final moments still in their eyes. He turned abruptly, stomach heaving, and went back around the corner, still dribbling water in his haste to get away.

It took a while before Thomas realized something fundamental.

They'd emptied the jails, to make up this army—so called. He called himself a soldier, hoping that with his weapons, his letter from the master and a horse, they would accept it at face value. But they had taken every Tom, Dick and Harry.

Under commissioners of array, qualified archers, men at arms, pike-men, anyone with a weapon and the notion to use it could engage with the king, to serve as soldiers in the king's army. They would take anyone with a mind to go. If a man was unqualified as an archer, he simply got paid a lower rate as a pike-man. Then there were the Welsh dirk-men, or apprentice archers, of which some men in this company had one or two. Thomas himself was lucky to have half-bluffed his way into master archer status. Upon question, he'd promptly challenged the serjeant to a contest. The man had chuckled, refused the contest due to pressure of time and work—and signed Thomas up for sixpence a day as he had Chestnut and a serviceable sword of his own. The sword, which Old Bill had borne at Crecy, was the clincher as much as anything else.

Men had flocked to the standard of Edward III.

It was a sickening revelation to realize what a farm-boy he really was—sure, he had practiced at the butts every Sunday. That was the law, and none took that so seriously as he. He had always planned to leave, his older brother's attitude to the land and his inheritance had ensured that. He'd won a few small wagers for his prowess. He could hit the target, often enough, especially when he was up against some big, bullying blowhard and Thomas really wanted to win. His father's stories, poor as he was, were so real. Victory was so easy, in those days. Perhaps he really hadn't been listening, or perhaps his father hadn't been telling everything either. It was his first time away from home and the village. If the big city, London, had been impressive and exciting, and Nantes and the keep fascinating for one wanting to be a soldier and a gentleman, the first few burning houses had been all too real, all too shocking. Yet it was his arm that threw some of the torches. It was his arm, his bow that had taken down unarmed men running away.

They stood and watched as the harder cases slit the throats of the old people and children. They hadn't said anything about that when recruiting for the expedition.

Thomas believed in justice, justice from above, whether it be by God or by man.

He'd seen damned little justice in the time he'd been here.

Riding out of Nantes, trailing along close to the front of the column, at first at least, Thomas was proud as a peacock. Just to be there at all. They'd taken his name down just like any other man. Mounted on what he considered to be not so much the finest, as the most useful and good-tempered horse he'd ever known, Thomas thought this was the only way to live.

They went forth as their king's champions, to make war in his name, and help him wrest the kingdom of France from the usurpers. King Edward was elsewhere, but they had good captains.

Their little army was composed of eight hundred men-at-arms, all of them from noble houses. Some of them were really big names. Even Thomas, from his little village in Cheshire, had heard of some of them. They were known far and wide. One or two of them were very rich men.

They'd taken some good prisoners and made some big ransoms on their campaigns. The lure of adventure had pulled him along and ultimately it had sucked him in.

Thomas still had hopes. The duty of a knight is to defend women and orphans, to do some good in the world in the name of God and the name of chivalry.

The chevauchee was designed to punish the enemy, to draw it home to them, and to their king, their own powerlessness.

Thomas only began to question, not so much war as what his own part in it might be, after burning the second or third farmstead. It really had taken that long—why was he even there?

This wasn't exactly what he had signed up for.

\* \* \* \* \*

The day dawned bright and clear. Thomas had slept in the barn with Chestnut and the other horses. He'd had some trouble, not unexpectedly, in falling asleep. It was a lot quieter up at the house. The action never really stopped entirely. Men were always cooking, drinking, moving about. Not with sentries talking right outside the door.

A small foraging party had returned during the night, and they had turned their horses loose in the yard but thankfully went straight for sleep. One or two of them had elected the barn as opposed to the overcrowded cottage that was the temporary headquarters of their company of a hundred men. They'd been there too long already, in Thomas' appreciation. They weren't exactly welcome in the neighbourhood. The rest of the army was scattered about.

Then there was the shirt of mail with its attached hood. Of course he wanted it, he was entitled to his fair share of the bounty. It was the sort of trophy he'd promised himself in setting out, against the wishes of his father and the tears of his mother and sisters. It meant a lot to wear such a thing, to have it and to call it his own. His father's small helmet was too small for him. The gleaming falchion, still sharp and still useful, was the only thing the old man could reasonably give up. A few copper coins to feed him and the horse on the journey was his only other parting gift.

Old Bill had done it with a tear in his eye, but he knew there was no stopping Thomas once he had his head set on a thing. A second son, Thomas would have to make his own way in life. The family only held a virgate and a half of land, barely enough to feed them.

He had set out to win his spurs. He had traveled across the sea to confront the foe—and his destiny. Now he knew what that really meant, in this year of Our Lord one thousand, three hundred and forty-six.

