

C. J. SANSOM



Overeign

Shardlake is a character to treasure

James Naughtie Sunday Times



Praise for S_{OVEREIGN}

‘Don’t open this book if you have anything urgent pending. Its grip is so compulsive that, until you reach its final page, you’ll have to be almost physically prised away from it. [*Sovereign*] pulls you, like its predecessors, into a tortuous world of Tudor terror . . . Exceptionally gifted at recreating the look, sound and smell of the period, Sansom also excels at capturing its moral and intellectual climate . . . his remarkable talents really blaze out’

Sunday Times

‘Sansom is excellent on contemporary horrors. This is no herbs-and-frocks version of Tudor England but a remorseless portrait of a violent, partly lawless country . . . You can lose yourself in this world’

Independent

‘I have enjoyed C.J. Sansom’s series of historical novels set in Tudor England progressively more and more . . . Sansom has the perfect mixture of novelistic passion and historical detail’

ANTONIA FRASER, *Sunday Telegraph* Books of the Year

‘A devilishly ingenious whodunnit . . . Sansom’s description of the brutality of Tudor life is strong stuff, but he is a master storyteller’

Guardian

‘Sansom’s plot . . . build[s] up to a genuine horror and a devastating revelation based on impressive historical research . . . The series is becoming an annual treat . . . The vigorous, well-drawn characters and their flawed moral intelligence are especially enjoyable, and a reminder of much that is lacking in current literary fiction. As political greed continues to torment the innocent under the guise of religion, this gripping and engaging series seems ominously prescient about the present, as well as genuinely enlightening about the past’

Independent on Sunday

‘A sure-paced, compelling story, blending harsh truths about the Henrician regime with some tender imagined details about the world that it destroyed’

Times Literary Supplement

‘A compelling read, vividly capturing the atmosphere of constant fear, as religious fervour and political ambition are expressed in cruelty and corruption’

Sunday Telegraph

‘A brilliant evocation of tyranny in Tudor England’

Literary Review

‘Both marvellously exciting to read and a totally convincing evocation of England in the reign of Henry VIII’

PHILIP ZIEGLER, *Spectator* Books of the Year

Sovereign

C. J. S_{ANSOM} was educated at Birmingham University, where he took a BA and then a PhD in history. After working in a variety of jobs, he retrained as a solicitor and practised in Sussex, until becoming full-time writer. *Sovereign* is the third novel in his acclaimed Shardlake series and his stand-alone thriller, *Winter in Madrid*, was a top 5 bestseller. He lives in Sussex.

Also by C.J. Sansom

WINTER IN MADRID

The Shardlake series

DISSOLUTION

DARK FIRE

C. J. SANSOM

Sovereign

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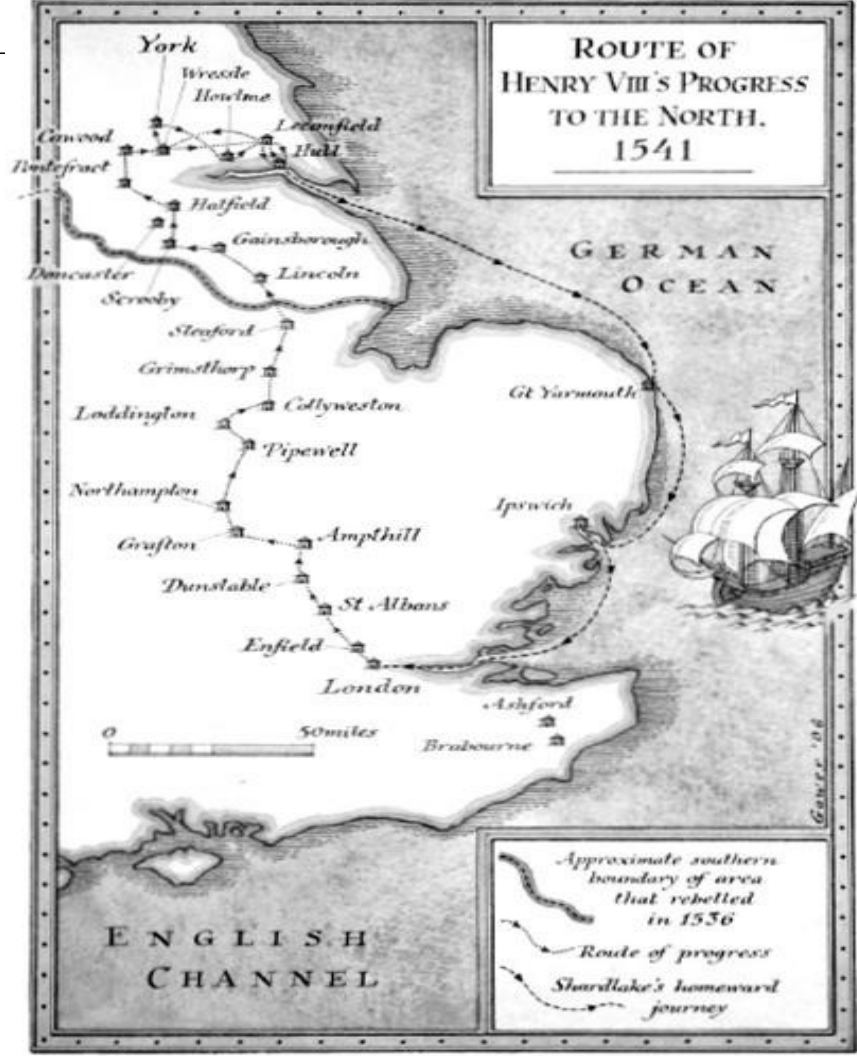
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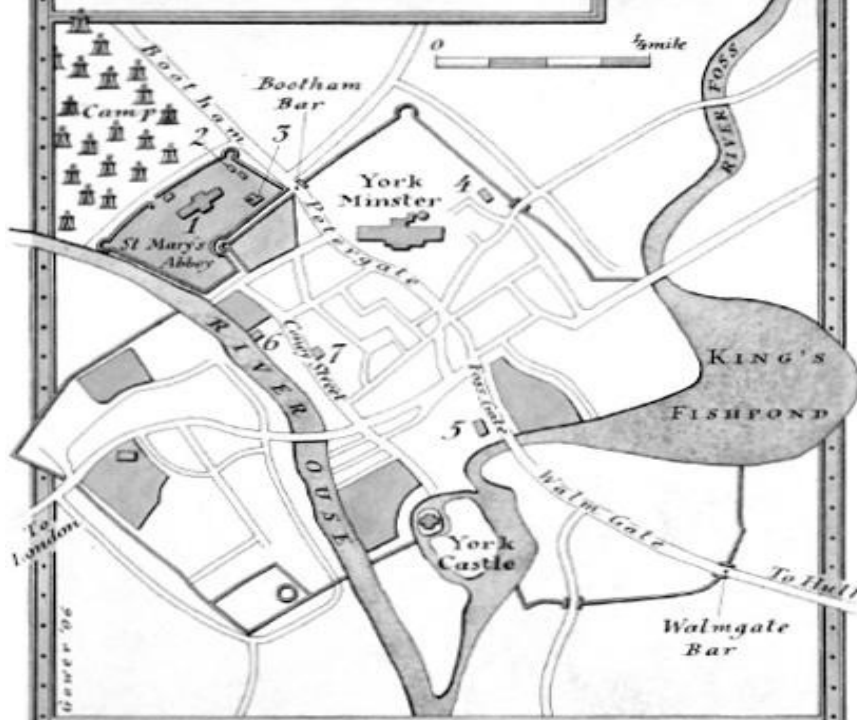
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To P. D. James



