Chapter One

My immortal soul is in grave peril, I have been informed, for the sin of blasphemy. And, as I am now in my seventh decade, a weary old man approaching my end, I suppose I must try to treat this sort of thing with a degree of seriousness – even if this extraordinary knowledge was imparted to me by a bouncy stripling barely out of childhood with a wispy upper lip and a brutally fresh tonsure . . . But I must strive to be fair in these writings; I must not indulge my envy of his youth: Father Anselm, our village priest, is no callow stripling, he is fully twenty-three years of age. It is only that he looks to me like an untried lad of twelve summers. Perhaps, when the ripe pimples that stud his small, eager face have cleared up, I will be able to show him the proper respect due a man of God.

But somehow I doubt it.

How did I blaspheme? I laughed in church today during

Mass, long and very loud, joyously and uncontrollably; indeed, such was my mirth that I was forced to excuse myself and leave in the midst of the lesson. I was reproved for my levity afterwards, and I may, Father Anselm warned me, even be guilty of blasphemy as well – a mortal sin. I showed a gross lack of reverence for a holy object and I must do a penance. When he told me this after the service this morning, it was only with a deal of difficulty that I did not begin to roar like a donkey once again.

It happened like this: Father Anselm was delivering his usual Sunday homily to the villagers and using the Flask of St Luke the Evangelist, as it is known, our village's only relic, as the basis for his theme, and the words from the Gospel of Matthew about the power of Faith as his text. I'm sure you will know it. Our Lord Jesus Christ said, 'If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain: "Remove hence to yonder place", and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you.'

Father Anselm claims that he had a vision in which St Luke himself came to his bedside and gave him the flask – which is an ancient leather bottle, sealed on the inside with pitch and at the neck with a wooden stopper. It has a rather indistinct image stamped into the leather of a prone man and a bovine animal of some kind. Father Anselm claims that it is an image of St Luke himself and his symbol of an ox, and that the saint told him to use it for God's work in the manor of Westbury in the county of Nottinghamshire. My manor, where I am lord over all, except perhaps over my sharp-tongued daughter-in-law Marie, mother of my grandson and namesake Alan. It is my

church, in fact, that Father Anselm preaches in. It stands on my land, the living is within my gift, and it was my silver, not five years ago, that paid for the new roof. If I choose to laugh there about his ridiculous stories of visions and holy flasks, surely that is my right.

I know that Father Anselm is lying about the vision; that water flask used to belong to me, and I gave it to the old village priest of Westbury – not Anselm's predecessor Father Gilbert, but the incumbent even before him, a little owlish man named Father Arnold – long ago when I had returned from my travels in the south. Nobody but me remembers him now – they are all in their graves. I do not know exactly where Arnold hid the bottle away in his little cott behind the church but, evidently, Father Anselm has newly discovered it and he is now pretending that because, like me, it is very old, it must be a sacred relic. It is not – the ox is, in fact, a bull and the man depicted on the leather is St Sernin, a holy man who lived and died in the far south, and whose image can be found, I would imagine, on hundreds or even thousands of similar water bottles that are sold to pilgrims in the beautiful, rose-coloured city of Toulouse. I know because that is where I bought this particular bottle, merely as a container for refreshment during my journeying, when I was in that city some forty years ago.

I will refrain from exposing the priest as a liar, although I would enjoy that a good deal. That would no doubt also gravely imperil my soul, I suspect, but I choose not to expose him for another, better reason. Father Anselm is a distant kinsman of the Earl of Locksley, a landowner in the counties of Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire, and I have given the priest the living

here at Westbury as a boon to the Earl. This magnate is not my old friend Robert Odo, the hero of all those lively ale-house rhymes, and the man who was my liege lord and companion on many a bloody adventure – no, alas, my old friend Robin has long been in his grave – this is his son, a bird of a very different feather. Yet I would not wish to offend him by embarrassing his priestly kinsman. So I will remain silent about the true provenance of the Flask of St Luke, and I will try to control my mirth when he prates about the power of faith to move mountains and how the flask will perform miracles if only the villagers will believe in it. I am too old to make fresh enemies, and fight yet more futile battles over something as slight as a boy priest's foolish lies.

I have seen enough of battle in my long life. Quite enough.

I must husband my strength, too. I do not know how long I have left in this sinful world – it cannot be long – and before I depart I have a tale to set down upon this parchment by my own blotched and shaking hand. By strange coincidence, it too is a tale of faith, and of a mountain. A tale of that journey to the rosy city of Toulouse when I was not much older than Father Anselm – a young knight of five and twenty years. It is a tale of that old leather flask, and a tale about my friend, the thief, the warrior, the cruel and generous lord – the current Earl of Locksley's father, whom all the people knew then as the outlaw Robin Hood . . .

The sound of a screaming horse ripped through the warm, dusty summer air in the hall at Westbury: a raw blast of scalding pain and rage, barely recognizable as coming from

a living thing and not some monstrous creature from a sweat-drenched nightmare. I was leaning over the long table at the north end of the hall, with my steward Baldwin, and Father Arnold, the old village priest, frowning over a scatter of parchments and rolls at the tally of rents and dues from the previous year, and building myself a mild headache after several hours of close study.

At the first equine squeal, I jerked upright, turned from the table and sprinted towards the door of the hall, vaulting the central hearth that lay directly in my path and bursting out through the portal into the bright July light of the courtyard. I knew the animal that was making that terrible sound: a gigantic, noble beast, dark as sin, strong as a mountain and worth two years' revenues from Westbury. It was my destrier, my trusted friend and mount in many a desperate mêlée: it was Shaitan. And when Shaitan was angry, hurt or frightened, he was as lethal as a maddened bull – just as powerful and twice as vicious. As I burst out of the hall doorway, I saw that my warhorse, saddled, bridled and accoutred for a morning gallop, had already taken a toll on the human population of Westbury. A young groom called Matthew lay on the dried mud of the courtyard, whey-faced and clutching an obviously broken arm, his eyes wide with agony. Shaitan was pawing the ground, skittering, capering and snapping his teeth at the centre of a loose ring of my people, men-at-arms, grooms, farm servants and maids. The Westbury folk, all of whom seemed to be shouting advice over each other, were wisely keeping their distance from the vast prancing, kicking,