According to all the talk, Charles of Blois was trying to take what rightfully belonged to John of Montfort, in the same way that Phillip of France had taken what was rightfully Edward II's. And now, he followed Edward III in that consecrated cause.

After a week or so in Nantes, it had occurred to a sickened Thomas Jolly that it really wasn't much of his business after all.

But to go back was to break his word. He'd thought hard about it. He could never go back to the village of course. Even that was impossible. There was no way

home but with the army and the blessing and approval of his superiors. The smell of manure and the breathing of tired horses was all around him. They were, at best, twenty miles from Nantes and for a lone Englishman to travel those roads was to die—horribly.

The shirt of mail hung on a rail, gleaming in the faint moonlight coming in through the loose and crooked boards of the barn. The gaping black hole where his face would go mocked him in his pretensions.

For surely, all was vanity.

Thomas Jolly sighed deeply, tossing and turning, praying to a merciful God that sleep would come.

\* \* \* \* \*

“But you got over that quickly enough, didn’t you?”

Sir Thomas sighed, deeply, eyes staring up at the blackened beams of the ceiling.

“Yes, Father. I suppose I did.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The men at arms had halted at an inn, while archers and footmen, mounted and dismounted, milled in the yard and filled their cups and horns from barrels of rich red wine.

“Larkin. What’s happening?”

“The ford is blocked.”

“Oh. What ford is that?”

Larkin laughed. It really was like that sometimes, men standing around with no idea of what was happening.

“There’s a river up ahead. Vaughn and Sands were in the van and they say there are hundreds of noble pennants on the far side.”

He spat, noisily, as Thomas stood, clinging to Chestnut’s bridle and wondering where he was going to find water, fodder, and something for his own belly.

The army had gotten up well before dawn. Alternately walking and cantering, the army had covered a good ten miles before the sun broke the horizon.

That was all Thomas knew.

In Old Bill’s stories, it seemed that his father was right there in the innermost circles at every council, and had a bird’s eye view of every battlefield, and had always known every little thing that was going on.

He saw now that that was not necessarily so.

Men milled in confusion in front of the doorway, and Thomas wondered if they were going in, or more likely the inn was full to capacity.

At that time, the door crashed open, men began shouting questions and several of Sir John’s captains forced their way out against a reluctant crowd of men.

“Back! Back! Make way, make way.”

The huddle of men backing up were treading on their toes, and Larkin grabbed Thomas’s arm and pulled him off to one side. There were two kinds of men in that yard, men who were talking, rather shouting, and those who would listen if only they could hear.

Sir John stepped out of the inn's front door and the quiet descended as he stepped up on a keg and spoke, in quite a normal voice.

"Right. I need a hundred mounted archers, all volunteers."

Larkin grabbed his right arm and lofted it in his strong and callused grip.

"Here we are, my Lord."

Sir John turned and grinned.

"Ah, yes, the Cheshire cat. Larkin my boy, how the Hades are you, my good fellow?"

"I am well, Sir John. The last time I saw you, sir, one of us had a head like a half-chewed pudding." He turned aside. "Some of you may recall that particular incident."

A ripple of laughter went through the fascinated mob, ears all a-quiver and straining to catch every syllable.

"...and one of us had a pretty good dose of the clap, as you may recall..."

The men roared, thousands of them, all jamming into the yard, streaming in on foot from all sides now that there was news.

"Ah, yes, be that as it may. I need a hundred of you good fellows. I'm offering a gold salut, for any man that crosses the ford. Assuming he lives to collect."

There was a hubbub as men struggled, pushing their neighbours aside and thrusting themselves forward.

Sir John's captain, William Vaughn, was there with his quill and his book of doom as some called it, all ready to take their names as Larkin dragged him forward.

"Come along lad, you'll find this a little more to your taste."

There were a score of men all yammering away at Vaughn as he sat at an outdoor trestle table in front of the inn. Shaded by a massive oak tree, he looked calm and comfortable enough with his fancy London accent and the fine surcoat covering his armour.

"Yes. Let's do this. In the name of Christ our Saviour, let us fight men for a change, Larkin."

Face long and angry, for no good reason that Thomas could discover except that this was what he was actually there for, he began pulling men aside.

"Relax boy, you'll get your turn."

With a quick glance around in some embarrassment, Thomas was reassured to see that a goodly number of the men were streaming back to the fields and orchards across the road, perhaps not fancying their chances much after all.

As for him, he was determined enough.

\* \* \* \* \*

The plan was a simple one.

The entire host of Sir John's army would arrive on the riverbank at the crossing. Arriving at a walk, the left wing would turn and array themselves along the bank. The right wing, arriving next, would split to the right and line up along the right side of the track. The track was vital in that it led through the wood. Their senior officers were all agreed on that. They had a small map, hastily sketched by Sands, and the situation seemed simple enough. The enemy, an estimated ten thousand strong, were strewn up and down the riverbank for a couple of miles each way.