YORK 1541



- | | |
|-------------------|-------------------|
| 1 Monastic Church | 6 Common Hall |
| 2 Pavilions | 7 Oldroyd's House |
| 3 King's Manor | |
| 4 Wrenne's House | |
| 5 Merchants' Hall | |
- 
 Dissolved Monastic Houses

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Chapter One

IT WAS DARK UNDER the trees, only a little moonlight penetrating the half-bare branches. The ground was thick with fallen leaves; the horses' hooves made little sound and it was hard to tell whether we were still on the road. A wretched track, Barak had called it earlier, grumbling yet again about the wildness of this barbarian land I had brought him to. I had not replied for I was bone-tired, my poor back sore and my legs in their heavy riding boots as stiff as boards. I was worried, too, for the strange mission that now lay close ahead was weighing on my mind. I lifted a hand from the reins and felt in my coat pocket for the Archbishop's seal, fingering it like a talisman and remembering Cranmer's promise: 'This will be safe enough, there will be no danger.'

I had left much care behind me as well, for six days before I had buried my father in Lichfield. Barak and I had had five days' hard riding northwards since then, the roads in a bad state after that winter of 1541. We rode into wild country where many villages still consisted of the old longhouses, people and cattle crammed together in hovels of thatch and sod. We left the Great North Road this afternoon at Flaxby. Barak wanted to rest the night at an inn, but I insisted we ride on, even if it took all night. I reminded him we were late, tomorrow would be the twelfth of September and we must reach our destination well before the King arrived.

The road, though, had soon turned to mud, and as night fell we had left it for a drier track that veered to the northeast, through thick woodland and bare fields where pigs rooted among the patches of yellow stubble.

The woodland turned to forest and for hours now we had been picking our way through it. We lost the main track once and it was the Devil's own job to find it again in the dark. All was silent save for the whisper of fallen leaves and an occasional clatter of brushwood as a boar or wildcat fled from us. The horses, laden with panniers containing our clothes and other necessities, were as exhausted as Barak and I. I could feel Genesis' tiredness and Sukey, Barak's normally energetic mare, was content to follow his slow pace.

'We're lost,' he grumbled.

'They said at the inn to follow the main path south through the forest. Anyway, it must be daylight soon,' I said. 'Then we'll see where we are.'

Barak grunted wearily. 'Feels like we've ridden to Scotland. I wouldn't be surprised if we get taken for ransom.' I did not reply, tired at his complaining, and we plodded on silently.

My mind went back to my father's funeral the week before. The little group of people round the grave, the coffin lowered into the earth. My cousin Bess, who had found him dead in his bed when she brought him a parcel of food.

'I wish I had known how ill he was,' I told her when we returned to the farm afterwards. 'It should have been me that looked after him.'

She shook her head wearily. 'You were far away in London and we'd not seen you for over a year.' Her eyes had an accusing look.

'I have had difficult times of my own, Bess. But I would have come.'

She sighed. 'It was old William Poer dying last autumn undid him. They'd wrestled to get a profit from the farm these last few years and he seemed to give up.' She paused. 'I said he should contact you, but he wouldn't. God sends us hard trials. The droughts last summer, now the floods this year. I think he was ashamed of the money troubles he'd got into. Then the fever took him.'

I nodded. It had been a shock to learn that the farm where I had grown up, and which now was mine, was deep in debt. My father had been near seventy, his steward William not much younger. Their care of the land had not been all it should and the last few harvests had been poor. To get by he had taken a mortgage on the farm with a rich landowner in Lichfield. The first I knew of it was when the mortgagee wrote to me, immediately after Father's death, to say he doubted the value of the land would clear the debt. Like many gentry in those days he was seeking to increase his acreage for sheep and granting mortgages to elderly farmers at exorbitant interest was one way of doing it.

'That bloodsucker Sir Henry,' I said bitterly to Bess.

'What will you do? Let the estate go insolvent?'

'No,' I said. 'I won't disgrace Father's name. I'll pay it.' I thought, God knows I owe him that.

'That is good.'

I came to with a start at the sound of a protesting whicker behind me. Barak had pulled on Sukey's reins, bringing her to a stop. I halted too and turned uncomfortably in the saddle. His outline and the tops of the trees were sharper now, it was beginning to get light. He pointed in front of him. 'Look there!'

Ahead the trees were thinning. In the distance I saw a red point of light, low in the sky.

'There!' I said triumphantly. 'The lamp we were told to look out for, that's set atop a church steeple to guide travellers. This is the Galtres Forest, like I said!'

We rode out of the trees. A cold wind blew up from the river as the sky lightened. We wrapped our coats tighter round us and rode down, towards York.

THE MAIN ROAD into the city was already filled with packhorses and carts loaded with food of every kind. There were enormous foresters' carts too, whole tree-trunks dangling dangerously over their tails. Ahead the high city walls came into view, black with the smoke of hundreds of years, and beyond were the steeples of innumerable churches, all dominated by the soaring twin towers of York Minster. 'It's busy as Cheapside on a market-day,' I observed.

'All for the King's great retinue.'