bucking bulk of the horse. All except one: my squire Thomas, a young man of seventeen or so summers, with peat-brown hair and dark Welsh eyes, and an air of oak-hard sturdiness, who had followed me to the wars in France. Thomas had the horse's leather reins wrapped around both of his fists, pulled taut, his weight leaning back in an attempt to keep the animal at least partly anchored. Shaitan suddenly stopped his weird capering and raised his massive head in one quick jerk, hauling Thomas forward willy-nilly; the horse then let out a massive squeal of displeasure and shook his heavy head, causing Thomas to scuttle to one side, then the other. The animal's wide shoulders bunched, the head dipped and, like twin black battering rams, his hind legs pounded out, iron-shod hooves slicing the air inches from the face of an incautiously close man-at-arms behind him. It was a manoeuvre that Shaitan had been patiently taught, long before I had owned him – and his ability to do this was part of his enormous value: the backwards double-kick was a deadly strike in the fierce press of battle that could crush an enemy's skull or stave in his chest, and it was only by the grace of God that no one had been killed so far on this day. Thomas had been dragged to his knees in the courtyard dust by then, and had lost one of the reins. He grimly held the other in both hands; but Shaitan, his chestnut eyes rolling in fury, grunting neighs exploding from his nostrils, clearly resented this slight check on his liberty; the huge black head swooped down, lips peeled back to expose pink gums and big, square yellow teeth, and, fast

as a pouncing cat, my warhorse lunged forward and bit down hard on Thomas's shoulder, eliciting a scream from the young man and a satisfied snort from the beast.

Into this maelstrom of angry horse and anguished squire, shouting folk and weeping, terrified servants, stepped my beloved, my utterly beautiful wife Godifa. She came out of the dairy, a white apron tied around her slim middle, the sleeves of her gown rolled up beyond her elbows, hands slightly reddened with hard work: blonde hair tucked under a neat white cap, pale cream face, sparkling violet-blue eyes – and an air of calm, quiet womanly authority, more remarkable for the fact that she had only recently passed her twentieth birthday. She seemed to glide smoothly towards Shaitan like a swan, her feet invisible beneath the hem of her long blue gown, her arms were held wide, outstretched to make the shape of the cross, and I saw then that she had a short cheese knife in her right hand. She was making a low meaningless noise in her throat as she advanced relentlessly on the destrier, who was now scuttling and prancing crabwise, shaking his back and hindquarters as if trying to wriggle his huge barrel of a body out of his tight riding saddle.

Stepping forward myself, I shouted, 'Goody, get back. For God's sake, keep away from him!' But my determined wife appeared not to hear me; she continued her calm, graceful walk towards Shaitan, crooning soft nonsensical phrases, arms out; and the crowd split before her, the folk moving aside to clear her passage like a swept-back pair of bed curtains. Shaitan saw my lady coming; he twisted his head

and fixed her with his dark, malevolent eye. Then he nodded once, as if making his mind up about something, brayed deafeningly with furious outrage, and reared high on his hind legs, his broad forefeet wind-milling above Goody's head; heavy, iron-rimmed hooves the size of roof shingles pawing the air above her fragile skull.

My heart stopped. The moment was frozen: the massive, furious, tar-black animal rearing up high against a pale sky, and before it, the slender figure of Goody, arms spread abroad like Our Saviour in his Passion on the Cross.

I screamed, 'No, no!' And took a fast step closer, reaching out blindly for a trailing rein. And then Shaitan came down. He laid his hooves down softly, one after the other, with a delicate precision, on the ground in front of Goody, scarcely creating a puff of dust. His long dark head bowed before my wife, nostrils warmly puffing, forehead knocking playfully against her breasts and belly; and Goody stroked his muzzle and satin neck with her left hand, still crooning, and her right arm moved smoothly along his flank. The cheese knife slipped between his belly and the twin girths holding the saddle in place, slicing through the tough binding leather in a couple of jerky thrusts. It was only then that I noticed the blood, dark fluid on his dark hide, seeping down Shaitan's flank from beneath the high saddle, showing up scarlet on Goody's white hand.

'Help me, Thomas, quickly now,' said Goody to my squire, who had got to his feet and was brushing the dust of the courtyard from his hose. And between them they carefully lifted the heavy wood-framed saddle from

Shaitan's back, and the blood-and-sweat-stained blanket beneath it, and Thomas bore them away and into the gloom of the stable.

I found myself at Shaitan's head, his bridle in my shaking hand and I stroked his broad nose, and silky-hard jaw bones for a hundred heartbeats, blowing softly into his nostrils and murmuring apologies to him. I looked between his ears over the muscular arch of his neck and down into the broad hollow of his back, and I could see the wound clearly, a gash a couple of inches long running laterally to the left of his spine, just above the glossy black bulge of his haunch.

'This is the culprit, sir,' said Thomas returning from the stable with a small grey-brown object in his right hand. It was a bent three-inch nail, a little rusty and oddly small in his strong brown hand but still sharp, and now smirched with horse blood and hair. 'This must have become wedged under the saddle somehow, then worked its way through the blanket when Matthew rode him across the courtyard.'

'How is Matthew?' Goody's voice broke in.

'He'll live, my lady,' Thomas replied, his natural grave cheerfulness already reasserting itself. He smiled in admiration at Goody. 'That arm is certainly broken – but it will be a good lesson for him. It will teach him that grooms should always check their gear carefully before saddling expensive destriers – and that they should not try to ride their master's mounts without permission!'

I put my arms around Goody then, and crushed her to

me, that awful moment – when Shaitan had towered above her like a solid black mountain, ready to fall on her head – still echoing shrilly in my soul. 'Promise me, promise me, my love, that you will never do something as foolish as that again,' I said, my words muffled by the white linen cap atop her head. I could smell the scent of her hair through it; and a perfume made of crushed summer roses that she sometimes wore. 'You must be careful, my darling; I do not think I could bear it if . . .'

Goody broke our embrace. She pushed back her body in the loose circle of my arms and smiled up at me. 'Oh do shut up, you silly man,' said my beloved, her violet-blue eyes glinting. 'I knew Shaitan would never really hurt me. What a fuss you do make!'

I had planned, with Thomas as an escort, to take Shaitan out for a good long gallop that morning – nowhere wild and dangerous, he was too valuable a beast to risk a carelessly broken leg by some mishap over rough ground – but the destrier was badly in need of some exercise. And while I did not fear that his wound was serious – it was a deep cut, no more nor less, and the head groom had already doctored it with a poultice of old bread and goose fat – I could certainly not ride him for some weeks. I was, however, reluctant to relinquish my own urge for fresh air – I had not left the compound of Westbury for some days, and I itched for the sensation of speed and freedom. I was more than ready that day to leave the mysteries of tallying the manor's revenues to Baldwin and Father Arnold, and enjoy some sunshine on my face and feel the wind in my

hair. So I ordered a feisty bay mare from the stables to be saddled instead, strapped on my sword and found an old riding cloak. While I was waiting for my mount, I took a look at Thomas's shoulder.

