

GODRIC

A Novel by

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Of Godric, his friends, and Reginald.

FIVE friends I had, and two of them snakes. Tune and Fairweather they were, thick round as a man's arm, my bedmates and playfellows, keepers of my skimped hearth and hermit's heart till in a grim pet bade them go that day and nevermore to come again, nevermore to hiss their snakelove when they saw me drawing near or coil themselves for warmth about my shaggy legs. They went. They never came again.

I spied them now and then, puddling my way home like a drowned man from dark Wear with my ballocks shriveled to beansize in their sack and Old One eye scarce a barnacle's length clear of my belly and crying a mercy. It was him as I sought in freezing Wear to teach a lesson that he never learned nor has to this day learned though wiser, you'd think, for sixty winters' dunking in bone-chilling, treacherous Wear. Not him. I would spy my gentle Tune and watchdog, firetooth Fairweather watching me as still as death in the long grass or under a stone as I hid home sodden on cracked feet but none of us ever let on that we were seeing what we saw until we saw no longer. I miss them more or hardly do, past most such sweet grieving now at age above a hundred if I've got time straight for once. For old Godric's now more dead than quick, a pile of dark rags left to steam and scorch not by the fire. It's the missing them now I miss.

That's two. The third was Roger Mouse, as stout of heart and limb as foul of mouth, plowing the stormy seas for pilfer or prize. He had an eye out ever for the willing maids, and no matter to Mouse were they flaxenlocked Dane or black Spaniard, old as earth or cherryripe for the plucking. No matter to Mouse if the deck was awash and storm in the rigging. He'd play with them at diddelydum the weather be damned and cared not a pin that the eyes of the oars were upon them. What a man was Mouse! What a sinner too was Mouse, but none was ever a fender friend, and what with all the merriment and great mirth, there was less room left in him for truly mortal sin than in your landlocked pennypinching chapmen working their cheerless stealth at the fairs where we peddled.

We had rabbitfur, goosefeather, beeswax, calfskin, garlic and gauds galore. We'd load them cheap at the one place and unload them dear the other for any fatrump mistress or dungfoot pilgrim with cockles in his hat that had the pence to squander. We grew rich till one fine day the Saint Esprit was ours with her sharp prow that sliced the waves like cheese. Mouse stood so high he said it blew the caps off men who stood astern when he broke wind. Godric was captain helmsman with a canny nose for weather, and captain Mouse was Godric's charm against the Evil Eye, for, mark you, Mouse's smack was less of evil than of larkishness the likes of which Our Lord himself could hardly help but wink at when he spied it out in whore and prodigal.

I loved Mouse. Together we saved a Christian king from infidels and not a silver coin to split between us for our pains. Years afterward, two hundred miles and more away in my dry hut, I saw Mouse in the eye of my heart go down with Saint Esprit off the Welsh rocks. He cried out the only name he knew me by, which was not Godric, and in the ear of my heart I heard him, helpless.

Ailred was fourth. They say as a babe he reared up like a lily in his tub and spoke the Pater Noster through nor would take of his mother's teat for the forty days and nights of Lent save Sabbaths. I

grew to a sheaf of bones made fast round the middle with a monk's rope.

The pictish king of Galloway was the devil fleshed. He had the gold eyes of a toad and a forkbeard. On cold nights he'd slit a slave's belly open like a sack so he could dabble his feet in the war bowels. He tied together the limbs of women in labor for sport and drank blood. Ailred went to him. Throned on a rock, the king was picking his teeth with the bone of a weasel when Ailred knelt and watered his shins with tears. They say a light went forth from Ailred then that blinded the king's gold eyes, and a creature was seen passing forth out of the king hung all over with bottles of the blood he'd drunk, and the king swore holy faith from that day on and took him the name of Ailred for his own. Thus with no loss of seed, or purity, my friend got him a son that day upon the rock, and Jesus the forkbeard, pictish knight though blind as a bat from that day on.

Ailred himself they made abbot after a time at Rievaulx where so great was his meekness the fiercest monks vied with each other to try it till one day one of them, finding him flat in a swoon from an attack of the stone, plucked him up as weighed no more than the weight of his thin bones and cast him head onto the fire. But Ailred forgave him, wouldn't you know. He'd let them harm no hair of the monk's head for the mischief he'd done. Nor was Ailred himself so much as singed.

He visits me from time to time. You'd never take him for holy. He smells of fish, his smock hiked up to his hips and his long legs lank as a heron's as he picks his way along the banks of Wear coughing his fearsome cough.

“Peace, Godric,” he says.

He's all bones. Godric's all rags. They kneel there hours on end under the low thatch without a word to clutter the silence save for the prayers they heave heavenward braided together like a hawser the better to hoist the world a cat's whisker out of the muck. Only once did he do me a bad turn, and that was from love as many a bad turn's been done from before. He sent me Reginald.

“To put your life on parchment, Godric,” Ailred says. His cough's like the splitting of wood. “To un-bushel the light of your days for the schooling of children. To set them a path to follow.” Did he but know where Godric's path has led or what sights his light has lit, he'd bushel me back fast enough. I've told Mother Reginald tales to rattle his beads and blush his fishbelly tonsure pink as a babe's burn but he turns them all to treacle with his scratching quill. I scoop out the jakes of my remembrance, and he censures it all with his clerkish screed till it reeks of mass. He brings me broth and plovers' eggs. He freshens my straw when I foul it. If some dream shipwrecks me at night, he's there with his taper to beacon me safe to shore. Just the sight of his sheep-face gives me the cramp.

I lie with my eyes rolled back to the whites and my jaws agape so he'll think I'm a corpse before he's dug his book from me. Often I speak to him only with the tongue of my hands which he does not understand. I have taught rats to run over him in the dark. But I suffer him. For it was lowly, gently, dark eyed Ailred sent him.

The fifth was Gillian. I met her on a Roman hill with Aedwen, my mother, drowsing at my side. She journeyed in our pilgrim band. At each day's end she'd bathe my feet. She crept beneath my cloak.

I have forgotten my father's face. I have forgotten my own face when I was young. By God's mercy someday I will forget Reginald's face. But her face I'll remember ever. Gillian I will not forget.

That's five friends, one for each of Jesu's wounds, and Godric bears their mark still on what's left of him as in their time they all bore his on them. What's friendship, when all's done, but the giving and taking of wounds. When Godric banished Fairweather and Tune, they all three bled for it, and part of Godric snaked off too nevermore to come again. And it's Godric's flesh that Ailred's cough cleaved like an axe. And when brave Mouse went down off Wales, he bore to the bottom the cut of Godric's sharp farewell. And when Gillian vanished in a Dover wood, she took with her all but the husk of Godric's joy.