There were bridges up and downstream, heavily guarded by towers and fortifications. They would either force the river here, or retreat back the way they had come, against forces that were said to be gathering for the pursuit.

The two wings would screen the real attack force.

The third contingent would be led by one hundred picked volunteers. As soon as left and right wings had cleared the road, the archers would charge across the ford, followed by the main body of mounted archers, archers on foot, and the pikemen and other foot soldiers. Only then would the heavy cavalry, the men-at-arms and the true knights attempt to cross.

Weighing a ton, man, horse, armour and weapons, the bottom of the river would be soft, the banks were steep and definitely crumbling according to the reconnaissance, and so they would be at a distinct disadvantage until they got on hard, level ground.

\* \* \* \* \*

Chestnut was excited by the shouts and the proximity of other horses and not understanding the danger. His ears were pricked up, his tail swished and the animal turned under him, first this way, then that. Thomas pulled on the reins, trying to control him. The big head kept turning back and forth as the animal tried to get a good look at all that was going on.

“Ready?” Mathew Thornton, having led the reconnaissance, would now lead the crossing.

Thomas’ bow was strung. He had an arrow notched in place, the string pulled back a couple of inches, no more. The arrow was held in place by light pressure of the left hand, his forefinger wrapped round arrow and grip. When Thornton turned and spurred into a gallop, Thomas kicked the horse into action and Chestnut plunged forward and down the sloping bank.

Thornton was in the middle of the stream, which was a mere thirty or forty yards across. Thomas followed Thornton, and Larkin was right at his shoulder. As soon as Chestnut had gotten down the bank and out into the water, Thomas let go of the reins and brought up the bow. There were men lining the bluff, gaping at the straggling line of men and horses coming at them.

It must have been an unbelievable sight, their numbers were so small.

Unable to pick out a single target in the seething, screaming mass of men above, Thomas let the first arrow fly at a lump of warm colour that might be one big man in brown or two men in the same rig. Someone screamed, but then they were all screaming.

Thornton, his horse reaching shallower water, was a good thirty feet ahead. Rather than slow up and wait for support, even as Thomas loosed his second arrow, he spurred the horse, shooting left and right as he rode up the bank. The angry shouts coming from all around took on a new urgency.

Larkin was shouting and shooting. The loud breathing and splashing of horses all around and behind him was enough to keep Thomas and Chestnut at full gallop. The animal was slower, now labouring, having to push aside three or four feet of water with its wide chest. Then they were in the shallows.

Thomas spurred Chestnut up the bank, just as Thornton crashed into a wall of men, some with shields and swords. The enemy pike-men were desperately trying



to form a line as French soldiers, armed with crossbows, attempted to flee. They must have discharged their bolts, and it would take too long to reload.

They were out of the water and on the gravel beach, with a trace of yellow sand just at water's edge.

He loosed another shaft, as Chestnut climbed the bank and Larkin and one or two others shouted and shot into the milling crowd at the top of the bank. Men screamed, clutching at the cloth-yard maple arrows sticking out of legs and torsos, eyes wide with pain and fright. Other men stood and gaped, transfixed and unable to move at all. Some turned and tried to get away, running right into a solid wall of humanity, who had probably heard all the commotion but had no idea of what was going on because they couldn't see any more than Thomas.

Seeing space to his left, Thomas pulled Chestnut that way, just as another horse slammed into the horse's hindquarters. It spoiled his shot and he hurriedly pulled out another arrow, and sent it home. The stunned look on a man's face would stay with him forever.

"Sorry. Watch where you're going, boy."

Thomas snarled at the man, who brushed past on his own mount, bow up and the nock of the arrow up to his cheek. The string twanged, the arrow hummed and another man went down with a sickening sob of comprehension as suddenly feeble fingers plucked at the goose-feathers sticking out of his sternum.

Chestnut bucked, startled by a man running straight at them, shield up and sword up behind his head. Thomas pulled the right side knee hard and the horse spun, knocking the man down and Thomas rode right over him, as he loosed one more arrow. His attacker was trying to crawl away from below, with more archers coming up the bank. A quick glance showed the ford crowded with horsemen, water foaming up and sending waves crashing back and forth.

Clinging on to the animal with knees alone, bow quickly slung over his left shoulder, Thomas pulled the falchion from its scabbard on his left hip. Unless the pike-men were dispersed, the whole crossing was threatened. They were trying to form up amidst mass confusion.

From the far bank came the roar of the foot archers as they raised their great war-shout.

Kicking Chestnut in the flanks, Thomas rode right into the mass of panicked, running, fighting, swearing, crying men. He caught a glimpse of their blue and gold livery. Somewhere in the middle of all that was Thornton and Larkin, trying to get into the mob of pikes before the fools had the sense to bring them down to the level.