My squire told me it was nothing but I made him strip off his chemise and inspected the two matching bright-red curves of swelling flesh on his chest and back that were the result of Shaitan's savage bite. He was right: no bone was damaged, the skin was barely broken, but I knew that the bruising would be spectacular and so, while my squire bore his wound stoically, I left Goody to apply a herb-laced salve of her own devising and cantered out of the main gate, leaving all my cares behind me.

And so it was that I found myself alone, on a fresh horse, riding out into the Nottinghamshire countryside that fine July morning. The fright that I had taken over Goody and Shaitan had made me a little reckless, and I put my spurs to the bay's sides and we galloped for a mile or so, taking the road towards Nottingham and heading due south. The sun was warm on my face, the horse moved smoothly under me and we ate up the ground together. On a whim, I took a path off the main road down a long tunnel of trees and, pounding along at a canter, my breath coming easily, I felt my anxiety over Goody recede. I was conscious of a deep sense of well-being: I was healthy and strong, not yet twenty-five years old; married to a wonderful woman and lord of a small but bountiful manor. On that morning, it seemed, all was well. I had proved myself as a man in war, many times, but I had no urge to seek out

battle again. I had silver in my coffers and strength in my limbs. I was content to husband my lands and raise fine sons and daughters with Goody for the rest of my days.

As I cantered along the tunnel between the trees, I reflected that in the full robes of midsummer, Sherwood was as fair as a maiden on her wedding morning: the oak and elm and ash each cloaked in glowing green hues; each trunk plump with sap and bursting with life; each sun-blessed clearing fecund with bright wild flowers. The forest floor was alive with the scuttle of rabbits, the boughs rattled with the chasings of squirrels, the calling and clatter of pigeons through branches and the quick-moving shadows of large game, red deer and the very occasional glimpse of wild boar.

I surged along that narrow track, urging the bay ever onward, out of sheer exuberance. The quickening forest life all around, the rhythm of my breathing, the cleansing feeling of swift forward motion, all added to my bubble of well-being. A hart bounded out in front of my horse's nose, surprising both me and my mount and I tugged the reins to check my pace, clamped my knees to keep my seat and hauled the bay to a halt. I found then I was laughing in the saddle after that slight shock, laughing for no reason but from a profound lightness of heart; a beneficent balance of the humours I had not felt in many months.

The mare was tiring, pecking against the reins and the sun was now soaring above me, not far off noon, so I turned my mount back towards the main road, and was content to walk her sedately along the leaf-padded track

through the trees. I was thinking then about dinner at Westbury, and how pleasant it would be to sit at the table with Goody and share a dish or two of meat with her and a flagon of good wine; and after dinner, perhaps, we would retire to our chamber together during the long, hot afternoon, and close the wooden door on the world. Perhaps this afternoon we might between us make our first strong son . . .

I heard a rustling in the wall of leaves to my right, the sound of a large animal moving through the undergrowth with little attempt at stealth. And ahead of me to my left I heard the crack of a breaking stick. In my joy-fuddled state, I merely frowned, puzzled as to what could be making these unusual noises – a clumsy deer, a sick boar? And then, simultaneously, four men stepped out of the greenwood and stood in the track to bar my path ahead. They were very dirty, ill-clad peasant folk in greeny-brown rags, three of them favouring dark hoods, and armed with a motley collection of weapons: cudgels, quarterstaves, an axe; two held rusty swords, one a spear. I had my hand on my own sword hilt by then, and whipped my head around when I heard a noise behind me. Three men of similar ilk stood on the path behind my horse.

Seven desperate men were now ranged against me; wild men of the woods, no doubt; thieves and killers . . . well, I had fought and won against longer odds – I was well schooled in war, well armed, well mounted, young and dauntless. I took a deep breath, my stomach muscles tightened and . . .

'Look up there, Sir Alan, if you please,' said the foremost man, a slim, almost girlishly good-looking rogue, with dark curly hair on his bare head and a vicious-looking woodsman's axe resting on his shoulder. His right arm was pointing upwards, ahead of the mare's nose and to my left. My eye followed his pointing finger and my heart sank. Standing on a stout branch of a tree, twelve foot above the forest floor, was an archer: a long yew bow was in his powerful hands, an arrow nocked and aimed at my heart, the trembling hemp string in his fingers pulled back all the way to the man's grubby right ear.

'Take your hand off your sword hilt, Sir Alan – and sit very, very still if you wish to live,' said Curly-hair.

I did as I was ordered. The men swarmed around the bay, two of them taking a firm hold on either side of the bridle, and Curly-hair pulled my long sword from its scabbard and held it up in the air with a whistle of admiration, as well he might. It was a beautiful object: a long slim blade of Spanish steel, sharp as a barber's razor and engraved in tiny gold letters along the fuller with the word 'Fidelity'. Above the wide steel crosspiece, a long leather-wrapped wood-and-iron hilt balanced the unusual length of the blade and the pommel was made of a thick, heavy ring of silver encasing a magnificent jewel, a sapphire of palest blue. It was a costly sword, worth almost as much as Shaitan, and a blade that I had won in single combat to the death with its previous owner: it soured my belly like a draught of bad wine to see it in another man's hands.

Curly-hair's greed for that blade was plain to see. 'I shall

safeguard this for you, Sir Alan,' he said, in a voice thickened with a kind of lustful envy.

Surrounded by these men, I was led, still a-horse, off the main tunnel-like track and into deep forest. For several miles, indeed for more than an hour, we plodded along pathways that were often no more than deer tracks a few inches wide. The men were silent, watching me closely from under their hoods, with Curly-hair leading the way, my sword Fidelity on one shoulder and his axe on the other. They offered me no harm as we travelled along, and when I asked them where they were taking me, their only response was to mutter that I had been invited to dinner. And I began to relax, for I knew who it was that had ordered these men, these desperate outlaws, to fetch me. It could only be one man; and, as far as I knew, he did not wish me any harm.

At last we came upon a wide clearing in the forest, an encampment of some permanence. A few crude shelters had been constructed at the edge of the space from cut wood and branches. A deer carcass turned on a spit over a fire in the centre, and two dozen or so men, women and children busied themselves; the men sitting in groups and drinking from a barrel of ale, or playing at dice or cleaning their weapons; the women sewing furs, mending their rags, moving about with bundles of firewood or bawling lovingly after scampering children. Two tall figures stood on the far side of the open space: one, a giant nearly seven foot tall, with shaggy blond hair that fell below his shoulders, was leaning on a vast double-headed axe. He was in earnest

conversation with his companion. This fellow, though a little shorter, was still a well set-up, handsome man of about thirty-five years old, unshaven, dressed in a scuffed leather jerkin and black hose, a long sword at his waist. He watched me advance across the clearing and dismount before him, a smile on his lean, stubbled face, his lively grey, almost silver eyes sparkling with mischievous joy.