Gentle Jesu, Mary's son, be thine the wounds that heal our wounding. Press thy bloody scars to our hearts that thy dear blood may flow in us and cleanse our sin.

Be thou in us and we in thee that Godric, Gillian, Ailred, Mouse and thou may be a woundless one at last. And even Reginald if thy great mercy reach so far.

In God's name Godric prays. Amen.

Of the family of Godric, his youth, and a sign from the sea.

AEDLWARD the freeman was my father, and Reginald has it that his name means Keeper of Blessedness. so, he kept it mostly to himself, more's the pity. I pity Aedlward. If he pitied me, he never said.

Aedlward's face I've long since lost, but his back I can still behold. He held his head cocked sideways, and his ears stood out like handles on a pot as he strode forth from the smoke of our hut to work our own scant croft of leeks, parsley, shallots, and the like, or else my lord's wide acres. Endless was the work there was, the seeding, the spreading of dung, reaping and threshing, cutting and storing. In winter there were scythes and plows to mend, the beasts to keep, roofs to patch until your fingers froze. It seems that he was ever striding off in every way but ours so I scarcely had the time to mark the smile or scowl of him. Even the look of his eyes is gone. They were grey as the sea like mine, it is said, only full of kindness, but what matter how kind a man's eye be if he never fixes you with it long enough to learn? He had a way of whistling through his teeth like wind through wattle, and it's like the wind that I Remember him. His was a power to thump doors open and shut like wind, a grey gust of wind that made flames fly and scatter chaff. But wind has no power to comfort a child or lend a strong arm to a lad whose bones are weak with growing. If Aedlward and Godric meet in Paradise, they meet as strangers do and never know.

It was fear kept Aedlward from us, and next to God what he feared of all things most was an empty belly. He had good cause. He had seen poor famished folk eat rat and cat and seen grown men suck their wives for strength enough to ferret nuts to feed them. Bitterer fare than that a man will go to when his belly starts to gnaw itself. So it was his fear we'd starve that made him starve us for that one of all things that we hungered for the most, which was the man himself.

The man was ever leaving us. If my lord said harrow, he'd harrow, said tinker, he'd tinker or fettle, he'd fettle though he was no villein bound to serve but a man born free as any man and paid the rent for our poor roof with pence. But my lord was all there was to save us if the harvest failed, so if the harvest no longer sat, I think my father would have laid an egg himself to please my lord. He loved us sure but like the bread a beggar dreams, his love could never pad the ribs or make the heart grow strong.

I sometimes see him to this day in dreams. He sits by the hearth, his back as ever turned. His chest has fallen to his chest. He neither sleeps nor wakes. There's a sack of onions on his knee, and his hands hang dark from grubbing in the earth. I huddle close to him to turn him by his great cold ears so I can see him plain at last. But Godric's hands close ever shut on empty air, and even in his dreams that face escapes.

But Aedwen, my mother, there's another tale. Friend of Blessedness, says scrivener Reginald, and blessed or not, she was a friend to all. What a lass she must have been with her hair in a braid and her rosy cheeks though it's never as a lass that a man remembers the mother that bore him. I remember her leading a Christmas jig in the churchyard, though, till Tom Ball the priest flew out to scold.

God in his wrath might keep them jiggging the whole year through, Ball said, till they'd jigged to the depths of their waists in the sod. But sweetheart, have pity they went on singing all Christmas Eve till

so wrought was poor Ball that he stammered it forth the next morning at mass. "Sweetheart, have pity," he said when he should have said, "Jesu, have mercy."

How Aedwen stuffed her braid in her mouth at that! Or she'd cover her mirth with her hands and shake till you'd think that the fit was upon her. She did the same too when she wept so you'd never be sure which she hid with her hands, her tears or her cackling. I think there were times she herself didn't know, nor does anyone know at times. Laugh till you weep. Weep till there's nothing left but to laugh at your weeping. In the end it's all one.

It was Burcwen, my sister, that tried her most. Burcwen had ears like Aedward's which she bound with a cloth at night to lay them flat. It never did. She had long legs and hair in a tangle and a gap between her teeth for squirting cider or perry through if ever the whim should take her. You never knew. She could outrun, outjig, outdevil the lads, and it was lads' toil and lads' sport she fancied. She had none of spinning with the women and Aedwen. She loathed staining my lord's wool with woad or vermilion, and her leaves were hard and flat as tiles. Aedwen would box her big ears and Aedward would take a rope to her if he'd strength enough left from his grubbing, but it was no use. Off she'd flee to hunt coney again or bedevil the ox with his great saint's eye.

Burcwen loved the lads, but it was like another lad herself she loved them. I think she was twelve before she learned they carried under their clothes what she herself was clean without. And when they found her flesh sweet and tried to tumble her, it sent her into a terrible fright and puzzle for thinking she wasn't a lass nor a lad either. There was nothing left for her to be but only Burcwen. So on and on Burcwen she was, lonely Burcwen, merry and larkish yet but in her own freaked fashion. She'd harry geese and climb high branches. She'd set the swine loose in Tom Ball's garden. She'd tease the hot lads in a way not to flame but to quench them, she thought, mocking their barnyard lust with speech rude far than any they knew themselves how to muster. Then Aedwen would cover her face with her hands and toss to and fro like a windy tree. Brother William was Burcwen's one fast friend till brother Godric stole her off.

Godric was older than either with a breach of years between that came of a stillbirth and several small deaths no whit less still. Aedwen had hardly been delivered of William when she waxed great with Burcwen, and the two of them grew up like finger and thumb at first. They made a wry pair. Burcwen was merry and mad. Burcwen was Burcwen. William was owlsh from the day he was born.

When William fixed you with his great round eye, you felt he knew when last you'd done the deed of darkness and the one you'd done it with and where. When Aedward brought apples or onions back William would count them out to the last one and any day you liked could tell the number left. And how the boy could talk!

Words came spilling out of him before he knew their meaning, and if there was none to listen, he'd talk to his own ten toes. He didn't care a fig for what he talked about. One matter would serve him as well as another. He'd prattle of Normans or crops or weather till the spittle gathered at the corners of his mouth, and if you made a move to flee, there'd come to his eyes a haunted look, and he'd prattle all the faster so you'd find no chink to flee him through. Words were the line that moored him to the world, I think, and he thought if ever the line should break, he'd be forever cast adrift.