Their fellow soldiers, in their panic to get away from the first rush of horsemen, were a disorganized mob, and try as they might, one or two pikes in position were not going to be effective.

Thomas laid about with the sword, sending more men down, and those fortunate not to be cut on the first swipe had no thoughts other than to get away from that massive brown horse, that fierce countenance, those angry shouts, and more than anything, that flashing, slashing sword.

\* \* \* \* \*

The mob of soldiers and horses surged forwards, all order and identity lost. Some of them were going the wrong way, back across the river for some reason. The colourful striped tents of the nobles were quickly stripped, even shredded in people's haste to get a piece of the fabric, whether it was worth anything or not. As usual, there were women screaming somewhere and Thomas tried his best to ignore it.

Thomas' jaw dropped at the sight revealed in one tent, as men scrambled to seize a golden chalice and silver cups, Bible cases chased in filigree and studded with gems, rich raiment and luxurious furs.

There was a loud cheer and a wooden box, the disputed prize of two struggling champions, fell to the ground as cursing men tussled. It broke open, spilling a sea of gold, silver and copper coins. The glittering sight was quickly obscured by the backs of other men, the backs of heads as they fell to their knees and scrabbled for the money.

Larkin was gone in the mob, but the bearded John Reid dragged him away.

"Don't stick your hand in there, you'll get it bitten off."

"Aye. Their captains will have a hard time with that mess of idiots—"

Reid nodded.

"I'm glad you listen well. You see well too. Listen now, Thomas Jolly. For surely, movable goods are common weal. But any prisoners we take are our own—although our captains get their portion."

And the king got his portion from them and their leaders.

"Our horses are scarcely winded. And I see that most of our troops have lost interest in serious pursuit."

Reid nodded.

"Let us hope that does not last long. However, my fellow, the best defense has always been to attack."

Reid swung into the saddle of his fine black gelding.

"Are you with me?"

"Aye, that I am."

The veteran voice cut through the din.

"Archers! Archers! Men of Cheshire! Cheshire Cats! All of you! Rally to me."

It took but a moment, but half a dozen men responded to their call, perhaps their being on the back of the crowd and unable to properly get to grips with the pillage had something to do with it.

"Why are we here?"

Reid had an answer.

"Because the enemy is just down the road, boys."

He booted the horse in the flanks and they had two choices. They could follow Reid or they could sit around waiting for something to happen. One thing they knew. There might be wine, but there would be no food, no rest for a while, until someone took control.

They were all looking at Thomas, bloody and triumphant.

Thomas thought Reid was entirely correct, in that with the common soldiers stoked with greed and the contents of one or two fine casks, there was a very good chance that an enemy counterattack would be successful. All of a sudden he was second in command of their little detachment.

“Come along lads, look sharp.” Picking a man, a likely looking fellow, he stared him right in the eyes. |Are you with me?”

He spurred Chestnut and the other men followed.

They thundered along behind, whatever their thinking may have been. While the French were beaten, there were plenty of them still about, and in a group they could be dangerous.

## Part II

“My lord.”

“Yes? Ah. What is your report.” Sir John sat at a small table provided by that purpose.

He and many of the richer knights had tents, servants and their table service along on the expedition. Just because they were at war, there was no reason to be uncomfortable. He would have to make that remark to the right person. It would go through the camp like wildfire.

“We lost five men in the initial rush, with two dozen of the footmen killed and seriously wounded.”

Sir John nodded. Seriously injured was a good as dead, and more merciful in the end. If there was no saving them then they were quickly dispatched.

“As for Sir Lionel, sir. We found him in the river.”

“Ah. That makes sense.” Sir Lionel’s dappled grey steed had been found on the riverbank, its rider nowhere in evidence.

The thing was champing at the bit, white around the gills and staring back down at the water.

With the limited visibility, the excitement and the haste to get across and come to grips with the enemy, it seemed Sir Lionel must have fallen from his mount. Very much individuals, and with no vision save that through slits, slots or a few rows of small holes, he’d gone down and not been missed.

Sir John nodded again. It was too bad, but their only major loss. Once over the river, they had formed up, charged the mob, and driven off the infantry. With their arrows clouding the air and no supporting infantry, the enemy men-at-arms and more noble combatants had little choice but to abandon the field. In any case, they had clearly failed in their task of preventing the hated English from crossing.

He noted a tall young fellow before them.

“And you are, young man?”

“Thomas Jolly, and his horse Chestnut.” Thomas nodded at the secretary, holding a sheet of parchment in his hands. “I’m one of the first hundred.”

“Ah, yes. Jolly, Jolly...Jolly.” The fellow nodded, but they did tend to straggle in as the whim struck them. “Here we are. Thomas Jolly.”