'Ah, there you are at last, Alan,' said Robin. For before me stood Robin Hood, Earl of Locksley, my friend, mentor and liege lord. 'Don't you ever leave the comfort of your hall for a healthy breath of fresh air these days? I've had men all over Sherwood waiting to waylay you for some days.'

I turned to my curly-haired captor, who was now standing beside the blond giant, and held out my right hand. 'I'll take my sword now, if you please.' The young man glanced quickly across at Robin and with a deep sigh of regret he flipped the blade off his shoulder and put the leather hilt of Fidelity into my hand.

'God's bulging ball-sack, I'm surprised to see you out and about, young Alan! I imagine you've barely left your bed, these past few weeks,' said the huge man, chuckling lewdly. He turned to Robin and said, 'You know what these lusty newly-weds are like: rut, rut, rut, all day, all night . . . I'll wager Alan and Goody have been banging away five times a day like a pair of love-drunk rabbits.' He affected a hideous, false woman's voice. 'Ooh, Alan, do come back to bed and bring your big sword with you . . .'

I paused in the act of sliding Fidelity back into its scabbard and glared at the giant. 'I give you fair warning, John

Nailor: if you ever speak about my wife in that disrespectful way again, I will shove this blade so far up your fat arse that you'll be using the point as a tooth-pick.' I looked hard at the big man, holding his eye, then slammed the sword home into its sheath.

Little John's mouth opened but he said nothing for a couple of heartbeats; out of shock, I am quite certain, rather than fear. But I do not believe he had been seriously threatened for many a year. Young Curly-hair took a step forward, but John put a massive hand on his chest that stopped his advance and said, 'Hold up, Gavin.'

There was a long, awkward silence, during which John and I stared at each other. It was finally broken by Robin. 'He's right, John. That was most discourteous of you. I think you should make an apology to Alan for speaking ill of his lady.'

Little John looked over at Robin in disbelief. 'Apologize? You want me to say I'm sorry?'

'I accept your apology, John,' I said, grinning at him. 'And I particularly appreciate the handsome way in which the apology was made. Now, this fellow here made a mention of dinner. Was that merely a ruse to bring me here without a fight?'

That golden July afternoon, at a long trestle table of greenwood planks set up in the centre of the clearing, we ate roasted venison, pigeon pie and barley bread and a simple sallet of wild leaves and herbs, washed down with a goodly quantity of freshly brewed ale. As we ate, I studied my lord, the notorious Earl of Locksley, and I was struck

by his simple, radiating happiness; his deep, uncomplicated enjoyment of life. Here was a man entering the middle years, although still as slim and fit as a twenty-year-old, who had been one of the greatest nobles at the court of King Richard, and one of his greatest warriors – and he was living like an animal in the wilderness of Sherwood, surrounded by a score of cut-throats, with a price on his head. Yet, while I'd known Robin for ten years or more, and knew him as well as any man, I'd never seen my lord more contented.

He had been recently outlawed, of course, and not for the first time. As a youngster he had been declared beyond the law – after he had killed a bullying, abusive priest – and Robin had taken to the predatory life of a thief in the woods like a pike to a fishpond. He had robbed from the rich who were foolish enough to travel through his part of Sherwood, and taken their silver by the sack-load, and he had given protection to the poor from other bandits and evil men, and even from the law – for a price. Robin was known then across the land for his ruthlessness to his enemies and for his reckless generosity to his friends – to cross him meant death or mutilation, but if you were inside his circle, quite simply, he would die for you. At the height of his fame, he was one of the most powerful men in the country, able to purchase a full pardon from King Richard with barrels of stolen silver, and be granted the fair hand and fair estates of the Countess of Locksley, his sweetheart Marie-Anne.

After his pardon, Robin had served Richard well: in the

Holy Land fighting the Saracens, in England during the rebellion, and in the long bloody wars in Normandy against Philip of France. But our hero-king Richard was dead, killed by a crossbow bolt outside an insignificant fortress in Aquitaine. And the new King, Richard's weak, vengeful and duplicitous brother John, had no love for Robin and had repaid my lord's loyalty to his older sibling by declaring the Earl of Locksley an outlaw, whose head was worth a small hill of silver to any man bold enough to try to take it.

There had been no trial, no assembly of the barons to weigh the merits of the case: a proclamation had been issued by the new Sheriff of Nottinghamshire – a greedy, short-legged crony of King John's named Sir William Brewer – and a strong force of knights and men-at-arms had galloped north to occupy Kirkton, Robin's castle in South Yorkshire that overlooked the Locksley Valley. They had found the place deserted; an echoing shell without a soul in residence, without beasts, fowls or a roaming stray dog. Even the fishpond had been emptied, every pot and pan packed up; every bale of hay and peck of corn long gone. Robin had given his goods and chattels to his friends, sent his horses, trained men and armour to his elder brother William, a petty baron who held the honour of Edwinstowe, and sent his wife and two boys across the sea to live under the protection of the Queen Mother, the venerable Eleanor of Aquitaine, where they would be safe from John's vengeance. Robin himself had slipped away into the vast, tangled depths of Sherwood, the haunt of wild men cast out by decent society, my lord's old playground – and his true home.

I had served King Richard too. He and I had even made music together, as we were both *trouvères* – poets who 'found' or composed songs during our leisure hours. And I mourned the loss of the Lionheart deeply, I had liked and admired him as a man and a fellow warrior, and he had been most generous and kind to me – knighting me personally, despite my lowly origins, and granting me lands and a place among his trusted companions. But I mourned him too because I hated his brother John perhaps even more than Robin did. I had served John once, reluctantly, and had vowed that I would never do so again. Indeed, I had no obligation to do so: one of John's first acts as King was to appropriate the lands that Richard had granted me: the rich manors of Burford, Stroud and Edington in England, and the war-ravaged manor of Clermont-sur-Andelle in Normandy. But I considered myself lucky – I had not been outlawed like Robin and, had I still had possession of these lands, I would also have owed John my service as a fighting knight. However, on that gorgeous summer afternoon, as I feasted with Robin and Little John, and jested and swapped stories, all that I had to uphold the dignity of my rank was the small manor of Westbury, which I held of the man sitting across the table from me, the outlawed Earl of Locksley.