Burcwen was his chief mooring at the start. Day after day they'd sit at sundown on a stile, their faces dark against the crimson sky, and William ever buzzing in her ear. I don't think Burcwen paid

much mind to what he said, but the sound alone worked some spell on her the way they say that music will on beasts. It soothed and rested her at least. It gave her peace to gather back the bits and pieces of herself the day had scattered. And I think that William scarcely listened to himself or cared if she paid heed or not, for it wasn't her heed he sought for with his words. It was herself to make fast to against the world's wild winds that sought to blow him out to sea for drowning. The jest of it was that Godric was the one that almost drowned.

It happened thus. I was a lad of twenty odd and William and Burcwen both but children still. I was off in the fens one April day to set out snares for waterfowl not far from where the Welland flows into the Wash. A stiff breeze blew across the saltings, and the air was watery chill. I see it yet and yet see Godric seeing it as well.

He was full of glee and daring then with a boy's heart still in the downy breast of a man. His neck hadn't thickened yet, nor his chest swelled to a run, nor his nose fleshed out to the great hook that became, but a bird's beak then. He had the seagrey eyes of Aedward although with less of kindness than a bird's cold glint and cunning. His beard was sparse and short, not yet the great black pricklebush it later grew. His raven hair fell shoulderlong, and save for a skin tied round his waist, he was naked as Father Adam was before his shame. Nor yet knew Godric shame himself. A young beast sure, but with a beast's young innocence.

Then far out across the shingle where skycolor sand and water meet, he spied a shape. Something glittered humped and wet there like a wrecked craft's cargo or a pirate's carcass sewn with gold along the seams or something rarer yet washed up from ancient Roman times, for legend is that Caesar drained old Wash to plow like meadowland and buried treasure there. Through the shallows Godric raced, birdbeaked, his arms stretched out like wings. Splashing silver spray chest high, he was soaked to the bone but never even felt the chill, his blood so full of flame. It was only a fish when he reached it, but ah, such a fish it was!

Blackbacked and blunt of snout, it lay on its side with its belly glinting in the sun like pearl. Its mouth grinned wide in welcome. Its porpoise eyes were glazed and gay in death. Salted down, it would have served to feed a family all through spring or more, so Godric with his knife set in to gutting. This was no easy task, for the fish was longer than a man and of a heft to match. Godric's blade was slight, and just to cut the thews and bones that held the head took time. Thus he did not mark the freshening of the breeze and the tide's swift turning till he glanced to find himself upon a spit of sand ringed round with scudding waves.

But still there was much work to do. He scoured the empty belly clean with brine. He lopped the tail and great three cornered fin. At last he was left with a hundredweight of fillet which he laid across his shoulders so that like a bishop's stole it hung down low to either side. Then up to his breast in surf he started for the shore.

It boiled him like a turnip in a broth. It knocked him off his feet and pounded him. When he opened up his mouth to cry, it filled his mouth. His burden dragged him under, yet he would not let it go, for though the deep churned dark about him, still deeper in his heart he saw that porpoise eye so blithe in death and heard its voice, or so he thought, say, "Take and eat me, Godric, to thy soul's delight. Hold fast to him who gave his life for thee and thine." Godric's breath then failed him. He was sucked down by the tide.

Burcwen found him. He awoke upon the strand to find her lips on his to breathe life back in him. His head was cradled in her lap. All said it was a miracle, and so I think it may have been. Three lessons Godric learned that day.

The first was that the sea's a killer, nor did he ever from that day forget nor fail again to keep an eye cocked on the waves' salt treachery.

The second was he learned that Burcwen's heart was his. Less and less as months passed by did she seek William out or sit astride their sundown stile to hear him buzz his need at her. More and more it was Godric that she sought for soothing, and he her. They spoke but little. Once she laid her fingers on his lips and said it was her breath they breathed. Who knows but it was so?

Lesson three was that he learned whose voice he'd heard beneath the waves and whose the eye that gazed at him so merrily. He learned that it was Jesu saved him from the sea, though saved him why he was saved for what deep end he did not learn, nor has he ever learned it to this day.

How Reginald asked and Godric answered and the Blessed Virgin's song.

AEDWEN named you well, Father, says Reginald II in his coddling lilt.

I say, "Father my bum."

"A holy name for a babe born to be holy," he says.

"Fiddle my faddle," I say or nothing at all in words but something instead in the fingertalk I doesn't know. He's better off not knowing, if he only knew.

"The god means God. That's plain as your nose, I mean no slight. The vic is Saxon reign. So Godric in sum means God reigns, Godric. It means God reigns in you. It means when God comes down at last to weigh the souls of men, he'll not find Godric's wanting, Father Godric."

"Fetch me a bowl to puke in," I tell him. He's got him such a honeyed way I'm ever out to sour it.

"Godric will have his little jest," says Reginald.

So then I teach him other ways to read my name. "God's god for sure. You hit that square. But ric Erse for wreck," I say, not knowing Erse from arse. "God's wreck I be, it means. God's wrecked Godric for his sins. Or Godric's sins have made a wreck of God."

Reginald throws up his hands, his palms as pale and soft as cheese.

"There's other ways as well," I say. "Rip Godric up another seam, and what you get is go and drick."

"What's drick?" says Reginald.

"A foul Welsh word not fit for monkish ears," I say.

"How great is your humilitas, Father," Reginald says.

I say, "Yet, Mother, not so great as is my drick." Why is it that the best in him calls forth the worst in me?

"When were you born, Father?" he says.

"The year of my birth."

"What manner of man is John the Baptist when he visits you in dreams?"

"Something between a goat and a Jew."

"Is it true you see what's happening years ahead and miles away, Father?"

“I see a man and maid a tumble on your grave.”

“They say the Blessed Virgin taught you songs.”

I open my mouth and croak like one who's had his tongue snipped out for swearing false. Eck, eck, sing, twiddling my eyelids like a beggar playing blind.

When was I born They say it was the year before the Bastard William beached his Normans at Pevensey, slaying Harold with a sunset shaft shot through his eye, then stomping down the golden Wessex dragon in the mud. They tell that Harold's mother said she'd give its weight in gold to have the body of her son laid deep in holy ground, but William buried it instead in Saxon soil that Harold hallowed by his falling there. Then William up and had them crown him king at Westminster on Christmas day, and when the Aethling joined with Dane and Scot to cast him out, stark William marched his Normans north and harried the land from sea to sea. Men, women, children, all, he put them to the sword in bitter cold. He slew their beasts and burned their crops and set aflame their towns until the folk cried mercy and the land was his. Thus Godric first saw light at a dark time, and the manger of his birth was death.

