

ONE

Sunday 28th January 1554

There was a man lying on the ground in front of me when I came to. He was dressed in travelling clothes, and I stared with a grimace at the stained and torn cloak, the sun-bleached hat and worn boots. His face, I thought, looked familiar, but for the life of me, at that moment, I couldn't work out why. Mind you, I had a serious lump, at least the size of a duck's egg, on the back of my skull, and there was a series of important questions troubling me just then, not least of which were: Why had someone clobbered me over the pate with what must have been a maul or hammer? Why was I sitting on the ground? Exactly where was I? And why was my knife in my hand?

And what was smeared over the blade? That should have been uppermost in my mind, to be honest, but just then the other questions seemed more urgent.

My companion, on the other hand, had no questions or concerns of any sort. Not any more. He was past caring, since someone – possibly me – had caused him to add his blood to the piss and mud of the ground out there. Yes, I was outdoors, in a small yard, and the noise that now came to me reminded me that I had been in a tavern. From the smell, this was the yard that was the unofficial privy out at the back.

I climbed to my feet, the world spinning lazily. It felt as though a giant had bound me to an enormous bobbin and was twirling it enthusiastically. I don't know whether you have experience of such events, but, to me, waking beside a dead body with my knife besmeared with blood was not looking like a good turn-up for the books. Especially when I heard a door crash wide, steps and a sudden grunt of surprise.

There are many men who are experienced with dead bodies. Some are used to finding them; others are used to finding

those responsible for them. Me, I'm more used to avoiding them.

I ran.

Earlier that day

Later, when I had time to think back, life had been so delightfully unremarkable only an hour or so before. It was just an ordinary, everyday Sunday morning.

We had all been sent out at daybreak by Bill, determined to catch the early attendees at church so that we could enjoy a good meal that evening. Yes, it was shameful behaviour to rob the religious on the Sabbath, especially in a church, but we had to live, and pickings had been poor the past week.

Bill? He's our company's fencing cully. There were six of us: Bill, Wat, Gil, Ham, me and Moll – Bill's wench. A man on his own in London nowadays, in the year of Our Lord fifteen hundred and fifty-three – or, if you prefer the new method by which some capricious fools are setting New Year in the week after Christmas, fifty-four – is in danger all the time. There are too many men with knives, clubs, guns and swords, and a fellow on his own is likely to be beaten over the pate and arrested before he's nipped his first bung, but with a man like Bill in charge of the company – a fellow who could fence the goods we found, who could source food and drink, beds and protection – life is a lot safer. I'd been with him for months now. When we stole something, he would find a buyer; when I cut a purse loose, he would take the money and make sure that it was held safe for the good of all of us, with the pelf being split equally. Bill ensured we all got a fair share and none of us would go hungry.

But enough of Bill.

That morning I'd decided to go to the cathedral. I reached the street near St Paul's, down close to Ludgate and the Fleet river, and there I pulled my woollen cap down over my eyes and studied myself as best I could in the limited reflection from a window-pane. Not tall, but not short, mousy hair a little ragged where Piers last cut it because he was drunk. Piers is a pimp and hairdresser working in a brothel, mainly

because he lost his wife and house to the ale, but he could still handle a pair of scissors quite well – and better while sober. I suppose, as an apple-squire, he had to know how to keep the doxies looking as well as they could. The wenches there were installed to cater for a better class of client. They never would let me inside, not without seeing the colour of my money first. Actually, if they saw the inside of my purse, they wouldn't let me in anyway.

I suppose it is as well to explain a little about myself. A fellow setting out on a narrative of this kind should naturally inform his readers as much about himself as possible. In that case, since by reading this, my dear friends, you are joining me on the journey of my adventures, I will explain.

First, I go by a number of names. Foremost is Jack Blackjack, since that is the name my father gave me; then there's Jack of Whitstable and Jack Faithful by those who know me well. But I have been known to use other names as I see fit. Peter the Passer, John of Smithfield, Hugh Somerville – all have been used or misused by me. As to the rest of me, I suppose I am well formed, if slender, with a face that inspires trust – which is lucky. It is my face that has earned me my keep these last two or three years: square, with a kind of rugged integrity in my brown eyes and straight nose. True, there is a scar on my left cheek, but that gives me an air of devil-may-care insouciance. I like to tell women how I won it defending the virginity and honour of a maiden – although, in truth, I won it tripping while running from an enraged miller who found me in his daughter's bed. It would have been fine, but when he glared at me and said, 'Who is *he*?' his daughter turned her limpid blue eyes to me and gave a squeal. 'I don't know! I've never seen him before!' Names hadn't mattered the night before, mind, but I suppose she saw no need to overuse the truth. In any case, when telling a tale like that of my scar, it's best to tell most of the truth – just not quite all. I want to entice a gull to listen to me while I snip the strings of his purse.