We rode slowly on, the throng so dense we scarce managed a walking pace. I cast sidelong glances at my companion. It was over a year now since I had taken Jack Barak on as assistant in my barrister's practice after his old master's execution. A former child of the London streets who had ended up working on dubious missions for Thomas Cromwell, he was an unlikely choice, even though he was clever and had the good fortune to be literate. Yet I had not regretted it. He had adjusted well to working for me, doggedly learning the law. No one was better at keeping witnesses to the point while preparing affidavits, or ferreting out obscure facts, and his cynical, slantwise view of the system was a useful corrective to my own enthusiasm.

These last few months, however, Barak had often seemed downcast, and sometimes would forgo his place and become as oafish and mocking as when I had first met him. I feared he might be getting bored, and thought bringing him to York might rouse him out of himself. He was, though, full of a Londoner's prejudices against the north and northerners, and had complained and griped almost the whole way. Now he was looking dubiously around him, suspicious of everything.

Houses appeared straggling along the road and then, to our right, a high old crenellated wall over which an enormous steeple was visible. Soldiers patrolled the top of the wall, wearing iron helmets and the white tunics with a red cross of royal longbowmen. Instead of bows and arrows, though, they carried swords and fearsome pikes, and some even bore long matchlock guns. A great sound of banging and hammering came from within.

‘That must be the old St Mary’s Abbey, where we’ll be staying,’ I said. ‘Sounds like there’s a lot of work going on to make it ready for the King.’

‘Shall we go there now, leave our bags?’

‘No, we should see Brother Wrenne first, then go to the castle.’

‘To see the prisoner?’ he asked quietly.

‘Ay.’

Barak looked up at the walls. ‘St Mary’s is guarded well.’

‘The King will be none too sure of his welcome, after all that’s happened up here.’

I had spoken softly, but the man in front of us, walking beside a packhorse laden with grain, turned and gave us a sharp look. Barak raised his eyebrows and he looked away. I wondered if he was one of the Council of the North’s informers; they would be working overtime in York now.

‘Perhaps you should put on your lawyer’s robe,’ Barak suggested, nodding ahead. The carts and packmen were turning into the abbey through a large gate in the wall. Just past the gate the abbey wall met the city wall at right angles, hard by a fortress-like gatehouse decorated with the York coat of arms, five white lions against a red background. More guards were posted there, holding pikes and wearing steel helmets and breastplates. Beyond the wall, the Minster towers were huge now against the grey sky.

‘I’m not fetching it out of my pack, I’m too tired.’ I patted my coat pocket. ‘I’ve got the Chamberlain’s authority here.’ Archbishop Cranmer’s seal was there too; but that was only to be shown to one person. I stared ahead, at something I had been told to expect yet which still made me shudder: four heads fixed to tall poles, boiled and black and half eaten by crows. I knew that twelve of the rebel conspirators arrested that spring had been executed in York, their heads and quarters set on all the city gates as a warning to others.

We halted at the end of a little queue, the horses’ heads drooping with tiredness. The guards had stopped a poorly dressed man and were questioning him roughly about his business in the city.

‘I wish he’d hurry up,’ Barak whispered. ‘I’m starving.’

‘I know. Come on, it’s us next.’

One of the guards grabbed Genesis’ reins while another asked my business. He had a southern accent and a hard, lined face. I showed him my letter of authority. ‘King’s lawyer?’ he asked.

‘Ay. And my assistant. Here to help with the pleas before His Majesty.’

‘It’s a firm hand they need up here,’ he said. He rolled the paper up and waved us on. As we rode under the barbican I recoiled from the sight of a great hank of flesh nailed to the gate, buzzing with flies.

‘Rebel’s meat,’ Barak said with a grimace.

‘Ay.’ I shook my head at the tangles of fate. But for the conspiracy that spring I should not be here and nor would the King be making his Progress to the North, the largest and most splendid ever seen in England. We rode under the gate, the horses’ hooves making a sudden clatter inside the enclosure, the barbican, and through into the city.

BEYOND THE GATE was a narrow street of three-storey houses with overhanging eaves, full of shops with stalls set out in front, the traders sitting on their wooden blocks calling their wares. York struck me as

poor place. Some of the houses were in serious disrepair, black timbers showing through where plaster had fallen off, and the street was little more than a muddy lane. The jostling crowds made riding difficult, but I knew Master Wrenne, like all the city's senior lawyers, lived in the Minster Close and it was easy to find, for the Minster dominated the whole city.

'I'm hungry,' Barak observed. 'Let's get some breakfast.'

Another high wall appeared ahead of us; York seemed a city of walls. Behind it the Minster loomed. Ahead was a large open space crowded with market stalls under brightly striped awnings that flapped in the cool damp breeze. Heavy-skirted goodwives argued with stallholders while artisans in the bright livery of their guilds looked down their noses at the stalls' contents, and dogs and ragged children dived for scraps. I saw most of the people had patched clothes and worn-looking clogs. Watchmen in livery bearing the city arms stood about, observing the crowds.

A group of tall, yellow-haired men with dogs led a flock of odd-looking sheep with black faces round the edge of the market. I looked curiously at their weather-beaten faces and heavy woollen coats; these must be the legendary Dalesmen who had formed the backbone of the rebellion five years before. In contrast, black-robed clerics and chantry priests in their brown hoods were passing in and out of a gate in the wall that led into the Minster precinct.

Barak had ridden to a pie-stall a few paces off. He leaned from his horse and asked how much for two mutton pies. The stallholder stared at him, not understanding his London accent.

'Southrons?' he grunted.

'Ay. We're hungry. How much – for – two – mutton pies?' Barak spoke loudly and slowly, as though to an idiot.

The stallholder glared at him. 'Is't my blame tha gabblest like a duck?' he asked.

' 'Tis you that grates your words like a knife scrating a pan.'

Two big Dalesmen passing along the stalls paused and looked round. 'This southron dog giving thee trouble?' one asked the trader. The other reached out a big horny hand to Sukey's reins.

'Let go, churl,' Barak said threateningly.

I was surprised by the anger that came into the man's face. 'Cocky southron knave. Tha thinkest since fat Harry is coming tha can insult us as tha likest.'

'Kiss my arse,' Barak said, looking at the man steadily.

The Dalesman reached a hand to his sword; Barak's hand darted to his own scabbard. I forced a way through the crowd.

'Excuse us, sir,' I said soothingly, though my heart beat fast. 'My man meant no harm. We've had a hard ride —'

The man gave me a look of disgust. 'A crookback lord, eh? Come here on tha fine hoss to cozen us out of what little money we have left up here?' He began to draw his sword, then stopped as a pike was jabbed into his chest. Two of the city guards, scenting trouble, had hurried over.