But all is light for Reginald. What do they know of dark and death, he and his brother Durham monks Saint Benedict would twitch inside his tomb to see them water down his rule. No wonder that the hands of monks are soft the way they've got them brewers, barbers, tailors, cooks to do the bidding and husbandmen to work their soil. No meat for monks unless they ail, says Benedict, so have the monks and more plead sick each day and gather in the misericorde to stuff their mouths with mutton till the fat runs down. The Loft, they call it, and mighty high and lofty are their ways. They copy their books and say their prayers, and if some wandering duke or prince comes by, they turn the cloisters to an inn to please his grace and bend their knees as deep as if to kiss my lord the bishop's ring.

And it's this same soft Reginald that asks of John the Baptist, what I've seen of him in dreams. I've seen a man all clad in rags and anger still although a kinsman of Our Lord as well as a high saint. I've seen a shaft of light aslant through dark, a fierce lance tilted to the heart of things, a flail, a knout. How do you tell of such a one as John to such as Reginald, who'd have him be a godly gelding like himself? “Abide alone,” John told me once. “Make thy place in wilderness as I did mine that the Lord may house thee. Make roots and grubs thy only fare that the Lord may feed thee. Make chilly Weald thy Jordan that the Lord may warm thee. Thus friendless, roofless, blue with cold, yet singing praise the world may learn of thee the glory and the grace of God.”

I say, “Mark me now, Reginald. Hear this.”

He sets down the eggs he's brought and squats beside me in the straw so he may catch the words I think will come out weak because he thinks that Godric's weak and old as Adam's shoe.

“WRITE THIS DOWN IN YOUR BOOK!” I cry with all the strength I have. Then see him clap his hands to his ears and rock back on his heels. But then he rocks back close again, for when I speak a second time, I barely mumble in my beard. Thus I play him like a fish. He looks a fish. His mouth's agape. His eyes are flared.

I say, “Then if you want it, here's my life.” You'd think it was the sacrament I tendered him, the seemingly way he bows his head to hear.

I say, "I started out as rough a peasant's brat and full of cockadoodledoo as any. I worked uncleanliness with the best of them or worst. I tumbled all the maids would suffer me and some the scratched and tore like weasels in a net. I planted horns on many a goodman's brow and jellied la with tales about it afterward. I took up peddling as my trade. I cozened and tricked the way a baker yeasts his leaves till they are less of bread than air. I passed off old for new. I let out pence at usury. I swore me false. A flatterer I was. A wanderer. I thieved and pirated. I went to sea. Such things as happened then are better left unsaid."

Reginald's eyes are rolled up in his head so all that shows is white. He crosses himself and like herring in a basket gasps for air. Yet I've spared him things far worse for the sake of sparing Godric too. I've spared him wasted Burcwen nibbling like a hare on grass and leaves. I've spared him William calling out along the darkened banks of Wear for what he'll never find. I've spared him two that lay one in one another's arms and never spoke a word.

"There's much you're better not to know," I say, "but know you this. Know Godric's no true hermit but a gadabout within his mind, a lecher in his dreams. Self seeking he is and peacock proud. A hypocrite. A ravener of alms and dainty too. A slothful, greedy bear. Not worthy to be called a servant of the Lord when he treats such servants as he has himself like dung, like Reginald. All this and worse than this go say of Godric in your book."

Poor Reginald's tears run trickling down his cheeks like tallow. He asks for sweet, and bitter's all he has from me. Have I no honeyed crumb to take the taste away?

"Well, but say this also if you like," I say. "Say yes, it's true that Mary came. She came though who knows why. Clad all in skyblue mantling with the crown of Heaven on her head. She smiled at me. And then I raised up on one elbow in the straw and sang:

Saint, Mary, virgin dame.
Mother of Jesu Christ, of God his Lamb,
Take, shield, and do thy Godric bring
To thee where Christ Is King.
Our Lady, maiden, springtime's flower,
Deliver Godric from this hour.

For Ailred's sake I sang it to the monk he sent. And what I said to him is so. It was indeed the Blessed Virgin taught it me.

How Godric left home.

“FAREWELL, Father. Mother, farewell, ”I said.

Aedwen took and slowly turned my face from side to side as if to rummage it for something she'd lost or feared to lose. She gave me a sack of berries and a wool cap. She wept no fears, and not a word came from her lips.

Aedward, my father, was sitting by the fire. He did not rise. He only raised one hand, then spoke the only word of all the words he ever spoke to me that I remember still as his.

“You'll have your way, Godric,” he said, and to this day that word he spoke and that raised hand are stitched together in my mind.

I believe my way went from that hand as a path goes from a door, and though many a mile that way has led me since, with many a turn and crossroad in between, if ever I should trace it back, it's to my father's hand that it would lead. I kissed him on his head then, for he'd turned away to watch the flames. He smelled of oxen and of rain. It was the last I ever saw of him.

Tom Ball came by to bless me. Ball was a heavy, slow paced man who had one eye that veered off on a starboard tack so you never knew for sure which way he looked. He entered our house splashing high with mud, for our yard was always a bog through spring. He sweated like a horse.

He laid his hands on me and blessed my eyes to see God's image deep in every man. He blessed my ears to hear the cry especially of the poor. He blessed my lips to speak no word but Gospel truth. He warned against the Devil and his snares with always that one eye of his skewed off as if to watch for snares himself.

“This life of ours is like a street that passes many doors,” Ball said, “nor think you all the doors mean are wood. Every day's a door and every night. When a man throws wide his arms to you in friendship, it's a door he opens same as when a woman opens hers in wantonness. The street forks out and there's two doors to choose between. The meadow that tempts you rest your bones and dream a while. The rackribbed child that begs for scraps the dogs have left. The sea that calls a man to travel far. They all are doors, some God's and some the Fiend's. So choose with care which ones you take for my son, and one day who can say you'll reach the holy door itself.”

“Which one is that, Father?” I asked for courtesy, for I was hot to leave. I was on my knees before him and with his one straight eye he held me there.

“Heaven's door, Godric,” he said.

“And will I know it if I reach that far?”

“Perhaps you won't,” Ball said. “Perhaps you will. But go now, Godric. The peace of God go with you too. Tom Ball will keep you in his prayers.”

So if my father's hand is the door from which my way went forth, please God the door it leads me may be the one Saint Peter keeps. And blessed be he who knows it when he comes to it, for not all do I think. Often when my way has led me not to the great door itself, God knows, but past some little glimpse of it, it wasn't for years I knew the worth of what I'd glimpsed, and then too late. Fool that was, I thought that day that it was only home I left.

The only one who wept was he who had least cause for tears, and that was William. He'd have crowed like a cock on a dunghill if he'd been anybody else, for now with Godric going off, Burcwen would be his again. How he must have missed her those last years! Ever since that day she found me on the sands of Wash half drowned and loved me for the breath she'd breathed into my lips, he'd been busy as a sailor in a gale to find some other place to moor.