While we ate, we passed the time in idle conversation: how was Marie-Anne, and her two boys? All well, Robin assured me, the boys growing up fast in Queen Eleanor's travelling court. And was Goody pregnant yet? Robin knew that a son to follow in my footsteps was my heart's

desire. No, not yet, but it was still early in the day. I looked at John sternly, half-expecting him to utter some crude comment about our attempts to make a baby – I had meant what I said about fighting him if he showed the least disrespect to Goody – but he seemed to have taken my threat to heart, and the big man merely grinned at me, winked cheekily and busied himself stripping the flesh from a whole haunch of roasted venison with his teeth.

'So you've had men looking for me about Nottinghamshire,' I said, when I had finally eaten my fill and I was sitting back, picking my teeth with a splinter from the table. 'Why did you not just send a messenger to Westbury? Or come and see me yourself. Goody would have been delighted to receive a visit from you.'

'I'm a wanted man, Alan,' said Robin with a happy grin, 'I can't go wandering about the countryside paying calls on the gentry whenever I feel like it. The Sheriff of Nottinghamshire is after my blood and I tremble at the thought of his terrible wrath.'

'Could it be, just perhaps, that the Sheriff is wrathful because a party of his tax gatherers was ambushed last week and robbed of nigh on ten pounds in silver up by Southwell?' I asked.

'Could be, could well be.' Robin's grin had become dangerously close to a smirk. 'Who knows what makes that funny little mountebank angry? Silly man. He stamps around Nottingham Castle, ranting and raving, pulling his own hair out – his *own* hair, mark you – and issuing dire threats that he cannot possibly fulfil – no sense of

moderation, no sense of dignity and no manners either. I sent him a pair of venison the other day, two fine plump hinds. A noble gift, you might well think. But did he have the courtesy to thank me? No. My people in the castle tell me that he harangued his men-at-arms for an hour, then raised the price on my head to fifty pounds! Fool.'

I laughed. 'Are you deliberately trying to goad him?' I asked. 'Sending him a brace of the King's deer, poached from under his nose? What did you expect – a big wet kiss and an invitation to keep Christmas with his wife and family this year?'

'I have no desire at all for his company, still less that of his appalling wife and her snotty brats – a simple thank-you would have sufficed. People are so ungrateful these days. But that brings me rather neatly to the reason why I wanted to see you.'

'No,' I said quickly. 'The answer is no.'

Robin looked hurt. 'I haven't even asked you the question.' He looked over at Little John. 'You see what I mean – there is no gratitude in the world. None at all.' Then to me: 'Come now, Alan, don't you even want to hear my proposal?'

'You want me to help you do something bad, I feel it in my bones, something far beyond the law and very likely immoral too – you want me to murder or kidnap someone; or, most probably, to help you steal something valuable that you have set your heart on. And that will put me afoul of the Sheriff, and have him coming after *my* blood. The answer is, no, thank you, Robin. I just want to stay quietly at home at Westbury, write a few half-decent *chansons*, tend

to my lands and put a baby in my wife's womb. That's all I want. I don't want to go on a wild escapade with you; I don't want to hurt anybody. I'm sorry, Robin, but whatever your proposal is, the answer must be no.'

'I want you to help me right a great wrong,' said Robin, looking absurdly pious. 'I want you to help me help a poor man, a friend of a friend of ours, who has been cruelly ill-used by a powerful lord. I have always thought of you as a decent man, Alan, a man on the side of all that is good and right. And now you have the chance to do something fine in this ugly world.' Robin fixed me with his odd silver eyes. 'Surely, as a good Christian, you want to make the world a better place, to help the poor and weak. Will you do that, for me, Alan? Help me to help someone. For the sake of all that we have done together, for our friendship?'

I said nothing, but I felt my heart beginning to sink.

'Allow me to tell you a little story,' said Robin, smiling like a fox outside a chicken run. 'Then you can give me your answer.'

Chapter Two

'Malloch Baruch is not a rich man,' Robin began, 'although to make his livelihood he deals with expensive materials, and must keep a goodly store of them. He is a goldsmith by trade, a Jew, of course, and he and his family lived in York – until ten years ago.'

My lord paused and looked at me, to see if I was attending closely to his words. I nodded, and swallowed thickly, as the memories came flooding back. A couple of years after I had joined Robin's men, he and I had been caught up in a bloody, Devil-inspired frenzy in York, during which almost the entire Jewish population of that city had been hounded to death by crowds of Christians fired by religious zeal. The Jews had been assaulted and robbed and forced to take refuge in the King's Tower at York Castle – and there, for several days of brutal siege, they

were surrounded by a boiling sea of Christian citizenry crazed with hatred for the unbelievers. Until the entire surviving community of York Jews – about a hundred and fifty men, women and children – decided to take drastic action. On the ground floor of the tower, trapped and desperate, the men of each family cut the throats of their wives and children, and then took turns to end each other's lives. For a moment, I recalled the lake of gore and its meaty stench, and the pathetic curled bodies carpeting the slick floor, their white throats sliced open by loving familiar hands. Robin and I, and our Jewish friend Reuben, had escaped only by the skin of our teeth, and Reuben's only daughter Ruth was killed in the mêlée while we were cutting our way free.

It was not a memory I relished.

Robin could see that he had my full attention. 'By luck, or the Hand of God, if you prefer, Malloch Baruch happened to be away from York on an errand in Lincoln during that time of madness,' he said, 'although his wife and young children perished in the King's Tower with all the rest of them.'

Robin paused again and scratched his growing beard. He had stopped smiling by now. 'So Malloch lost everything: his family were dead, his precious metals stolen from his workshop, his house burned to the ground. But he did not give in to despair, as might many a man. After he had buried his wife and children in York, and said the traditional words of mourning over them, he returned to Lincoln and began again. Reuben helped him in those

early days: he arranged for Malloch to borrow money to buy gold to work with; he found him a new workshop and generous clients in and around Lincoln. Malloch worked hard, long days and nights hunched over his workbench patiently fashioning gold and silver trinkets for his clients, and with the passing of time his spirit revived. He married again, his new wife bore him a son, and then a daughter, and his fame as a goldsmith grew with his new family. Ten years on, and his reputation as a goldsmith is as one of the finest craftsmen in England. But, in spite of this, his living is still precarious; he took on heavy debts to rebuild his life, and he has not yet redeemed them. You must remember that he lost half a lifetime of savings in the disaster at York and that scale of loss is not recovered by a few years of hard labour. Then, two years ago, Malloch had a stroke of fortune – or so he believed.'