He looked up.

“Cheshire man. And his horse. He’s on the list, Sir John.”

Sir John nodded, and reaching into a bag, pulled out the requisite gold coin.

“Congratulations, and thank you for your help.”

Thomas bent a knee and made a quick bow.

“Always a pleasure, Sir John.”

The grizzled old knight smiled gently, watching for a moment as the young man bit the coin. It was an unconscious habit he’d picked up watching other men, thought Sir John. Jolly had never held a gold coin in his entire life. Not in his estimation. He’d seen him around, without knowing anything in particular about him. In a host of this size it was impossible to know everyone—but he prided himself on being open and accessible to the men. The fellow was already going.

“Young man?”

Thomas stopped and turned.

“You were third across the river. I saw it myself.”

Thomas nodded.

“Yes, my lord. I was.” The look was incalculable.

Wordlessly, he turned and led the animal off to find some food, some water and perhaps some wine.

\* \* \* \* \*

Why it would be necessary to build a bonfire while the latest village smoldered, just across the road intersection, Thomas would never know. The stench of burning houses had to be experienced. It was useless for cooking, attracting drunks like moths to a flame, and perhaps that was the point. It was a convenient rallying-point for those in the immediate area, and a beacon for those parties who rose still in the blackening night.

The moon had gone down and the more useless prisoners had been dispatched.

The ones worth good money were locked up under heavy guard in their one remaining barn. They were sleeping under the stars and leaving before dawn. Probably. That’s all Thomas knew. The hostages would be secure enough until morning, when a strong party would keep them in tow for the duration of the campaign. Thomas had little sympathy for the natives, who would surely have slit his throat under similar circumstances. He had a share of seven prisoners, all that their party had been able to round up on short notice before darkness fell. While the other men were busy adding up their winnings, quoting some astronomical figures, Thomas wasn’t sure exactly how he felt about it. They had a couple of knights, a prelate, and a couple of men who pleaded and promised that they were rich burghers and their families would pay. They had three others, one of whom might turn out to be a comte or count. He might also be a liar, claiming that he had been taken by surprise in the privy and that he had left his surcoat, with his arms borne upon it, and now it couldn’t be located what with all the pillaging. It made a good story. Almost anyone would lie under similar circumstances, and Thomas was surprised the other men could not or would not see that. One or two of the partners were already borrowing money against their expected winnings.

An armed and still able-bodied man who surrendered at the point of a sword had dishonoured himself just as surely as he had denied the body of Christ and confounded his maker with the Devil himself. Selling him his life was moral enough, the way Larkin, Reid and others had explained it. Not that he had asked exactly, and he wondered what they found deep inside on the rare occasions when they might take a look.

Four thousand francs for a knight was lot of money. Some of the prisoners were rich burghers. It was difficult to say whether a parish priest would fetch any kind of price at all. They probably were valued well enough, perhaps even beloved by their flock, and ten shillings was ten shillings as someone had said. How long it might take the faithful to gather a ransom, a half a pence at a time was another question. Prisoners had to be fed, and it was difficult to know who one might trust in terms of giving them parole without some surety.

The biggest problem as far as Thomas could see it, was that some of the men were all for flogging them off again, at a big discount as far as he could see. Ready money was one thing, for someone had to guard the hostages.

When some of the men wanted to sell the hostages they had, that was bad enough. When they wanted to trade them off for other prisoners, neither Thomas, nor anybody else he could talk to could explain any particular advantages that might ensue. Not very convincingly, at any rate, and he was unimpressed with their feverish schemes.

What it did, was to invite endless talk, and discussion, and argument, and heated words that would sooner or later lead to real trouble. That part was becoming tiresome enough in and of itself.

The solution, insofar as he could determine, was to keep his own counsel, don't count the pennies too closely, never show your own purse in a crowd, and more than anything, watch your back.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sir Thomas' eyes were closed. His breathing was shallow and rapid.

Father Hardie paused in his prayers. He'd often wondered if it did any real good.

Sir Thomas' eyes flickered and then opened.

"It's a terrible thing, Father."

There was nothing to say. Hopefully his presence would bring comfort. Father Hendrie always felt that loss for words every time he attended at a deathbed, often enough at a sick bed. As often as not, they were already unconscious, and all he had to do was administer the sacraments. Some of the deaths were still violent enough—and yet he never had to look into their eyes, never had to offer reassurances, although the survivors were a different matter. At that moment, the theatre of death was still about those still living.

"Yes, my son."

"It's just that my own children are gone now."

That had to be the saddest thing for an old man. His wife Agnes was gone. He'd taken her in marriage at Caen, from a good family who had fallen on desperate times. Sir Thomas had deeply loved the lady, who as all knew was a very spirited person. His daughter had married, making a good match into a prominent family in the next county. Dolores had passed during a recurring outbreak of plague.