So, as I said, I studied myself, checked my appearance and walked into the Black Boar tavern, just another slightly scruffy fellow who had entered for a sup of ale, and hardly anyone

cast me a glance. Why should they? They didn't know that within the hour I'd be a wanted man, a notorious murderer.

It was dark inside the tavern when I entered, and I almost brained myself on the low ceiling. Smoke curled from the fires, thick fumes choking at the throat and creating a warm fug. It was hard to see from one side of the room to the other.

Men were seated at settles and benches, and I glanced about me as I entered, hoping for a suitable victim. The barman saw me. He was big and red-faced, and had the cheerful look of a man who knew exactly where the club under his bar sat waiting. He raised a leather tankard in a dumb show of offering, but I shook my head briefly. I was there for a different occupation. Besides, I had no money. I pushed past drinkers and a threepenny upright who was haggling with a man who couldn't take his eyes from her chemise top, to where two men were playing dice on a rough tabletop in a window. One was a great bear of a man, with a beard that was as black as a sinner's soul. The other was fair-haired and had a bright smile and youthful grin. Pushing past me, a fellow with a broad-brimmed hat went to the table and sat, his face hidden, and seemed to stare at the murky glass of the window.

There was no point hanging about hopefully. A quick inspection of all the fellows inside told me that there were no pickings in there, not that I'd be keen to try it. I like the Boar and wouldn't want to be forced to seek a new watering hole because desperation had forced me to steal from a customer in there. I wanted to watch the street, but the men near the window showed less inclination to move than dogs at a three-day corpse. The Bear glowered at me while he continued his game, and I leaned against a wall and peered through the window at the yard outside while they exercised their eyes in my direction. I eyed the game briefly, to see whether they were playing with fullams or some other form of loaded dice, but I am not experienced enough to tell. Dice are a mug's game. The sharpers know how to trap a coney and empty his purse in minutes. The three played on, the hatted man seemingly joining in without speaking.

It was hard to see through the window at first, but I knew

that place, and in my mind's eye I could fit the people to the scene, even with the filthy and smeared glass.

The great looming bulk of the cathedral was just down from here. I could make out the steeple against the sky, the roofs of the canons' houses, and even the school for poor boys. And all about them were the people of the city, wandering and bellowing.

There were days when this city drove me to distraction. I come from Whitstable, and the ribald cries of the hucksters and whores demanding attention, the shrieks of the little brats begging for food or coin so they could go and buy drink for idle parents, or to take themselves to oblivion, made me feel sick. The idea of providing a service for money was sneered at, when the lazy brats could win a rich man's coins, but I did not begrudge them that, although I did dislike their habit of picking on a fellow like me. These dregs of society were all too keen on deriding a fellow's dress or sneering at him when he gave them nothing. Still, the wenches selling their pies and apples had busy lives of grim effort, just as I did. They toiled hard, as hard as any scavenger cleaning the streets of refuse. And they were just as necessary, but also dangerous, to a man like me, if they took it into their heads to denounce a fellow trying to nip a bung.

The point was, many new people came every day, expecting to find streets paved with slabs of gold. They arrived from towns and villages all over the kingdom, walking with the drovers bringing their animals to Smithfield, riding on mules, or joining one of the teams of packhorses that made their way from as far away as Exeter or even Durham, attracted by the frenetic lure of sex and money, just like ravens to a corpse.

Inevitably, the newcomers would end up here, in St Paul's on Ludgate Hill. And this is where I'd meet them.

It's where I met him. I really wish I hadn't.

TWO

I was a professional already, and I could spot them a mile off.

Wide-eyed, confused, they'd wander the streets staring upwards with their daft mouths agape at the magnificent tall buildings, rich stonework and expensive carvings. Most of them had never seen a house with more decoration than an annual covering of limewash; here in the city, often a man set store more by how ostentatious the outside of his house was, rather than have any comfort inside, and these places showed it.

Never pick the older ones. That was my first, my hard and fast rule. Older folks would have more experience, and may be on the lookout for a cutpurse. No, I'd always head towards the youngsters, the lads too overwhelmed and befuddled to chew the straw in their mouths. You could promise them much and make a small fortune from their foolishness before they'd realized they'd been gulled.

But there was a problem with this rule: if you always went for the youngsters, you invariably ended up with purses that were almost weightless. They had so little left after a journey here. All their money was spent on the roads heading to London, and robbing them was as pointless as stealing the flame from a candle. It would not benefit me. And I was hungry.