With Burcwen gone, he'd searched to find some other friend. Old folk he'd tried with nothing else to do, he thought, but please a lad like him, and younger folk he hoped would have him and be proud, and others his same age to play with at bowls and stick and stone. But in the end his endless chatter drove them all away. Nor young nor old had time enough for the time that William needed nor room in the heart's quiet for one who never could be still. Yet now, though Godric's leaving gave him Burcwen back, he wept to see him go.

As I passed the lower sheepfold, I found Burcwen waiting there. She had no cloak nor shoes upon her feet but carried a basket on her arm.

"I'm going with thee, Godric," she said.

I said, "And so's the Man in the Moon thine uncle, child."

The wind blew rain about, and my lord's fat sheep were huddled with their backs to it. Against his cheek, my sister's hair was wet, and there was wildness in her eye.

"See what I've got," she said and from her basket drew a length of hemp. "Unless I go, I'll hang myself. They'll bury me at the crossroads with a stake drove through my heart."

I said, "Just standing out here in the rain you'll catch your death."

"It's my life I'm here to catch before it gets away," she said. "My life's with you, Godric."

"And so is mine with you," I said, "and one day I'll come back with wealth enough to build us a great house where we'll live out our days in peace."

"The Man in the Moon must be your uncle too," she said.

"But for now, your life is here," I said, "and my life's mine to find and fashion where I may. So Godric goes," I said, "and Burcwen stays." I raised her chin so she could read the firmness in my face. "Dear heart, farewell," I said, and when I left, she made no move to follow me.

After I had gone some fifty paces, though, I heard her calling through the wind. With a lad's quick skill, she'd shinnied up a tree and tied one rope end fast around a branch and with the other sought to make a hangman's knot.

“Stay see me jump!” she called, then something else the wind blew off. I saw she laughed, and laughter too was part of what was choking me, but there was madness in our mirth, for I was daring her to die and Burcwen daring me to drive her to. So then I ran to save her while i still had time.

I plucked her off her branch like a treed cat, and we scuffled, laughing in the rain, while I trussed her underneath the arms and hoisted her until she hung there dangling from her tree again. When she saw that there was nothing she could do, she went so grave and still she could have been an angel overhead. Her virgin breasts were bared where she had torn her clothes, her head a flower bending on its stem.

“Look in the basket, Godric,” she said in a small voice, “and take the parting gift I brought.” It was a cross she'd whittled from two bits of wood and bound with strands of her own hair. I hung it round my neck, and there it hangs still to this day, the hair as bright and soft as it was then.

“You've foxed me fair this time,” she said, “but other times will come and slyer foxes.” “And so they will,” I said.

“Farewell then, Godric,” she said from where she hung. She wanly Aapped her arms at me like wings. “May the Man in the Moon watch over you till next we meet.”

I've wondered since if maybe why she brought that rope was not to hang herself but so I'd have the means to make her stay. I think that in some corner of her heart she wanted to be bound against her own wild will to go with me as in the wilds of me I yearned to cut her down so she could come.

But off I went and never gave another backward glance lest like Lot's wife I'd turn into a pillar salt as my own tears.

Of Peregrine Small and how Godric came to prosper in trade.

I THINK of Fairweather and Tune, of Fairweather with his tongue of flame and sleepy, faithful Tune. Have they withstood the years. Do they drape themselves like garlands over dead limbs still and cover themselves for sun on rocks too high for Wear to wet? Have they found it in their hearts to pardon Godric?

If they but knew, it was not the coldness but the warmth of Godric's bowels for them that made him drive them off. It's hard to fasten on the airy love of God when such as earthy Tune with jewels for eyes slips on his belly through the dust to pay his loving court. Tune slept in a jar, but at my ever entering he'd rear his head and shuttle to and fro to weave my welcome.

Fairweather guarded me. Whenever a man drew near, or monk or maid, he was fierce to strike and swift to sting. The trouble was he guarded me from God as well. Let God himself approach me down the path I made of prayers, and such a hissing would break forth from Fairweather then you would have thought the King of Glory was my foe. For love of me, Fairweather warded off the love of God and since I loved Fairweather for his care, I had to banish him with Tune.

I paid a smith to fettle me from the lids of two great pots the iron vest I wear to fret the devil in my flesh, and when I walk, it sounds to warn the world I'm near the way that Ailred's cough warns me of him. Do my snake friends listen still for Godric clanking through the trees, or Godric's clank and Ailred's cough like the chanting back and forth of monks at mass Does Godric listen still for them? He listens surely. There's no doubt of that. Rut ah, there are so many sounds!

All those years ago Tom Ball blessed my ears to hear the poor cry out for help, and I still hear them right enough. I hear them when the mouse squeals in the owl's cruel claw. I hear them when the famished wolf howls hunger at the moon. I hear them when old Wear goes rattling past in weariness and in the keening of the wind, and when the rain beats hollow on my roof. In all such sounds I hear the poor folk's bitter need and in the dimtongued silence too. But when melody wells up in thrush throats, and bees buzz honeysong, and rock and river clap like hands in summer sun, then misery is drowned in minstrelsy, and Godric's glad in spite of all. Yet sometimes too he's sad in spite of all, God knows, for there are other voices than the poor's.

One is the voice of Peregrine Small, a weaver late of Bishop's Lynn, where I went to peddle at the fair not many months from when I left my sister dangling like a Christmas goose. Small's cloth was a weft so fine you could have pulled it through a lady's ring, and he himself was scarce less dainty. He had a man's parts and a silken yellow beard, but when he walked, he swayed his hams from side to side, and when he opened up his bearded lips, it was the simper of a maid came forth.

Poor Small, he could not help himself. He didn't paint his face like some I've seen nor seek out me to use him for a maid, but Mistress Small they called him, and the lads were always making sport of him to see him blush and roll his cow eyes heavenward. It's the voice of this same Small that echoes still in Godric's ears. E e e e e k! E e e e e k! he cried as if they sought to ravish him, and in the knock kneed manner of a maid fled down Saint Margaret's darkling nave.

It happened thus. It was fair time, as I say. The town was full. Merchants were there from many parishes with tents and stalls and painted flags, and others from as far away as Flanders with the wines, dyes, hides, furs, herbs and wares of every sort too rare to name. Cattle and swine thronged through the streets till you walked up to your shins in dung. Notaries were busy with their wax to seal contracts and bargains, and whores flocked everywhere to seal some bargains of their own wherever there were walls or bits of ground left dry enough to prop their bums against Jack Ploughman's hub and puff. From miles around the rich and poor alike came out to gawk at dogs in kerchiefs standing on their heads or bears that jigged and one sick lion riding on a sumpter mule, his great tongue lolling out. Magicians drew live doves out of the air as easy as thimble riggers drew pence out of dunces' pockets and the Jews in their horned caps and yellow badges sat in booths to weigh out silver at the rates of gold.