'Swords away!' one snapped, his pike held over the Dalesman's heart, while the other did the same to Barak. A crowd began to gather.

'What's this hubbleshoo?' the guard snapped.

'That southron insulted the stallholder,' someone called.

The guard nodded. He was stocky, middle-aged, with sharp eyes. 'They've no manners, th' southrons,' he said loudly. 'Got to expect that, maister.' There was a laugh from the crowd; a bystander clapped.

'We only want a couple of bleeding pies,' Barak said.

The guard nodded at the stallholder. 'Gi'e him two pies.'

The man handed two mutton pies up to Barak. 'A tanner,' he said.

'A what?'

The stallholder raised his eyes to heaven. 'Sixpence.'

'For two pies?' Barak asked incredulously.

'Pay him,' the guard snapped. Barak hesitated and I hastily passed over the coins. The stallholder bit them ostentatiously before slipping them in his purse. The guard leaned close to me. 'Now, shift. And tell thy man to watch his manners. Tha doesn't want trouble for't King's visit, hey?' He raised his eyebrows, and watched as Barak and I rode back to the gates to the precinct. We dismounted stiffly at a bench set against the wall, tied up the horses and sat down.

'God's nails, my legs are sore,' Barak said.

'Mine too.' They felt as though they did not belong to me, and my back ached horribly.

Barak bit into the pie. 'This is good,' he said in tones of surprise.

I lowered my voice. 'You must watch what you say. You know they don't like us up here.'

'The feeling's mutual. Arseholes.' He glared threateningly in the direction of the stallholder.

'Listen,' I said quietly. 'They're trying to keep everything calm. If you treat people like you do those folk you don't just risk a sword in the guts for both of us, but trouble for the Progress. Is that what you want?'

He did not reply, frowning at his feet.

'What's the matter with you these days?' I asked. 'You've been Tom Touchy for weeks. You used to be able to keep that sharp tongue of yours in check. You got me in trouble last month, calling Judge Jackson a blear-eyed old caterpillar within his hearing.'

He gave me one of his sudden wicked grins. 'You know he is.'

I was not to be laughed off. 'What's amiss, Jack?'

He shrugged. 'Nothing. I just don't like being up here among these barbarian wantwits.' He looked at me directly. 'I'm sorry I made trouble. I'll take care.'

Apologies did not come easily to Barak, and I nodded in acknowledgement. But there was more to his mood than dislike of the north, I was sure. I turned thoughtfully to my pie. Barak looked over the marketplace with his sharp dark eyes. 'They're a poor-looking lot,' he observed.

'Trade's been bad here for years. And the dissolution of the monasteries has made things worse. There was a lot of monkish property here. Three or four years ago there would have been many monks' and friars' robes among that crowd.'

'Well, that's all done with.' Barak finished his pie, rubbing a hand across his mouth.

I rose stiffly. 'Let's find Wrenne. Get our instructions.'

'D'you think we'll get to see the King when he comes?' Barak asked. 'Close to?'

'It's possible.'

He blew out his cheeks. I was glad to see I was not the only one intimidated by that prospect. 'And there is an old enemy in his train,' I added, 'that we'd better avoid.'

He turned sharply. 'Who?'

'Sir Richard Rich. He'll be arriving with the King and the Privy Council. Cranmer told me. So like I said, take care. Don't draw attention to us. We should try to escape notice, so far as we can.'

We untied the horses and led them to the gate, where another guard with a pike barred our way. He produced my letter again, and he raised the weapon to let us pass through. The great Minster reared up before us.

Chapter Two

‘I’^T’S BIG ENOUGH,’ Barak said.

We were in a wide paved enclosure with buildings round the edges, all overshadowed by the Minster. ‘The greatest building in the north. It must be near as big as St Paul’s.’ I looked at the giant entrance doors under the intricately decorated arch, where men of business stood talking. Below them on the stairs, a crowd of beggars sat with their alms bowls. I was tempted to look inside but turned away, for we should have been at Wrenne’s house yesterday. I remembered the directions I had been given, and noted a building with the royal arms above the door. ‘It’s just past there,’ I said. We led the horses across the courtyard, careful not to slip on the leaves that had fallen from the trees planted round the close.

‘D’you know what manner of man this Wrenne is?’ Barak asked.

‘Only that he’s a well-known barrister in York and has done much official work. He’s well stricken in years, I believe.’

‘Let’s hope he’s not some old nid-nod that’s beyond the work.’

‘He must be competent to be organizing the pleas to the King. Trusted, too.’

We walked the horses into a street of old houses packed closely together. I had been told to seek the corner house on the right, and this proved to be a tall building, very ancient-looking. I knocked. Shuffling footsteps sounded within and the door was opened by an aged dame with a round wrinkled face framed by a white coif. She looked at me sourly.

‘Ay?’

‘Master Wrenne’s house?’

‘Ar’t gentlemen from London?’

I raised my eyebrows a little at her lack of deference. ‘Yes. I am Matthew Shardlake. This is my assistant, Master Barak.’

‘We expected thee yesterday. Poor maister’s been fretting.’

‘We got lost in Galtres Forest.’

‘Tha’s not t’first to do that.’

I nodded at the horses. ‘We and our mounts are tired.’

‘Bone-weary,’ Barak added pointedly.

‘Tha’d best come in then. I’ll get the boy to stable thy horses and wash them down.’

‘I should be grateful.’

‘Maister Wrenne’s out on business, but he’ll be back soon. I suppose tha’d like some food.’

‘Thank you.’ The pie had merely taken the edge from my hunger.

The old woman turned and, shuffling slowly, led us into a high central hall built in the old style with a hearth in the centre of the floor. A fire of coppice-wood was lit and smoke ascended lazily to

the chimney-hole high in the black rafters. Good silver plate was displayed on the buffet, but the curtain behind the table that stood on a dais at the head of the room looked dusty. A peregrine falcon with magnificent grey plumage stood on a perch near the fire. It turned huge predatory eyes on us and stared at the piles of books that lay everywhere, on chairs, on the oak chest and set against the wall in stacks that looked ready to topple over. I had never seen so many books in one place outside a library.

‘Your master is fond of books,’ I observed.

‘That he is,’ the old woman answered. ‘I’ll get tha some pottage.’ She shuffled away.