The shadows were lengthening in the clearing and the men and women of Robin's band were making their preparations for nightfall: wide deer skins were being laid out on the grass for the family groups over by the tree line, while the single men and women laid their blankets and furs by the fire. Cut branches were being stacked in high tottering piles by the stone-lined hearth to fuel a damped blaze during the night. In the rough wooden shelters, mothers washed their children's grubby faces, men took a last tankard of ale or scrubbed their teeth with salt and well-chewed willow twigs.

'Gavin,' called Robin to the ruffian who had brought me here, as he passed by the long table with an armful of

firewood, 'fetch us some of that cheese, would you, and some more ale.' He turned to me: 'You'll stop with us tonight, Alan?'

I muttered something to the effect of Goody worrying about me, but Robin waved that idea away. 'I sent word that you were with me,' he said. 'She's a sensible lass who won't be overly concerned if you don't come home till the morrow.'

I privately noted that Robin had messengers at his beck and call who *could* visit Westbury any time they pleased. And realized that the only reason I had been waylaid in that alarming manner earlier was because Robin wished it so. He could easily have summoned me in many other ways. I wondered why he had chosen that dramatic method, and knew then that the answer lay within the question: Robin often loved to pose and strut and perform like an actor in an Easter mystery play – it was in his very bones. He loved the idea that he was the hero of his own *chanson* or epic poem, and he was prepared to go a good deal out of his way to make his actions seem larger than life. But Robin had picked up the threads of his speech, and I was caught up once again in the tale of the unfortunate Jewish goldsmith.

'So Malloch had a stroke of good fortune: he was visited at his workshop by a Sacrist, a canon of Welbeck Abbey. You know the place, of course?'

I did. It was a remote house of Premonstratensians in the depths of Sherwood, not far from Worksop. The canons were reputed to be zealous and extremely wealthy. I nodded

warily. Robin's relationship with wealthy Houses of God might be likened to the relationship between a hungry wolf and a newborn lamb.

'Abbot Richard, it seemed, had a desire for a set of golden altar paraphernalia, liturgical vessels and the like, for his Church of St James the Great, and he had heard of the growing fame of Malloch the goldsmith of Lincoln. The Sacrist had a marvellous commission to dangle in front of the craftsman: a full set of altar ornaments – chalice and ciborium, monstrance, holy water vat, wine jug, paten and pyx, a pair of candelabra – and a magnificent crucifix as the centrepiece – all in solid gold, carved and inscribed and decorated with rubies, enamels and pearls and other precious items. "Spare no expense," the Sacrist said to our friend. "Count not the cost, my good man: magnificence is required!" It was to be Malloch's masterpiece, a work that would be the wonder of Christendom.'

I murmured in appreciation: in my mind's eye I could see the altar spread with these precious items, the sacred heart of the Abbey church glowing warmly with yellow candlelight reflected from these golden ornaments. It would indeed create a wondrous sight for worshippers – and ensure that Welbeck Abbey received a stream of pilgrims wishing to view such a splendid display. The Abbey would become justly famous; the Abbot's influence and power would grow.

'Malloch asked for a small deposit in silver to pay for his materials; he showed his sketches to the Abbot himself and they were approved – even highly praised. And then

he began to work. For six long months he toiled on the Welbeck pieces, eschewing all other employment, putting his heart and soul into creating the most wonderful objects the world had yet seen. He constantly improved his designs, making them ever more costly, ever more fabulous, and borrowing money from his fellow Jews to pay for the finest jewels, for the extra gold and silver required. Then, at Easter last year, he presented his work to the Abbey.

'Abbot Richard and all the canons were duly struck dumb with wonder at the artistry of his finished objects, and they were received with much rejoicing. Then Malloch presented his bill of accounts, detailing the monies he had outlaid on metals and jewels, the wages he had paid his apprentices and journeymen, and asking most humbly if he might be recompensed at the Abbot's earliest convenience.

'At first the Abbot was all kindness and reassurances; the money would certainly be forthcoming once the Welbeck estate wool revenues had come in at Michaelmas. But, as the months passed, the Abbot's tone changed. He spoke of the deposit in silver as if that sum were a full and final settlement; then he spoke of Malloch's duty to God, of the historical crimes of the Jews, and suggested that the "gift" of the golden altar ornaments might be seen as an act of atonement. Malloch's increasingly vociferous pleas for payment – for at least a part of the huge sums he had outlaid – were ignored. A year passed and his fellow Jews began to demand that he make good his loans to them, but the goldsmith was unable to honour his debts. Malloch was staring ruin in the face; he went to Welbeck

earlier this summer and begged for even a part of the money to meet his bills: he went down on his knees in front of the Abbot. But the Abbot's men-at-arms dragged him away, and beat him and ejected him from the Abbey. Finally, in despair, and not knowing where else to turn, he came to me.'

My heart had been touched by the story of the Jew but this was not an unusual tale. The Jews were despised by many for their rejection of Our Saviour and for their usurious activities; while many a nobleman or bishop was happy to borrow from them, even agreeing to very high annual repayments, it was not uncommon for the same lord to refuse to repay the sum when it was called in. Indeed, some people whispered that the persecution of the Jews in York ten years ago had been at least partly fired by landowners who wanted to see those they owed money to destroyed and their mortgages consumed in the flames of the riot.

Robin had been watching me as I thought. Indeed, he seemed to have been reading my mind: 'Do you remember that fellow, Brother Ademar, from the siege of the King's Tower?'

I shook my head.

'He was a monk dressed all in white, something of a skilled orator, who used his talent to exhort the crowds to kill the Jews.'

I remembered him then; and I remembered Robin hurling a great stone down on him from the battlements of the tower, which smashed his skull like an egg.

'Brother Ademar came from Welbeck – he was an official

of the Abbey, the cellarer, I believe, for many years,' said Robin. 'Indeed, he was Abbot Richard's younger brother. That is a family that clearly has little love for the Jews of England.'

I sighed, beaten. 'What does Malloch want us to do?'

Robin smiled at me, his bright eyes reflecting the last gleams of sunlight. 'I knew I could count on you, Alan,' he said, and he reached forward across the table and gripped my forearm for a moment. 'I have promised Malloch that I will go to Welbeck, take the golden pieces from the altar and return them to him.'

'And we do this for a fat fee – for a suitable recompense, I mean,' I said, with a smile to take the sting from my words.

'For a suitable recompense, yes,' said Robin gravely. 'Should I put my life at risk, endanger the lives of my men, for nothing?'