A Jew named Haggai sparked the tinder of that moiling time. As chance would have it, in years ago heft he was about the same as Peregrine Small, and like Small too he had a yellow, silken beard. Haggai turned Christian, that's where it began. Perhaps he turned to Jesu truly in his heart, ruing the bloody mischief of the cross the Jews had wrought. Perhaps it was because he was so fair of hair and face he hoped in time to pass for Saxon. Perhaps, since nothing human's not a broth of false and true, it was the two at once.

In any case no less a high and mighty lord would be the one to baptize him than Ranulf Flambard, Chancellor, who'd traveled north to do the business of the king. King William Redhead's business even was to milk the land of gold and silver till it cried for mercy, and Flambard, called the Torch, was he that pulled the teats for him till they hung dry. Flambard was as sharp a rogue as ever broke wind in a mitre, nor was this the last that Godric heard of him, for their sails were set on courses doomed to cross again. But one day's evil is enough each day, and that day's sprang from Haggai's hallowing.

The Jews caught scent of it and flew into a heathen rage. They wanted Haggai's blood for play, false, and to draw it they were hot to batter down Saint Margaret's door. This door was bolted fast against the hurly burly of the fair, but the Jews thumped on it with their fists and feet and pikes till at last the Christian folk within believed their hour had come and called for help.

What came was more than help or less. Christians came and Jews came, both magicians, whores and thieves and all who'd traveled to the fair to buy or sell or gawk. Everybody with a nose for heydiddlediddle and danger ran to fill the square, and Godric too, his own great beak a quiver. He bought the hair of women cheap at nunneries where it was cropped and when the ruckus started up was selling it dear to Joans and Jills to plait into their own thin tresses. Saint Margaret's door fell down at last. The crowd pressed in like sheep. And Godric too.

Inside there was a churchly dusk and quiet. Flambard and Haggai both had fled. A flock of Christians cowered around the stoup. A stout priest raised his arms in vain for peace. And then, for want of other foe, the crowd turned on itself. They went to it pellmell. The vengeful Jews were routed soon. Then it was Christian fists that bloodied Christian snouts, and Christian staffs that cracked heads and Christian pates like nuts. I myself was mounted on some knightly tomb, crowing like a cock and laying about me with a stick to clobber all who threatened me when all at once I heard a feeble mewling at my feet and turned to find this Peregrine Small crouched down for shelter there behind the tomb.

“Stand up like a man, weaver!” I cried and thwacked him hard across the back to stir him. Puddling

the floor for fright, he stood, and, be it ever on my head, a brace of aproned Yorkshire cobblers saw him then and took him with his yellow beard for Haggai.

They set up a cry and in seconds tore the clothes off poor Small's back. They aimed to mock how he was circumcised and work God knows what other mischief on his flesh, and had they only held him long enough to find his parts as whole as theirs, it might have saved his skin. But Small broke free and Bed them naked down the nave. His soft flesh flickered white as milk as through Saint Margaret's shade he hooted e e e e k! with what by then was half of Yorkshire on his tail.

He doubled back then as I've seen hares do. Who can say but that he thought to find in me his one friend? And so I might have been indeed, but even as he threw himself into my arms, the pack was on him. The cobblers stabbed him with their awls in throat, breast, belly while Godric, drenched in blood, fell back beneath his broad beamed, spouting corpse.

The folly of the mob killed Small, and greater follies followed still.

First, word went round it was the Jews that killed him. They said that Small had come upon a Jew dishonoring a Christian tomb and pointed to the puddle Small himself had made to prove that they were right. When Small set out to drive the villain off, they said, six other Jews leapt forth. These six it seems, the doughty Small did battle with, unaided and unarmed, till one crept up by stealth to pierce him from behind while yet another jabbed him in the side just where the Roman lance pierced Christ. Thus weaver Small died Peregrine the Martyr.

Second, they claimed the blood of martyred Small worked miracles. A man born dumb prayed through the whole Aves through aloud without one fault when but a drop of it was placed upon his tongue. A silver coin that chanced to fall in it was turned to gold, and from the holes the awls had dug, a mist was seen to rise that shaped itself into a holy cross.

Third, there were folk that vied to give as much as six French knives or a pair of ivory combs for a scrap no bigger than a leaf of the garment Small had bled upon. That garment was peddler Godric's Own, of course, for Small had bled and died in Godric's arms. He peddled it off in bits and pieces for the last dank thread, then slit a cat's throat on another still and peddled off as much again.

Who knows? He might be peddling cat gore still but that the mighty Flambard called a halt. Already a score or more of Jews had paid for Small's death with their skins, and Flambard feared that as the martyr's fame spread farther yet, more Jews would fall to Christian zeal. He knew that each Jew fallen was a Jew the less to lay a golden egg whenever William Redhead cackled, so Flambard sent the word if Godric wasn't gone from Bishop's Lynn before the sun went down, he'd never see it up again. And Godric went.

He paid for passage on a boat bound north and after three days' up wind battling reached an isle ground round with cliffs so steep there was no place to moor except an iron ring embedded in the stone. He had them make fast there, then scrambled up the rocks to wait until the boat was gone to work his stealth.

Thus, Master Reginald, set down in your book how it was through a martyr's death that god Godric's peddling prospered and how the chancellor of an anointed king was the one by whom he first set foot on holy Farne.

How Godric fared on the holy isle of Farne.

HERE is what I found on Fame. I found an old H man sleeping on a bed of stone. Campion was everywhere and grey winged gulls. His lips were still, but had he opened them to speak my name, I think that I'd have followed to the world's far rim. Later, I saw him bent over a spade. I called to him but he did not even raise his head. When I reached the place where he had stood, I found him gone. I wept and wept I do not know how long. Then as I'd come to do, I buried all my wealth from Bishop Lynn between a clump of heather and a fish shaped rock.

I'd brought some cheese but had no stomach for it then. I'd told the boatman I wanted to do penance for my sins and bade him come to fetch me the next day. He said he would. He was a tall, rough fellow with a salty tongue, and yet I knew I trusted him.