‘Some beer would be welcome as well,’ I called after her. Barak plumped down on a settle covered with a thick sheepskin rug and cushions. I picked up a large old volume bound in calfskin. I opened it and then raised my eyebrows. ‘God’s nails. This is one of the old hand-illustrated books the monks made. I flicked through the pages. It was a copy of Bede’s *History*, with beautiful calligraphy and illustrations.

‘I thought they’d all gone to the fire,’ Barak observed. ‘He should be careful.’

‘Yes, he should. Not a reformer, then.’ I replaced the book, coughing as a little cloud of dust rose up. ‘Jesu, that housekeeper skimps her labours.’

‘Looks like she’s past it to me. But maybe she’s more than a housekeeper, if he’s old too. Don’t think much of his taste if she is.’ Barak settled himself on the cushions and closed his eyes. I sat down in an armchair and tried to arrange my stiff legs comfortably. I felt my own eyes closing, coming with a start as the old woman reappeared, bearing two bowls of steaming pease pottage and two flagons of beer on a tray. We set to eagerly. The pottage was tasteless and unspiced, but filling. Afterwards Barak closed his eyes again. I thought of nudging him awake, for it was ill-mannered to go to sleep in our host’s hall, but I knew how tired he was. It was peaceful there, the noise from the cloister muffled by the windows of mullioned glass, the fire crackling gently. I closed my eyes too. My hand brushed the pocket where Archbishop Cranmer’s seal lay, and I found myself thinking back a couple of weeks, to when the trail of events that had led me here began.

THE LAST YEAR HAD BEEN a difficult time for me. Since Thomas Cromwell’s fall, those associated with him could be dangerous to know, and a number of clients had withdrawn their work. And I had gone against convention by representing the London Guildhall in a case against a fellow barrister of Lincoln’s Inn. Stephen Bealknap may have been one of the greatest rogues God ever set on earth, but I had still offended against professional solidarity in acting against him, and some fellow barristers who might once have put cases my way now avoided me. Things were not made easier by the fact that Bealknap had one of the most powerful patrons in the land behind him: Sir Richard Rich, Chancellor of the Court of Augmentations. Then, at the beginning of September, had come the news of my father’s death. I was still in a state of shock and grief when, going into chambers one morning a few days later, I found Barak waiting for me, a worried expression on his face.

‘Sir, I must speak with you.’ He glanced at my clerk Skelly, who sat copying, his glasses glinting in the light from the window, then jerked his head towards my office. I nodded.

‘A messenger came while you were out,’ he said when the door was closed behind us. ‘From Lambeth Palace. Archbishop Cranmer himself wants to see you there at eight tonight.’

I sat down heavily. ‘I thought I was done with visits to great men.’ I looked at Barak sharply, for our assignment for Cromwell the year before had made us some powerful enemies. ‘Could it mean danger for us? Have you heard any gossip?’ I knew he still had contacts in the underside of the King’s court.

He shook his head. ‘Nothing since I was told we were safe.’

I sighed deeply. 'Well then, I shall have to see.'

~~That day it was hard to keep my mind on my work. I left early, to go home for dinner. As I walked towards the gate I saw, coming in, a tall, thin figure in a fine silk robe, blond curls peeping out from under his cap. Stephen Bealknap. The most crooked and covetous lawyer I ever met. He bowed to me~~

'Brother Bealknap,' I said politely, as the conventions of the inn demanded.

'Brother Shardlake. I hear there is no date for the hearing of our case in Chancery. They are slow.' He shook his head, though I knew he welcomed the delay. The case involved a little dissolved friary he had bought near the Cripplegate. He had converted it into tumbledown tenements without proper sewage arrangements, causing great nuisance to his neighbours. The case turned on whether I was entitled to rely on the monastery's exemption from City Council regulations. He was backed by Richard Rich, as Chancellor of the Court of Augmentations that handled the property of the dissolved monasteries, because if he lost the case, the sale value of those properties would fall.

'The Six Clerks' Office seems unable to explain the delays,' I told Bealknap. I had sent Barak, who could be intimidating when he chose, to harangue them several times, but without result. 'Perhaps your friend Richard Rich may know.' I immediately wished I had not said that, for I was effectively accusing the Chancellor of Augmentations of corruption. The slip showed the strain I was under.

Bealknap shook his head. 'You are a naughty fellow, Brother Shardlake, to allege such things. What would the Inn Treasurer say?'

I bit my lip. 'I am sorry. I withdraw.'

Bealknap grinned broadly, showing nasty yellow teeth. 'I forgive you, brother. When one has poor prospects in a case, sometimes the worry of it makes you forget what you say.' He bowed and walked on. I looked after him, wishing I could have planted a foot in his bony arse.

AFTER DINNER I DONNED my lawyer's robe and took a wherry across the river and down to Lambeth Palace. London was quiet, as it had been all summer, for the King and his court were in the north of England. In the spring news had come of a fresh rebellion nipped in the bud in Yorkshire, and the King had decided to take a great progress up to awe the northmen. They said he and his councillors had been sore alarmed. As well they might be; five years before the whole north of England had risen in rebellion against the religious changes and the Pilgrimage of Grace, as the rebel army had called itself, had raised thirty thousand men. The King had gulled them into disbanding with false promises, then raised an army to strike them down. But all feared the north might rise again.

Throughout June the King's purveyors had roamed all London, clearing shops and warehouses of food and other supplies, for they said three thousand people would be going north. It was hard to comprehend such numbers, the population of a small town. When they left at the end of June it was said the carts stretched along the road for over a mile, and London had been strangely quiet all through that wet summer.

The boatman pulled past the Lollards' Tower at the north end of Lambeth Palace and in the failing daylight I saw a light shining from the window of the prison atop the tower, where heretics in the Archbishop's custody were held. Cranmer's eye on London, some called it. We pulled up at the Great Stairs. A guard admitted me and led me across the courtyard to the Great Hall, where he left me alone.

I stood staring up at the magnificent hammerbeam roof. A black-robed clerk approached, soot-footed. 'The Archbishop will see you now,' he said quietly. He led me into a warren of dim corridors, his footsteps pattering lightly on the rush matting.

I was taken to a small, low-ceilinged study. Thomas Cranmer sat behind a desk, reading papers by the light of a sconce of candles set beside him. A fire burned energetically in the grate. I bowed deeply before the great Archbishop who had renounced the Pope's authority, married the King to Anne

Boleyn, and been Thomas Cromwell's friend and confederate in every reforming scheme. When Cromwell fell many had expected Cranmer to go to the block too, but he had survived, despite the hard work to reform. Henry had placed him in charge in London while he was away. It was said the King trusted him as no other.