His son Albert had died in childhood, and the surviving son Ralhp had been killed in France in the war. He was about twenty-two, as Father Hardie recalled.

To see all that one had loved, all that one had held dear, gone, never to return. It must be very hard. There were times when Father Hardie thought his own childless, loveless life was cursed. It was bitterly hard at times, and yet nothing compared to what Thomas had seen, what Thomas had endured. They were all

God's children after all. There were times the father was grateful and yet he accepted that he had missed certain fundamental things about life, and living.

"We can never thank you enough, Sir Thomas, for the church. Our almshouse, which you have generously showered with your love and your bounty. The bridge, the roads that you repaired."

Sir Thomas had the reputation of a crusty old gentleman. He was a man not easily contradicted, and he was known to hold a grudge forever. Yet he was capable of forgiving, even those he had wronged. He had his better side. To be thanked was probably the farthest thing on his mind at the time. As shire representative, he had fought hard for more roads, better laws, and lower taxes. He wasn't easily intimidated, in a crowd where his rank wasn't quite so impressive amongst the magnates, the dukes and the barons. And yet he would have accosted them as a familiar, as an equal. He would have made them listen respectfully.

"...and why not? For surely it was I who put some of them there. As for the church, that is in memory of my children...and probably the best thing I have ever done in my life, Father. For surely I was a greedy, violent person. I thought nothing of taking another man's life—and slicing his wife and mother's throat, and selling his children, and burning his grange...I have no doubt I will blaze in the hottest fires that the Devil can provide. And surely no one deserves it more than I."

Tears flowed down the old man's cheeks.

"You did nothing that a thousand other men haven't done."

That was the strangest thing about repentance. It was the ones you least expected, thought Father Hendrie. Everyone thought Sir Thomas a good man, and yet deep inside there was another truth, one visible only to him.

"I must try to buy my way into the Kingdom of Heaven, for surely I have earned it no other way. And yet it is easier to drive a camel through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

"Ah, I knew you were listening that day...go on."

The old man was silent, perhaps thinking of his home and all that he governed, beneficially enough for those with a mind to be governed.

In later years, partially out of the necessity of administering his extensive estates, with manors scattered all up and down the valley of the River Dane, Thomas had hired professional stewards and really had prospered. He was an odd mix of frugality and prodigality, mindful of the past and forgetful of the present.

"It was an act of contrition, for you to acknowledge that. The church is a wonderful legacy. Thomas. I can assure you that God understands and welcomes those who truly repent, make amends for their sins, and cleanse themselves of moral impurity."

\* \* \* \* \*

With little hope of such a small host taking the kingdom of France, they were little better than Danes. Thomas had concluded it was a war of pillage, nothing more, the odd hard-fought battle, the rest nothing but a great robbery as St. Augustine had said.

"...in the retinue of the high and powerful lord, Sir John, Captain of the Company of the Lion, the archer John Floris took a horse, sold for six gold saluts,

archer Roger Mill won a sword, sold for thirty-seven shilling and six pence tournois...”

Everything had to be accounted for. This had been one of the initial shocks, just how commercialized their expedition really was. They were operating it as a business. In some ways this was reassuring. Thomas had been lured by fortune as well as fame, just as any other man. He hoped there would come a time when he might forget the rest, but the truth was that he had money now and what a strange notion that was too.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Yours is in the far stall.”

“What?” Thomas barely knew the fellow.

“I said, yours is in the end stall.” The small dark archer’s name was Blackwell.

Thomas thought his first name was George. Outside of a few remaining barns, stables and granaries, the village and its nearby still burned, as the roar of flames and the crashing down of buildings attested.

“I’m sorry, I still don’t understand.” Thomas was very tired.

He’d filled his belly with stew and needed sleep. He had no patience for this.

Blackwell handed him an earthen jug. There was a strong smell of wine. The local red was strong and not quite sweet enough for Thomas’ taste, but there wasn’t likely to be anything else. They hadn’t seen beer in at least a couple of weeks and there were times when he missed it terribly. He’d never seen so much wine in his entire life. The water in the streams was undrinkable, the well was brackish and hard, and the ponds filthy with scum. They all knew better than to drink that, although some men did, and some men still died by the day.

“Your share of the plunder, are you daft or what?”

Thomas took a long swig, which was at least wet and relatively cool and refreshing in the stifling heat of the day. The inside of the small barn, emptied of fodder and grain, was little better than outside. With evening advanced, there was the faint stirring of a breeze through the open doors at both ends.

Plunder was supposed to be turned into a serjeant, captain or secretary.

Thomas also knew that didn’t always happen, although penalties could be severe.

There were voices, male and female, coming from another stall. The male was loud with wine and the woman pleading. To get away from the sound, Thomas took the jug, and went in the opposite direction to the far end of the barn.