Great as my need for penance was, I watched the birds instead. There were black backed guillemots with crimson feet and gulls and terns so thick you would have thought that Farne itself had wings. The rocks were limed with droppings, the sea air salt and soft with spray. I stood and heard above the surf the creaking sadness of the gulls. A little way apart rose great stone pinnacles like fingers from the sea, some broken off, some with their summits lost in cloud. If Aedward's had been a giant's hand and turned to stone for birds to nest on, I think it would have looked like that. I wondered if the old man watched it too. That night I saw him yet again.

Whether or not I dreamed, I did not know, but I saw him pick a moonlit path to where I lay and then sit down. He put a finger to his lips and only then I saw he held a sleeping hare with silken ears laid flat against his fur.

"I swooned for hunger once," he said, "and this one stroked me with his tongue until I wakened. Glythwin is his name. He shall pray for you, Godric. Perhaps you know that when hares pray, the ears of God grow long as theirs to hear."

"Thank him for me then, Father," I said.

"When hares nip, though, the sting is sharp," he said. "The night I died, they waved lit torches and fro from that high ledge behind you there to tell my monks on Lindisfarne the news. Would you believe it, though? There was not one of them awake. So Glythwin sank his teeth into the abbot's toe. You should have seen the jig he did with one foot tucked beneath him like a stork!"

"You say that you were dead, and yet you saw?" I said.

"Not only saw but laughed," he said, "till tears ran down."

"Would I be right that you're a ghost then, Father, and you haunt this place?"

"Ah well, and if it comes to that," he said, "your shadow fell here long before your foot, and that's a kind of haunting too. Farne had long been calling you, I mean, before you heard at last and came."

"I heard no call, Father," I said. "I came here as a stranger, and I came by chance."

"Was it as a stranger and by chance you wept?" he said, then let me wonder at his words a while before he spoke again. "When a man leaves home, he leaves behind some scrap of his heart. Is it not so, Godric?"

I thought of Burcwen waiting with her basket in the rain and how I kissed my father's head, and nodded yes.

"It's the same with a place a man is going to," he said. "Only then he sends a scrap of his heart ahead." "It's true there's something fetching here," I said, "but I had no aim to come, Father, nor have any aim to stay."

"Nor shall you either," he said. "Your heart's no guillemot to make this isle your rookery. It was right you came to fold your wings a while and get your bearings for the flight to come. But your true nesting place lies farther on."

"Lies where" I asked.

He said, "Godric, this much at least I know for sure. Until you reach it, every other place you find will fret you like a cage."

The hare had come awake. He raised his ears. The old man set him on the ground. He hopped where I lay and crouched there with the stars behind his head, I wondered if already he was saying prayers for me and how you prayed with four legs and a tail.

"You know my name, Father," I said. "Now may I ask what yours may be?"

"I never liked it much," he said. "It always makes me think of how a frog sounds plopping in a pond. Cuthbert! But that's the way they christened me."

"Holy Mother of God!" I cried. "Then you're the holy saint himself!"

"Ah well," he said. "To Gossip Guillemot I'm just a bald head like an egg. To God, who knows holiness, since holiness was all he knew, I think he did not know his own. I went to my knees before him then for from ancient Saxon times Saint Cuthbert's fame and fear were great."

"Oh forgive me, your worship, for I have sinned," I said. "Bless me, for if I'm not yet damned for good and all, I've only got a spiderleg to go." Then I told him the tale of Peregrine Small and how he slew a cat for blood and sold false relics off for true to honest folk at Bishop's Lynn. My eyes were filled with tears of shame.

For a wonder, it was the cat he asked me of. What manner of cat, he said, and had it suffered cruelly?

"Only a common street cat, sire," I said. "Some bony beggar cat with ragged ears and twisted tail. As to his suffering, I fear I thought no more of that than of a pig's at sticking time. I think he didn't die at once, but even there I can't be sure."

Cuthbert gave a cry and, gathering up the hare again, knelt down. The moon made silver of the both as Cuthbert prayed.

“O thou who art the sparrow's friend,” he said, “have mercy on this world that knows not even what it sins. O holy dove, descend and roost on Godric here so that a heart may hatch in him at last. Amen.”

Then he rose and placed his hand on me, nor was it any ghostly hand but warm and strong with life. “Godric, thy sins are all forgiven thee,” he said. “Go now. Do good. For there's no good a man does in this world, however small, but bears sweet fruit though he may never taste of it himself.”

“Father, will we meet again?” I said and grasped the hem of his coarse cloak.

“You will see Farne again,” he said, “for where your treasure is, there shall your heart be too.” Then before I could speak more, I fell into a sleep so deep I did not wake till well past dawn.

The boatman's foot was in my ribs.

“Rise up, man!” he said. “Or else the birds will shit you white as a Farne rock.”

The sky was grey behind him. I could see his mast whip back and forth above the ledge. The man grinned down at me through crooked teeth. I asked him who he was.

“I'm Roger Mouse,” he said. It was the first I ever heard the name of him who was to be my first and best friend.

How Godric met a boar and a leper and how' people sought him in his cell.

I CAN no longer hold my water and itch in places I haven't scratched these twenty years for the clownish stiffness in my bones. It's Reginald that has to swab my bum and deems the task a means of grace. I've got an old dam's dugs. My privities hang loose as poultry from a hook. My head wags to and fro. There's times my speech comes out so thick and gobbled I'd as well to save my wind. But the jest is bitterer yet, for deep inside this wrecked and ravaged hull, there sails a young man still.

How I rage at times to smite with these same fists I scarce can clench! How I long, when woods are green, to lark and leap on shanks grown dry as sticks! Let a maid but pass my way with sport in her eye and her braid a swinging, and I burn for her although my wick's long since burnt out and in my heart's eye see her as the elders saw Susanna at her bath her belly pale and soft as whey, her pippin her slender limbs and thistledown. So ever and again young Godric's dreams well up to flood on Godric's prayers, or prayers and dreams reach God in such a snarl he has to comb the tangle out, and who knows which he counts more dear.

Is he asleep, old Godric? Is he awake? Does he himself know which? He lies there staring at a crack. He mumbles holiness. They say he first saw light in Bastard William's day, and now it's Henry Second, Becket's bane, that calls the tune from France.

They say that Godric's body's scored from when the Devil, shaped like a wild boar, fetched him down and tore him. They say he healed a leper with a kiss. They kneel there waiting for him to rise and stir while Godric mocks them in his peacock heart.

What can such whispering gawkers know of hot, foul breath, he thinks, of slobbered tusks and eyes like coals? Fierce from a thicket it sprang on him with snuffling rage, but Godric knew it for the Prince of Darkness by the golden circlet on its brow and signed it with the cross. From snout and pizzle blood spewed forth. Then, as it screamed, its maw filled up with flames till there was nothing left of it except a stench so vile that Godric swooned.