In a deep, quiet voice he bade me sit. I had only seen him at a distance before, preaching. He wore a white clerical robe with a fur stole but had cast off his cap, revealing a shock of greying black hair. I noticed the pallor of his broad, oval face, the lines around the full mouth, but above all his eyes. They were large, dark blue. As he studied me I read anxiety there, and conflict and passion.

'So you are Matthew Shardlake,' he said. He smiled pleasantly, seeking to put me at ease.

'My lord Archbishop.'

I took a hard chair facing him. A large pectoral cross, solid silver, glinted on his chest.

'How goes trade at Lincoln's Inn?' he asked.

I hesitated. 'It has been better.'

'Times are hard for those who worked for Earl Cromwell.'

'Yes, my lord,' I said cautiously.

'I wish they would take his head from London Bridge. I see it each time I cross. What the gulls have left.'

'It is a sad thing to see.'

'I visited him, you know, in the Tower. I confessed him. He told me of that last matter he engaged you in.'

My eyes widened and I felt a chill despite the heat from the fire. So Cranmer knew about that.

'I told the King about the Dark Fire quest. Some months ago.' I caught my breath, but Cranmer smiled and raised a be-ringed hand. 'I waited until his anger against Lord Cromwell over the Cleveley marriage faded, and he'd begun to miss his counsel. Those responsible for what happened walk on eggshells now; though they denied they were behind it, they dissembled and lied.'

A chilling thought came to me. 'My lord – does the King know of my involvement?'

He shook his head reassuringly. 'Lord Cromwell asked me not to tell the King; he knew you had served him as well as you could, and that you preferred to stay a private man.'

So he had thought of me kindly at the end, that harsh great man facing a savage death. I felt sudden tears prick at the corners of my eyes.

'He had many fine qualities, Master Shardlake, for all his hard measures. I told the King only that servants of Lord Cromwell's had been involved. His Majesty left matters there, though he was angry with those who had deceived him. He told the Duke of Norfolk not long ago he wished he had Lord Cromwell back, said he'd been tricked into executing the greatest servant he ever had. As he was Cranmer looked at me seriously. 'Lord Cromwell said you were a man of rare discretion, good at keeping even the greatest matters secret.'

'That is part of my trade.'

He smiled. 'In that hotbed of gossip, the Inns of Court? No, the Earl said your discretion was of rare quality.'

Then I realized with a jolt that Cromwell, in the Tower, had been telling Cranmer about people who might be of use to him.

'I was sorry to hear your father died,' the Archbishop said.

My eyes widened. How had he known that? He caught my look and smiled sadly. 'I asked the King's Treasurer if you were in London, and he told me. I wished to speak to you, you see. May God rest your father's soul.'

'Amen, my lord.'

'He lived in Lichfield, I believe?'

‘Yes. I must leave for there in two days, for the funeral.’

‘The King is well north of there now. At Hatfield. The Great Progress has had a hard time of it, with all the rains in July. The post-riders were delayed; often ascertaining the King’s wishes was not easy. He shook his head, a strained expression crossing his features. They said Cranmer was no skilful politician.’

‘It has been a poor summer,’ I observed. ‘As wet as last year’s was dry.’

‘Thank God it has lately improved. It made the Queen ill.’

‘People say she is pregnant,’ I ventured.

The Archbishop frowned. ‘Rumours,’ he said. He paused a moment as though gathering his thoughts, then continued. ‘As you may know, there are several lawyers with the royal train. This is the greatest Progress ever seen in England, and lawyers are needed so that disputes that arise within the royal court, and with suppliers along the way, may be resolved.’ He took a deep breath. ‘Also, the King has promised the northmen his justice. At every town he invites petitioners with complaints against the local officialdom, and lawyers are needed to sort through them, weed out the petty and the foolish, arbitrate where they can and send the rest to the Council of the North. One of the King’s lawyers has died, poor fellow, he took pneumonia. The Chamberlain’s office sent a message asking the Council to send a replacement to meet the Progress at York, for there will be much business there. I remembered you.’

‘Oh.’ This was not what I had expected; this was a favour.

‘And if you are going halfway there already, so much the better. You’d return with the Progress next month, and bring back fifty pounds for your work. You’d only be allowed one servant; best to take your assistant rather than a bodyservant.’

That was generous, even for the high rewards royal service brought. Yet I hesitated, for I had not wished to go anywhere near the King’s court again. I took a deep breath.

‘My lord, I hear Sir Richard Rich is with the Progress.’

‘Ah, yes. You made an enemy of Rich over the Dark Fire matter.’

‘And I am still involved in a case in which he has an interest. Rich would do me any ill turn he could.’

The Archbishop shook his head. ‘You need have no dealings with Rich or any royal councillor. He is there in his role as Chancellor of the Court of Augmentations, to advise the King on the disposition of lands seized in Yorkshire from the rebels. Neither the councillors nor the King have any real involvement with the petitions – the lawyers deal with everything.’

I hesitated. This would solve my financial worries, ensure I could discharge my responsibility to my father. Moreover, something stirred in me at the prospect of seeing this great spectacle; it would be the journey of a lifetime. And it might distract me from my sorrow.

The Archbishop inclined his head. ‘Be quick, Master Shardlake. I have little time.’

‘I will go, my lord,’ I said. ‘Thank you.’

The Archbishop nodded. ‘Good.’ Then he leaned forward, the heavy sleeves of his tunic rustling as they brushed the papers on his desk. ‘I also have a small private mission,’ he said. ‘Something I would like you to do for me in York.’

I caught my breath. I had let him spring a trap. He was a good politician after all.

The Archbishop saw my expression and shook his head. ‘Do not worry, sir. There is no scurrying after danger in this, and the mission itself is a virtuous one. It requires only a certain authority and discretion, in manner, and above all –’ he looked at me sharply – ‘discretion.’

I set my lips. Cranmer made a steeple of his fingers and looked at me.

‘You know the purpose of the Great Progress to the North?’ he asked.

‘To show the King’s power in those rebellious parts, establish his authority.’

‘They say the north is the last place God made,’ Cranmer said with sudden anger. ‘They are barbarous people there, still mired in papist heresy.’

I nodded but said nothing, waiting for him to show his hand.