He turned the corner and stopped. There was a short wall, and the end was open. There was a thin litter of straw on the bare ground. Looking fearfully at Thomas from where she was tied by both wrists to a supporting pole was a young woman in a nun’s habit.

\* \* \* \* \*

He’d picked up a little French. Many of the older men seemed to speak a fair bit of it and it was useful enough in questioning prisoners. Some of their men didn’t even speak English at all, which had been a shock.

Nothing like this though.

“Hello.”

“Please don’t hurt me. If you do, God will curse your life and all of your progeny.”

“It’s all right, I don’t mean to harm you. Please don’t be afraid.”

She was obviously terrified, her pale oval face turning away as she began to cry.

Awkwardly, he dropped his saddle where it was. It was the only pillow he was likely to get. He began kicking straw, what there was of it, into place for a bed.

“I’m terribly sorry about all of this, but it is war. Now, let’s get you untied.”

The knots, made of raw hide, were tight and he had to struggle to get them undone. He was just stepping back to admire his handiwork and get a good look at her when she pulled a small blade from somewhere and came very close to gutting him before he could react.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thomas took the knife away from her. Her name was Brigit and she was sixteen. He held her as she wept and then, after a while, he told her that he had to sit down. He pushed her away, unable to help or even fight against arousal. It was like he just didn’t care sometimes. They were in a foreign land, at war, and they had hardly even stopped. It really had been a long day, not just in the saddle, for always they must keep moving. The truth was that his arm ached at times, whether from shooting with the bow or wielding the sword. There was a lot of bull work involved in pillage, wagons and ponies had to be loaded, houses and building searched, fugitives and runaways recovered, prisoners to be guarded. There was the work involved in any camp, which for the most part involved finding their own beds and cooking their own meals.

“There are too many people about for you to try and escape. Good luck if you try it. You know exactly what they’re like and what will happen if they catch you. I am sorry. I am so unbelievably tired.”

Thomas unslung his bow and quiver. He doubted if the girl was strong enough to string the bow, but he laid them along the base of the back wall, where he intended to sleep. If that were possible, for the noise coming from the other end was still there. It was all he could do to ignore it sometimes.

He unbuckled the sword and scabbard, lying it alongside the other weapons. A few stragglers, a sentry or two had had their throats cut in the night, but so far they had encountered no significant military force. His head hung, buzzing with tiredness as he pulled the saddle into place and unrolled his blanket.

“Oh, Jesu, joy of man’s desire.” He wished she would shut up.

The young lady was saying her rosary as Thomas gratefully stretched out on the ground. “Please just let me sleep.”

Rolling over, he put his back to her and his head down. Her soft voice was still going. He fell asleep in moments.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thomas awoke to low voices very close by, a warm girl tucked in against his back with one arm flung over his neck and a sense of foreboding. The fires outside had burned low. There was a moon but no lights in the barn. A shadow moved across a beam of light, blackening it momentarily out in the long range running down the centre of the barn.



She had crawled under the blanket. It got very cold at night in the hills. His hand came out and gripped the hilt of the falchion, and he got his other hand in position to hold the scabbard if he needed to draw it. There was something about the furtive approach and the fact that the men, two of them he thought, had gone silent with their nearer approach.

He made a small snort and then some soft snoring noises. The thud of their footfalls just around the end of the partition and the haste was enough to spark him into action.

They were right there, their hoarse breath giving away their location. It was pitch-dark in the stall and Thomas in his dark clothing would be invisible to them. The gleam of a blade, the shape of its point revealed a poniard in an outstretched hand.

His father's training took over.

Never ask questions. Never say a damned word, boy...

He was already standing in a far corner, recalling that a drunken man had stumbled in earlier, apologized profusely, and stumbled right back where he had come from.

One quick swipe with the falchion and a man screamed as his hand dropped off. The other man, not seeing anything but startled by the sound, turned and bolted, his unlucky partner following along. The gasping and sobbing and excited calls from the uninvolved, drowned out the sounds of them running. He held his position, sword in hand as more men came running to his end of the barn, dull yellow highlights dancing around as one of them had taken a moment and thought to bring a torch.

A loud, rather large individual held the torch high, hard and angry eyes taking in Thomas and the girl, who had awoken and retreated to the farthest corner in her fright.

"What the devil is going on here?"

"Assassins, serjeant." Thomas indicated the hand on the floor with the point of his sword. "There were two of them. I reckon they had four hands between them when they came in here. Now they only have three..."

Bending, he picked up the poniard.

The trouble was, the weapon was relatively undistinguished, merely a blade with a finger-guard and a knob of black metal for a butt end.

All the archers and foot soldiers had them, for the dispatching of the wounded and the persuasion of prisoners.

There was a crowd of men now, and more torches.