And let them say what cost the kiss I gave one rainy day on Dover Road.

I see the shape approaching still. Its clothes are patched with white and on its head a tall red hat a bent and faded pale from years of weather. Frick frack, frick frack its rattle goes, and as I climb the bank to let it pass, the very mist shrinks back to Bee its touch. The mire is gullied deep, and as it nears my perch, it trips and topples to the ground. It tries to rise but flounders down again. It whimpers like a child that's being flogged. The rain is pelting hard, and flat on its belly in the muck it might well drown for all I know. So less from pity than from fear to have a murder on my soul, I go to help it with its feet. As I bend down, it turns to face me. Then I see it has no face.

I can't say if it was a man I kissed or maid or why I kissed at all. I've seen them make the sick eat broth by holding it so close the savor draws them on. Maybe misery has a savor too so if you're needy enough, sick though you be with sin, your heart can't help but sup. In any case, I closed my eyes against that foul and ashen thing that once was human flesh like mine and kissed its pain. When

reached out to me, I fled till I was far enough away to puke my loathing in a ditch.

The tale they tell is of a leper cleansed. I do not know nor seek to know, for pride lies one way, ruin the other. But from that time the word went forth that there was healing in my hands. Something was in my hands at least and rests there yet though they're all knotted now and stiff like claws. Folk come from miles to have me touch them. Could I but touch the churlishness within myself or kiss of Godric clean!

Here's how it happens when they come. They go to the monks at Durham first. "Where be the wretches to the hermit?" they ask. They say, "We're here to see the one as cools his holy bum in Wear come summer or snow." "To what end see him?" ask the monks, for to some I could be just as well a hanging or a calf that's got two heads. Others would sell me fowl, or have me bless some trinket, or take a snippet of my beard back home to keep off warts. And some there are who come to try me if they can.

I remember a plump maid once with apples in her cheeks and drooping lids. She'd finished telling all her fleshly sins and knelt for shriving when all at once she flung her clothes above her head and was as nimble as a tumbler at a fair went topsy turvy with her bum aloft. I had my own sport then. Tune was sleeping in his jar but at my call shot forth and lunged at her. Hey nonny nonny off she went then! No did she stop, I'll vow, till Orkney rocks.

The monks do the sieving, as I say, and send to Godric only those deemed worthy, though I'd guess that if a gallows rat should slip a coin into their cowls, they'd send him too. And to each they give a cross of plaited straw to be his proof they've sent him. Else Reginald will drive them off.

To touch me and to feel my touch they come. To take at my hands whatever of Christ or comfort such hands have. Of their own, my hands have nothing more than any man's and less now at this tottering, lamewit age of mine when most of what I ever had is more than mostly spent. But it's as if my hands are gloves, and in them other hands than mine, and those the ones that folk appear with rods of straw to seek. It's holiness they hunger for, and if by some mad grace it's mine to give, if I've a holy hand inside my hand to touch them with, I'll touch them day and night. Sweet Christ, what other use are idle hermits for?

But then from time to time a day will dawn when suddenly my blood runs chill for thinking that what holiness I have is mine to keep lest, losing it, I lose the hand within my hand, my own heart, my heart, my own life's life. And then I fend them off like leeches come to suck my blood. Reginald lets them in. I scowl at them. Or will not speak. Or feign some fatal ill or sleep.

Or sometimes, fierce with rage, I'll even crouch on hands and knees and shake my hair and beard into a snarl and roar at them. And sometimes even then, so great their need, they'll risk their skins by kneeling down to kiss me as they might a leper.

How Godric became Deric and sailed the seas with Roger Mouse.

WE stood on the deck of Saint Esprit, myself and Mouse. She was running free before a wind that shook our beards, and Mouse kept his cap pulled down about his ears. He had his arm around my shoulder and smelled of onions. Once in a while the sea would crest, but mostly it was great blue hills with foam for heather. A swell would rise and glitter in the sun, then slide and sink into a dale. A dale would heave into a hill.

“The waves are like the years the way they melt!” Mouse called against the wind. “Great Alfred arse, while yet we can, we better. . .” and then when a gust blew off his nether words, he sang it out for fair. “LIVE! LIVE!” he cried. And such was Mouse. He lived and gave me lessons in the art.

He called me by the name I'd told him there at Fame. Gudericus, I said, when asked. He said it was too much to mouth and chopped it down to Deric. So Deric I was to him from that day forth, nor did he ever know of Godric. Why did I play him false like that? I think in some way it was Cuthbert doing. “Do good,” he bade me. He laid that holy charge on Godric's head. But goodness was not Godric's meat. Wealth was he after and sport and hazard, so rather than deny the old saint's bidding, I denied his proper name instead.

The boat Mouse sailed me in to Farne did not belong to him but to a Newcastle shipwright by the name of Curran that he let her from. Curran was growing dim of wit with age so it took no great trick to gull him of his craft than the leaky tale of how we'd lost her in a squall that splintered her against the rocks. A broad beamed, lumpish thing she was, forever thumped by every wave, but we hugged the shore with her, and she served us for a year or two of seaborne sharpening. We hauled fish in her, wool and hides. We put in at fairs. What we picked up from the dullard Scots for groats we peddle off for pence from Yarmouth south to Ramsgate, then turn back and try to fill our purse the other way. Here or there we'd hire louts to help with loading, then keep them on as crew until the time came round to pay them for their pains. When that day dawned, we'd go ashore and in some pothouse ply them so with beer their brains were all awash, then leave them there to wonder when they waked. Mouse and Deric both were nothing but a dream.

One of these, a rogue named Colin we'd already gulled some months before, we chanced upon again inside a Portsmouth stew. Mouse had a meaty wench with painted pippins and I a wall eyed beauty with one hand lopped off for thieving when Colin came clomping in and spotted us. It was fox and geese then down the lane, and Colin with a wicked blade and Mouse and I as bare as birth, or goosenecks flapping. Thanks be to God we somehow got away and cast off before he sniffed us out again. And so it ever was, for from the start my Mouse and I had luck.

We traded Curran's tub for shares in other craft, each fleeter and stouter than the last, and each time cast our cozening peddlers' nets still wider yet till we were catching gulls and boobies as far afield as Flanders, Denmark, France. And thus we saw the world, did Mouse and Deric, as also did the world see us. I won't say either side was better for the sight, but ah, what times we had! Such romps and routs and carefree sinning that if we'd died, unshriven as we were, we'd both be dangling now on red hot hooks in Hell. What's more we soon grew rich as well. By the time that I was thirty odd and

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