I rode back to Westbury the next morning with my heart in turmoil. I had, of course, agreed to go with Robin to Welbeck in three days' time to steal back the golden altar items for poor Malloch – how could I refuse, after that doleful story? And the goldsmith was a friend of Reuben's, which meant that Robin wanted to help him, and I did too – I owed Reuben my life several times over. So despite what I had promised myself, I was about to embark on a wild, unlawful escapade – and I wasn't sure how I felt about it. What I had said to Robin was quite true: I did want to live the quiet life with Goody, tend my lands, husband my crops and raise strong sons; but a part of me

was vibrating like a vielle string at the thought of action. I had been a thief before I was a warrior, and long before I was a lord of lands, and I had never forgotten the thrill of larceny that I'd loved as a snot-nosed cut-purse in the crowded streets of Nottingham.

But I did not think it would be an easy task – we had to enter an abbey filled with dozens of vigorous young canons and muscular lay workers, plus a dozen of the Abbot's personal men-at-arms, break into their church, purloin their most holy, treasured possession and escape – all without being recognized. On top of that, I had made Robin swear that we would not kill or hurt any of the Abbey folk – they were not enemy soldiers to be slaughtered; most of them were doubtless good, decent Englishmen trying to live a quiet life of religious devotion – and, with a fine show of reluctance, my lord of Locksley had agreed to my conditions.

Finally, there was Goody. What would she say when I told her I was riding off on a madcap adventure with Robin that could easily end in death, disaster or outlawry? Robin had made the obvious suggestion that I should not tell her where I was going or what I was planning to do, but I had rejected that. I did not wish there to be any falsehoods between myself and my beloved.

In the event, when I told Goody about Malloch and his golden ornaments her response surprised me. 'Of course, you must do it,' she said. 'God made you a knight for a purpose and, as a knight, it is your Christian duty to protect the weak – even a Jew – and see justice done. A poor

man has been cheated by a rich and powerful one: you must set things right, if it is in your hands to do so.'

I should not have been surprised. Goody had taken to reading romances recently and had developed a conception of knightly conduct that was very far from the brutal, gore-sodden reality. Her friend, Robin's wife Marie-Anne, Countess of Locksley, had sent her a copy of a poem by Christian of Troyes called 'Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart', and she had read it all the way through at least three times to my knowledge. It tells a tale of the noble knight Lancelot and his adulterous relationship with Guinevere, the wife of King Arthur. This has long proved a popular theme with the ladies – as a *trouvère*, I had even composed a few *cansos* on the subject myself. I had found, though, that my attitude had changed somewhat since I had become a married man, and lord of a moderate estate. And while I did not suspect my lovely Goody of a liaison with a younger man – I found her enthusiasm for these fanciful tales disconcerting.

With Goody's blessing, then, I set about preparing myself for my mission of justice with Robin. My primary concern was that I should not be recognized as Sir Alan Dale, lord of the manor of Westbury, by the canons of Welbeck – the Abbey was, after all, only a day's ride from Westbury, and though the canons kept to themselves, for the most part, and resided in a very remote part of Sherwood, they could conceivably be considered my neighbours. I did not care to run into the Abbot at, say, Nottingham Castle in the years to come and have to explain why I had robbed him

and his brothers of their golden hoard – I cared even less for the idea that they might complain to King John and petition to have me brought before his courts. I could expect little justice, and even less mercy, if I found myself there. So I cut myself a broad strip of soft cowhide and tied it diagonally around my head in the manner of someone who has lost an eye. And I began to experiment with a weak glue of boiled beef tendons, a few drops of blood squeezed from a pin-prick in my finger and a bowl of milled oats. The day before I was due to depart with Robin, I had completed my disguise and I was admiring myself at the far end of the hall in a large polished-silver mirror that belonged to Goody.

My own mother – God rest her soul – would not have owned me. A desperate villain looked out at me from Goody's fine mirror: I was dressed in rags; my blond hair was hidden by a tightly fitting woollen workman's cap; half my face was covered by the broad leather eye-patch and the rest of my face and my hands were covered with a disgusting-looking skin complaint, created by sticking individual oats to my skin in little clumps and colouring them with drops of dried blood. I looked rather like one of the misbegotten lepers I had seen in the Holy Land during the Great Pilgrimage – indeed, for a moment, I was concerned that the canons would not allow me entrance to Welbeck, fearing that I would spread some awful contagion. But I was satisfied that no one would recognize the handsome young knight, Sir Alan of Westbury, in the foul-looking vagabond who stared out at me from the silver. As a final

touch, I wadded a piece of clean linen and pushed it inside my left cheek, and that gave the effect of distorting the line of my jaw and cheekbone on that side. It made my speech seem muffled and odd – which pleased me, for I did not want my voice to be recognized either – but I did not expect to be doing much talking at Welbeck. I was just admiring my villainous reflection, grinning in satisfaction, when I heard a polite cough behind me, and whirled around. It was Baldwin, my usually very competent steward, looking a little shame-faced.

He was not alone.

'Excuse me, Sir Alan, but we have a visitor: Sir Nicholas de Scras has just arrived and he insists on paying his respects to you. I've arranged for his horse to be stabled and his belongings to be taken to the guest hall; I hope that is all satisfactory.'

And I looked beyond my retainer at the sturdy familiar figure of the knight. Sir Nicholas was still the same slim, fit-looking man I had known in the Holy Land; his iron-grey hair had perhaps a few more flecks of silver in it; but his browny-green eyes were still sharp. He looked utterly appalled.

'By the Cross, Alan – is that really you?' said my old friend.

I could feel myself blushing as I hastily pulled the cap and eye-patch off my head, and scrubbed at the dried oats with my cuff in an effort to dislodge them.

'Why in the name of all that is holy are you got up like a thrice-poxed beggarman?'

'It is for an entertainment,' I mumbled through my

sodden cheek cloth. 'A bit of mummery for the village, er, for the Church, to celebrate the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin in a fortnight.'

'Is that really suitable attire for a church? Under the eyes of Almighty God? Well, my friend, it is your business, of course, but . . .' Then Sir Nicholas stopped, his face seemed to be contorting, bulging and writhing, his skin above the neck was turning the colour of a peeled beetroot. I realized then, with a dismal sinking of the heart, that he was trying not to laugh.

'To be honest, Sir Alan,' wheezed this pious knight, gasping, and causing his muddy eyes to protrude in a quite unnerving manner, 'You look rather . . . absurd . . . forgive me . . . like a pantaloon . . . ha-ha . . . like a seller of quack remedies at a fair . . . ha-ha . . . who has cut himself shaving and then fallen face-first into a bowl of porridge. Oh. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!'

Then Sir Nicholas, former Knight Hospitaller, warrior of Christ and pitiless scourge of the Saracen hordes, surrendered at last to his mirth. He threw back his head and brayed like a drunken donkey at his own enormous wit.