‘Lord Cromwell established forceful government in the north after the rebellion five years ago. The new Council of the North employs many spies, and it is as well they do, for the new conspiracy they discovered last spring was serious.’ He stared at me with those passionate eyes. ‘Last time they called only for the King to rid himself of reformist advisers.’

Like you, I thought; they would have had Cranmer in the fire.

‘This time they called him tyrant, they wanted to overthrow him. And they planned an alliance with the Scotch, though the northmen have always hated them as even worse barbarians than themselves. But the Scotch, like them, are papists. Had their plan not been exposed, Jesu knows what might have followed.’

I took a deep breath. He was telling me secrets I did not wish to hear. Secrets that would bind me to him.

‘Not all the conspirators were caught. Many escaped to the wild mountains up there. There is still much we have to learn about their plans. There is a certain conspirator of York, recently taken prisoner there, who is to be brought back to London by boat. Sir Edward Broderick.’ Cranmer set his lips tight, and for a moment I saw fear in his face.

‘There is an aspect of the conspirators’ plans that is not generally known. Only a few of the conspirators knew, and we believe Broderick was one. It is better you do not know about it. No one does except the King, and a few trusted councillors in London and York. Broderick will not talk. The King sent questioners to York but they got nowhere, he is obstinate as Satan. He is to be brought from York to Hull in a sealed wagon when the Progress moves on there, then sent back to London by boat, guarded by the most loyal and trusted men. The King wants to be in London when he is questioned, and it is safe to question him only in the Tower, where we can trust the interrogators and be sure the skill will extract the truth from him.’

I knew what that meant. Torture. I took a deep breath. ‘How does this involve me, my lord?’

His reply surprised me. ‘I want you to ensure he is alive and in good health when he arrives.’

‘But – will he not be in the King’s care?’

‘The Duke of Suffolk is in charge of arrangements for the Progress, and he chose Broderick as gaoler. A man who can be trusted, although even he has not been told what we suspect of Broderick. He is in charge of Broderick in the prison at York Castle. His name is Fulke Radwinter.’

‘I do not know that name, my lord.’

‘The appointment was made hurriedly, and I have been – concerned.’ The Archbishop pursed his lips, fiddling with a brass seal on his desk. ‘Radwinter has experience of guarding and of – questioning – heretics. He is a man of true and honest faith, and can be trusted to keep Broderick under close guard.’ He took a deep breath. ‘Yet Radwinter can be too severe. A prisoner once – died.’ He frowned. ‘I want someone else present, to keep an eye on Broderick’s welfare till he can be brought to the Tower.’

‘I see.’

‘I have already written to the Duke of Suffolk, obtained his agreement. He understands my point, I think.’ He picked up the seal and laid it flat on the desk before me. A big oval lozenge, Cranmer’s name and office traced in Latin round the edge, a portrayal of the scourging of Christ in the centre. ‘I want you to take this, as your authority. You will have overall charge of Broderick’s welfare, in York and then on to London. You will not talk to him beyond asking after his welfare, ensuring he comes to no harm. Radwinter knows I am sending someone, he will respect my authority.’ The Archbishop smiled again, that sad smile of his. ‘He is my own employee; he guards the prisoners under my

jurisdiction, in the Lollards' Tower.'

'I understand,' I said neutrally.

'If the prisoner be bound uncomfortably, make the fetters looser though no less certain. If he hungry, give him food. If he is ill, ensure he has medical care.' Cranmer smiled. 'There, that is charitable commission, is it not?'

I took a deep breath. 'My lord,' I said. 'I undertook to go to York only on a matter of pleas before the King. My past service on matters of state has cost me much in peace of mind. Now I wish remain, as Lord Cromwell said, a private man. I have seen men die most horribly—'

'Then ensure for me that a man lives,' Cranmer said quietly, 'and in decent conditions. That is all I want, and I think you are the man for it. I was a private man once, Master Shardlake, a Cambridge don. Until the King plucked me out to advise on the Great Divorce. Sometimes God calls us to hard duty. Then —' his look was hard again — 'then we must find the stomach for it.'

I looked at him. If I refused I would no doubt lose my place on the Progress, and might be unable to redeem the mortgage on the farm. And I had made enemies at court, I dared not alienate the Archbishop too. I was trapped. I took a deep breath.

'Very well, my lord.'

He smiled. 'I will have your commission sent to your house tomorrow. To act as counsel on the Progress.' He picked up the seal and set it in my hand. It was heavy. 'And that is my authority to show Radwinter. No papers.'

'May I tell my assistant? Barak?'

Cranmer nodded. 'Yes. I know Lord Cromwell trusted him. Though he said neither of you had real zeal for reform.' He gave me a sudden questioning look. 'Though you did, once.'

'I served my apprenticeship.'

The Archbishop nodded. 'I know. You are one of those who worked in the early days to bring England to religious truth.' He gave me a keen look. 'The truth that the right head of the Church in England is not the Bishop of Rome, but the King, set by God above his people as Supreme Head, to guide them. When the King's conscience is moved it is God who speaks through him.'

'Yes, my lord,' I said, though I had never believed that.

'These conspirators are dangerous and wicked men. Harsh measures have been needed. I do not like them, but they have been forced upon us. To protect what we have achieved. Though there is much more to be done if we are to build the Christian commonwealth in England.'

'There is indeed, my lord.'

He smiled, taking my words for agreement. 'Then go, Master Shardlake, and may God guide your enterprise.' He rose in dismissal. I bowed my way out of the chamber. As I walked away, I thought this is no charitable mission. I am keeping a man safe for the torturers in the Tower. And what had that Broderick done, to bring that look of fear to Cranmer's eyes?

MY MUSINGS WERE interrupted by voices outside the room. I nudged Barak awake with my foot, and we stood up hurriedly, wincing, for our legs were still stiff. The door opened and a man in a rather threadbare lawyer's robe came in. Master Wrenne was a square-built man, very tall, overtopping Barak by a head. I was relieved to see that although he was indeed elderly, his square face deeply lined, he walked steady and straight and the blue eyes under the faded reddish-gold hair were keen. He gripped my hand.

'Master Shardlake,' he said in a clear voice with a strong touch of the local accent. 'Or Brother Shardlake I should say, my brother in the law. Giles Wrenne. It is good to see you. Why, we feared you had met with an accident on the road.'

I noticed that as he studied me his eyes did not linger over my bent back, as most people's do. man of sensitivity. 'I fear I got us lost. May I introduce my assistant, Jack Barak.'