So today I was waiting to find a new target, one who could help me to find a good meat pie and a quart of beer. I had already failed to steal one purse, taken another that contained only a few bone counters that would be suited to a game of merrills or backgammon, and one clipped coin. Not enough for more than a cup of beer.

'You standing there hoping to play?'

This from the bearded man. He glared at me like a miller seeing a rat in his sack.

'Nay, I am waiting for a friend.'

'You keep looking at us as though you're watching our play.'

'I will turn my back.'

'You'll feel my boot in your arse if you don't piss off!'

The fair man was already laughing uproariously, while the man with the hat remained at the table, but any relief I felt at their lack of attention was quickly dispelled as the big man climbed to his feet, fists ready clenched. I strolled away, but as I heard him approach, I hurried.

I swear I could feel his boot at my buttocks as I hurtled through the door and almost into the fellow who was soon to become the fellow I most feared in the whole world.

I'd seen him walking about the street that morning while I was watching for a target. He was loitering like a man of leisure.

Broad-shouldered, he had a thin beard and sallow complexion. His eyes were a little yellowish, like a man who'd spent too many hours out of the sun, and at first glance I would have marked him as a man who had the pox or malaria. It was a false first impression, though. On a second look, he didn't seem unwell. A good thing, too, for else the dainty wench at his side would have dropped him in an instant. She was dressed in sober but fashionable style, with a most lecherous twinkle in her eye when she looked at her man, but when she glanced in my direction, that twinkle died like a snuffed candle.

He was clearly wealthy. There was no chance that this woman would have been with him for long if his purse was empty, for I knew her. She was Ann Derby, one of the brightest, sweetest, shrewdest little tarts who ever lifted skirts for a coin.

I fixed my best and brightest apologetic smile to my face and bowed and apologized most prettily, if I say so myself, and eventually the fellow grunted that he was unharmed, and took his hand from his sword's hilt. However, he was no easy hob ready for a fleecing. I could see that from the way that he set a hand on his purse as soon as look at me. This was not a newly arrived innocent ready to be saved from excessive spending by my swift fingers, and Ann took his arm to walk

between him and me, too obviously keen on the idea of liberating his purse herself. She didn't want to share it with me. I was left muttering a curse under my breath.

Turning and looking about me, I saw another face I recognized. On a low staircase that gave up to a shop front, I saw my comrade Bill. It was rare to see him out like this. The fencing cove was happier to keep to his bench where others would bring their winnings to him, but there he was. Good old Bill. If it weren't for him, I would have nowhere to trade my prizes, nowhere to rest my head. He was peering in my direction, but I don't think he saw me. He was searching for someone else. Fleeting, I wondered who.

However, I had no time to ponder about him overlong. As Ann and her man passed on, I saw another fellow who was clearly perfect, only a short distance away.

He was a younger man with much more money than sense, and the gaudy, fashionable clothes to prove it. Slashed sleeves and more buttons than could easily be fitted to their holes in an entire morning, he was rolling in a manner guaranteed to attract the attention of any number of fly nips or foists. More, those clothes were worn and stained. He was a recent visitor, or I was a Fleming. With his clothing and his general air of dissolute living, I felt sure I had a target worthy of at least one or two meals. His purse looked overfull, which is always a good sign in my eyes.

I carefully took the battered coin from my purse and allowed it to fall, stepping on it in an instant. A man cannot leave a penny lying in the street for two breaths without some thieving urchin snatching it up. As the gull stumbled past, I raised it with a frown. 'Master? I believe you dropped this,' I said. 'Does your purse have a hole?'

The poor, befuddled fellow turned his blank gaze to me, and I held it aloft. Well, who would deny ownership? His stare moved from me to the coin, to the purse at his belt, and he rattled the purse. It chinked delightfully, indicating to anyone who could be interested that here was a most friendly purse, feeling a little overfull and eager to share a pleasant evening in the company of a fellow with a liking for a life of comfort. I knew that purse and I would get along well.

But before I could open my mouth, a flaxen-haired harpy, with the sharp, furious face of an alewife who finds her customer has been drinking all night and now cannot pay the reckoning, stopped before us and screeched at him.

'So there you are! Two weeks, almost, and you've deigned to return?'

'Mistress, you must not . . .'

'Must not, mustn't I? What mustn't I, eh? When my husband goes dipping his wick in another woman's . . .'

'Agnes, in the name of God, go home! You are making an unnecessary scene. Trust me!'

'What? Trust you?' she spat. 'Do you think me a fool? Do you think I'm blind?'