I straightened my back. 'Welcome to my hall, Sir Nicholas,' I said coldly. 'What a wonderful surprise. Baldwin, stir yourself and bring us wine, will you? And hot water and a towel.'

Sir Nicholas de Scras poured the wine while I scrubbed the dried oats from my face; and in a little while I recovered my usual good humour and began to enjoy the company of my old friend.

'What brings you here, Nicholas?' I asked. 'I had thought you would have your hands full in serving William Marshal, the newly made Earl of Pembroke. Does he no longer require your skill at arms?'

'Hmm. Yes. Well, in truth, I have left the Earl's service. I'm an idle fellow these days, Alan, a gentleman of leisure,' said Sir Nicholas with a tight smile. 'Plenty of time on my hands. My nephews are away training to be knights in Kent. Our lands at Horsham are run by the steward. There's not much for me to do.'

'The King would surely welcome a knight of your experience,' I said, somewhat unkindly, for he had once been John's man and had tried to persuade me to join that household. Sir Nicholas looked at me hard over the rim of his cup.

'The Earl of Pembroke now serves King John. But I will not. That is why I left his service. I will not serve that impious, royal, red-haired little shit-weasel again,' he said flatly. 'He humiliated me after we surrendered Nottingham to Richard – called me a coward to my face, would you believe it?' Nicholas laughed grimly. 'I'll roast in Hell before I will wield my sword for that croaking, God-mocking popinjay.

'Do you know that he once asked me if I truly believed that the Devil existed? And then he mocked my answer. No, Alan, I will not serve John or his man the Earl of Pembroke; and so I think my fighting days must be behind me. In a year or two, when my nephew William is old enough to shoulder his responsibilities for my brother's

lands at Horsham, I will leave this world behind and offer myself as a novice at Lewes Priory, our family has long had connections there. I plan to spend the rest of my days praying for my family and the forgiveness of my sins.'

He did not seem old enough yet to retire from the world and take the black habit of a Cluniac monk. However, I could feel a deep sadness in him; I believed that he had always regretted his decision to leave the Order of the Knights Hospitaller, and I sensed that he felt that by joining another religious institution – even as a novice – he hoped to regain some of the comradeship that he'd enjoyed among the Hospitallers.

'I'd better give you a decent dinner before you take your vows, then,' I said with a smile. 'You'll be on stale bread and cold cabbage broth with the brothers at Lewes, and nothing to drink but water.'

'Well, I won't say no to a decent meal,' Sir Nicholas replied, smiling, 'but I'm not hanging up my spurs just yet. I plan to travel a little, see some old friends, make a small pilgrimage or two.'

Over dinner, the best that the servants could prepare at such short notice, I tried to raise Sir Nicholas's spirits, and we spoke of battles won and lost, or brave men we had known – many of whom were now dead. Goody left us to our manly talk, and in the dusk of twilight, we pulled up stools beside the hearth at the centre of the hall and finished our wine as we toasted our boot soles.

'There is another reason why I have come to see you, Alan,' said Sir Nicholas, at last. 'I apologize for springing

myself on you without a word of warning: but what I have to say is important, and I wanted to tell you as soon as possible.'

I had been half-expecting something of this kind. Nicholas de Scras was not an aimless man and I suspected that there was some deeper reason for his sudden arrival, deeper anyway than the urge to see an old comrade. I refilled his wine cup and kept silent.

'I still have friends in the Hospitallers,' Sir Nicholas said. 'A few who understand why I felt it was my duty to leave the Order. And I write to them, and meet up with them from time to time.' He took a sip of his wine; he seemed almost a little embarrassed. I sat back on my stool and waited for him to come to the point.

'As you know, there has always been a great rivalry between the Templars and the Hospitallers – we should be as brothers, I know, united in our love of Christ and serving God shoulder to shoulder with humble hearts; but the truth is that the Templars are an arrogant, headstrong lot, obsessed with money and power, for the most part, and we often see each other as our opponents, to be overcome, outdone; that is to say . . . there have been times when we have, God forgive us, rejoiced at the Templars' misfortune.'

He took a sip of wine and continued. 'I heard a rumour of such a misfortune when I was visiting a Brother Hospitaller in Leicestershire – how we chuckled about it together. The misfortune happened to the Templars of France, of the Paris Temple, to be precise – and I'm sorry to say that this rumour concerns you.'

I noticed that he used the words 'us' and 'we' to describe the Hospitallers, although he had left his Order nearly ten years ago; also, I had a fairly good idea what he was referring to by this 'misfortune', but I held my tongue. I wanted to hear what the Knights Templar were saying about me and my dealings in Paris.

'My Hospitaller friend told me that the Templars had been deprived of a significant sum in silver last year by a clever forgery. Apparently, the thief had got hold of one of the Templars' promissory notes, the parchment letters that, on production, allow the bearer to draw sums in silver from Templar preceptories across Christendom – and which in some quarters are deemed to be as good as coin itself, perhaps even better, as they are easier to carry through dangerous lands. Anyway, the thief or thieves had possession of one of these letters, and they had copied it and used the copy to draw funds – five hundred pounds! – from the Paris Temple. The canny Knights of the Temple of Solomon handed over five hundred pounds of silver. Can you imagine? They gave a hoard of silver to a plausible thief who came to them bearing nothing more than a letter written in their code. He'd have needed a train of packhorses to carry it away, though I doubt he could sit his own horse for laughing.'

There was a little pause and I felt that Sir Nicholas was waiting for me to say something. So I said blandly, 'That seems a little foolish, to hand over such a huge quantity of silver to an unknown man on the strength of a little piece of parchment.'

'Doesn't it,' said Nicholas. He gave me an odd, penetrating look. 'Did I mention that the letter was an almost perfect copy of a genuine promissory note? Save for the sum involved. The original note, the genuine one, was made out for a little over two English pounds. The false note had been rewritten, copied almost exactly by someone who knew the Templar codes, and only the sum involved had been changed.'

Once more Sir Nicholas paused and gave me that strange look, as if he were trying to see inside my soul. I said nothing, so he continued: 'The Templars are, understandably, extremely angry about this theft. They plan to have their vengeance on the miscreant, and, if possible, to recover their money. In any case, they plan to make an example of the man – to deter others from attempting a similar crime. Harsh words have been spoken, and ugly sentiments have been expressed about the prolonged torture and summary execution of the thief. They plan to move against him, to take him up for trial before the next full moon.'

Again he paused, and again I stayed mute. Sir Nicholas de Scras sighed. 'The Templars believe that this bold thief was the man for whom the original note, the one for two pounds, was made out. And that man is listed in their records as one Alan Dale, the knight of Westbury in the English county of Nottingham.'