Barak bowed, then shook Wrenne's extended hand.

'By Jesu,' the old man said. 'That's a champion grip for a law-clerk.' He clapped him on the shoulder. 'Good to see, our young men take too little exercise now. So many clerks these days have a pasty look.' Wrenne looked at the empty plates. 'I see my good Madge has fed you. Excellent.' He moved over to the fire. The falcon turned to him, a little bell tied to its foot jingling, and let him stroke its neck. 'There, my old Octavia, hast tha kept warm?' He turned to us with a smile. 'This bird and I have hunted around York through many a winter, but we are both too old now. Please, be seated again. I am sorry I cannot accommodate you while you are in the city.' He eased himself into a chair and looked ruefully at the dusty furniture and books. 'I fear since my poor wife died three years ago I have not kept up her standards of housekeeping. A man alone. I only keep Madge and a boy, and Madge is getting old, she could not cater for three. But she was my wife's maid.'

So much for Barak's theory about Madge, I thought. 'We have accommodation at St Mary's, but thank you.'

'Yes.' Wrenne smiled and rubbed his hands together. 'And there will be much of interest to see there, the Progress in all its glory when it arrives. You will want to rest now. I suggest you both come here at ten tomorrow morning, and we can spend the day working through the petitions.'

'Very well. There seems to be much work going on at St Mary's,' I added.

The old man nodded. 'They say any number of wondrous buildings are being erected. And the Lucas Hourenbout is there, supervising it all.'

'Hourenbout? The King's Dutch artist?'

Wrenne nodded, smiling. 'They say the greatest designer in the land, after Holbein.'

'So he is. I did not know he was here.'

'It seems the place is being prepared for some great ceremony. I have not seen it, only those who do business are allowed into St Mary's. Some say the Queen is pregnant, and is to be crowned here. But no one knows.' He paused. 'Have you heard anything?'

'Only the same gossip.' I remembered Cranmer's annoyance when I had mentioned that rumour.

'Ah well. We Yorkers will be told when it is good for us to know.'

I looked at Wrenne sharply, detecting a note of bitterness under the bluntness. 'Perhaps Queen Catherine will be crowned,' I said. 'After all, she's lasted over a year now.' I made the remark deliberately; I wanted to establish that I was not one of those stiff-necked people in the royal employ who would talk of the King only with formal reverence.

Wrenne smiled and nodded, getting the point. 'Well, we shall have much work to do on the petitions. I am glad of your assistance. We have to weed out the silly fratches, like the man disputing with the Council of the North over an inch of land, whose papers I read yesterday.' He laughed. 'But you will be familiar with such nonsense, brother.'

'Indeed I am. Property law is my specialism.'

'Ah! You will regret telling me that, sir.' He winked at Barak. 'For now I shall pass all the property cases to you. I shall keep the debts and the feuds with the lesser officials.'

'Are they all such matters?' I asked.

'For the most part.' He raised his eyebrows. 'I have been told the point is that the King must be seen to care for his northern subjects. The small matters will be arbitrated by us under the King's authority, the larger remitted to the King's Council.'

'How shall our arbitration be conducted?'

'At informal hearings under delegated powers. I will be in charge, with you and a representative of the Council of the North sitting with me. Have you done arbitration work before?'

‘Yes, I have. So the King will have no personal involvement with the small matters?’

‘None.’ He paused. ‘But we may meet him nonetheless.’

Barak and I both sat up. ‘How, sir?’

Wrenne inclined his head. ‘All the way from Lincoln, at the towns and other places along the road the King has received the local gentry and city councillors in supplication, those who were with the rebels five years ago on their knees, begging his pardon. He seeks to bind them anew with oaths of loyalty. Interestingly, the orders have been that not too many supplicants were to gather together at once. They are still afraid, you see. There are a thousand soldiers with the Progress, and the royal artillery has been sent by boat to Hull.’

‘But there has been no trouble?’

Wrenne shook his head. ‘None. But the emphasis is on the most abject forms of surrender. The supplication here at York is to be the greatest spectacle of all. The city councillors are to meet the King and Queen outside the city on Friday, dressed in humble robes, and make submission and an apology for allowing the rebels to take over York as their capital in 1536. The citizenry will not be there, because it would be bad for the common folk to see their city’s leaders thus humbled –’ Wrenne raised his heavy eyebrows – ‘and in case they might be angered against the King. The councillors are to hand presents to Their Majesties, great goblets filled with coin. There has been a collection among the citizenry.’ He smiled sardonically. ‘With some cajoling.’ He took a deep breath. ‘And they are talking of us going too, the King’s lawyers, to present him formally with the petitions.’

‘So we’ll be thrust into the heart of it.’ Despite Cranmer’s promise, I thought.

‘We could be. Tankerd, the city Recorder, is in a great lather about the speech he must make. The city officials are sending constantly to the Duke of Suffolk to make sure everything is done just as the King would wish.’ He smiled. ‘I confess I have a great curiosity to see the King. He sets out from Hull tomorrow, I believe. The Progress spent much longer than planned at Pontefract, then went to Hull before York. And apparently the King is going back to Hull afterwards; he wants to reorganize the fortifications.’ And that, I thought, is where we put the prisoner in a boat.

‘When will that be?’ I asked.

‘Early next week, I should think. The King will only be here a few days.’ Wrenne gave me another of his keen looks. ‘Perhaps you will have seen the King before, being from London.’

‘I saw him at the procession when Nan Boleyn was crowned. But only from a distance.’ I sighed. ‘Well, if we are to be present at this ceremony, it is as well I packed my best robe and new cap.’

Wrenne nodded. ‘Ay.’ He stood up, with a slowness that revealed his age. ‘Well, sir, you must be tired after your long journey – you should find your lodgings and have a good rest.’

‘Yes. We are tired, ’tis true.’

‘By the way, you will hear many strange words here. Perhaps the most important thing you should know is that a street is called a gate, while a gate is called a bar.’

Barak scratched his head. ‘I see.’

Wrenne smiled. ‘I will have your horses fetched.’

We took farewell of the old man, and rode again to the gate leading from the Minster Close.

‘Well,’ I said to Barak, ‘Master Wrenne seems a good old fellow.’

‘Ay. Merry for a lawyer.’ He looked at me. ‘Where next?’

I took a deep breath. ‘We cannot tarry any longer. We must go to the prison.’

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