The girl sobbed, uttering a small shriek on catching sight of the bloody hand.

"There will be a blood trail. They ran right up the middle of the barn."

The serjeant nodded, lowering the torch and examining the straw and dirt beneath his feet.

He quickly came to a decision. He gave Thomas a quick nod, perhaps some small note of approval evident there, and he turned to the men. Some of their faces were at least familiar as they gaped at the hand, the blade, the girl and Thomas, sword in one hand and poniard in the other.

"Serve him right." Their opinions were hardening.

“All right. Some of you men. Take a couple of torches and have a look around. And if by chance, you should happen to run across a couple of men, one of whom is missing a hand, I want you to promise me that you won’t hang them.”

“Don’t hang them sir?”

“No. Bring them to me—and as for you, Thomas, you are lucky to be alive.” His eyes flickered past the nun. “The situation seems clear enough.”

And Thomas was still on the scene. The men knew him well enough by now. A couple of small parties turned and began following the splotches and drips of dark red blood under sputtering light. The odds of catching anyone now weren’t very good. The thing was, this deep in enemy country, anyone leaving camp and striking off on their own wouldn’t last very long either.

There was nowhere to run, a fact Thomas had already figured out for himself.

## Part III

Father Hardie had anointed Sir Thomas with the holy perfumed oil, making the sign of the cross on Thomas’ forehead, also pulling back the blankets and anointing the withered old feet and hands, like the stigmata of Jesus’ nail-wounds on the cross.

“These rites prepare the soul for death and your entry into the Kingdom of Heaven.” The old soldier nodded, his eyes closed. “You have confessed your sins, made your penance and made your peace with God.”

“Thank you Father.” The voice was a tired whisper, the lips barely moving. “I am ready, as I have been ready for a very long time.”

The eyes, still a luminous blue, although the whites were discoloured and bloodshot, turned to him.

In spite of the pain he must be enduring, the old soldier still had perfect control of himself. It said a lot about his upbringing, his attitudes and his discipline. No wonder he’d gone so far, raising himself up by dint of the bow, the sword, and thoughtful investment in land of the profits of campaigning. He’d grown to lead his own armies, won his own battles, and ultimately, knighted other men and passed the title down to two sons.

The bony hand, surprisingly strong, clamped onto his wrist. The priest let it lie for the moment, although the moment of dissolution could be surprisingly violent and he would have to take care.

“I’ve always wanted to meet him, you know?”

“Who, Thomas?” Who did you want to meet?

God, he probably meant, as the eyes closed and the head fell back on the pillow. Thomas was still there, as a gentle and rhythmic squeeze on the wrist attested.

It was an honest expression, nothing particularly blasphemous about it, just the last words of what had once been a strong man, a brave man, and honest enough for the times they lived in.

“Bless you, Sir Thomas, for the bosom of the Lord welcomes you.”

The mouth moved but no sound came out. Not for the first time, the Father saw a tear, a single tear, well up in the corner of the nearest eye.

“The one thing I hated the most...”

“What was that, Thomas.”

It couldn't be much longer now, as the breath rattled in the man's throat, much like a snore. His whole body ravaged by consumption, it was a miracle that he had survived, been active this long. He'd only recently taken to his bed, worn out, tired of life and knowing that it was no good. It was all over and rightly so.

“The horses—the poor horses.” He was thinking of Chestnut, who had been wounded in battle.

Maddened by pain, Thomas could never forget the look in the horse's eye when he finally cornered him, crooning softly to him and taking the muzzle into his hands for the very last time.

A friend, Mark of Hyde, also dead these many years, had crept up as Thomas talked gently and lovingly to the animal, weeping inconsolably as he did so. One great swing of the maul and the horse went down. Even that wasn't enough, and Chestnut, making one last valiant effort to rise, had stared into Thomas' eyes in shock, pain and disbelief as he personally cut the great vein in the neck and sent him on to the next world.

His lips moved silently in prayer, tears flowing freely.

“I understand. That must have been very hard.”

Father Hardie raised the Host, and just at that moment the body of the old man stiffened. The eyes opened wide and he stared at something unseen far up above. His mouth moved and there was a long rattle of the expiring breath, as the grip on the Father's wrist throbbed strongly in panic and fear and then finally fell away.

The Father heaved a sigh. It was the darkest hour of night, shortly before dawn as the songs of birds outside were strengthening.

Gently, he opened the old knight's mouth and placed the Eucharist on the tongue. He pushed the lower jaw up into place again. Thomas' mouth opened slightly but there was no danger of it falling out and there was no longer any need to worry about choking.

\* \* \* \* \*

O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended you and I detest all my sins, because I dread the loss of heaven and the pains of hell. But most of all because I have offended you, my God, who are all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve with the help of your grace, to confess my sins, to do penance and to amend my life. Amen.

---