'Don't make a scene!' he pleaded, his eyes darting hither and thither as though expecting a captain and his soldiers to appear at any moment.

'I *hate* you!'

With that, she burst into tears and ran off down the road towards the cathedral.

There are never good moments to intervene between a husband and wife, but this seemed like a heaven-sent opportunity for me. The man might not have been a newcomer as I had first thought, but he was clearly in need of companionship.

'Master, you should have a leather worker look at your purse,' I said. 'There are so many men about here who would steal the teeth from your jaw; if one were to see your money falling so easily, they would cut the strings in a trice and be off to the stewards to spend it.'

'But there is no hole,' the man said. His tone was that of a boy told that his favourite toy had been eaten by the dog, fretful and sullen now his woman had gone.

'Mayhap the coin was ejected by the others for being less than sociable,' I smiled, desperately trying to avoid gazing longingly at the purse. 'Are you new to the city?'

'No! I live here.'

'Really?' I had guessed that, of course. Why else would his woman have been here, too? Still, his accent was so slow and dull, it was as bovine as the cattle I guessed he tended. I

thought he sounded as though he came from Suffolk. Only later did I learn he came from the other direction, from far-off Devon. But he was speaking the truth: he had been living in London long enough. He had been going to say something else: where he was to, or where he was from, I guessed. It mattered little to me. 'If you don't recall this penny, why do we not go in and have a pot or two of ale as good companions should? Someone else lost it and we can make good use of it.'

'No, I have an urgent duty. I must go and fulfil my task.'

'Perhaps you should visit the cathedral? St Paul's is only just here, my friend. Come, you are cold, and it is warmer inside. Besides, it is always a sound scheme to offer thanks to Him for safe delivery after a long journey.'

'No. I must complete my mission before I rest. I have a message. A most important message,' he said.

'For whom?'

But that was as much as he was prepared to divulge. I smiled and teased and cajoled, but I wasn't truly interested in some message. All I wanted was the opportunity to take hold of that purse. I needed something that day. So far, all I had was a set of bone counters.

I'd even given him my last blasted penny.

THREE

Bone counters? Yes. And one clipped penny.

I was not having a good day. Earlier, I had seen a fellow who looked ideal. He was a youth of some eighteen or nineteen years, clad in a jacket that had plainly been made for him two summers earlier, a cloak that had seen the underside of more than one hedge, and the gaping, mazed stare of the newly arrived. However, for all that he was young and new to the city, he had a purse that looked most interestingly full, and I was determined to become better acquainted with it.

It would be tedious to explain my approach to him – the slow, blinking confusion on his ale-bloated features, the slight stumble that allowed me to trip him over my leg, the swift nip of his laces with my concealed knife, and then the profuse apologies and quick assistance to help him to his feet, dusting him with one hand while the other slipped his pleasantly weighty purse under my shirt. I left him to go on his way with a cheery wave and smile, and walked increasingly swiftly in the opposite direction.

There are some gulls who are a problem, and who require hard effort just to be able to speak a few words to them. Others are so suspicious that even a man as apparently honest as me cannot approach within a few feet. This fellow was as easy as a child. Most men who carry large purses can be relied upon to be cautious. They don't get to acquire large purses by giving away all their wealth like this lummoX.

I soon discovered why. His purse was full, but not in a way that would enrich me. Inside there was one clipped penny and many bone counters, the sort that a gambling club might use. They were useless to me, and I almost cast the purse, bone coins and all, into the gutter. But then I thought the better of it. Someone might value those counters. I shoved it back into my shirt and continued on my way.

So, now I had this new gull.

I could see only one way to get near to him, and that involved investing more than my solitary penny. I persuaded the fellow, at length, to join me in a sup or two, and he finally agreed, walking with me back into the tavern from which I had been ejected so recently. I pushed my way inside with the youth trailing behind me. Willing or no, he had little choice: I had the hem of his cloak in my hand.

Inside, I caught the eye of the barman and soon had a jug of ale and two cups. Pushing my guest towards a bench and table in a corner, I began to think that the day was going to go well. I was looking forward to a drink, but I was looking forward with still more enthusiasm to the first opportunity of looking into that purse.

‘You again!’

It was the man into whom I had almost run earlier. He and Ann Derby were there, staring at me disapprovingly. As my companion and I stood at the bench, his woman rested her buttocks on the smooth wood with barely a hint of reluctance. It was only natural. The boards were as filthy as the rest of the tavern. I bowed and looked about me for an alternative rest for my weary legs, but only succeeded in catching the eye of the dice-player with the hat. He appeared to be studying me with some interest, and I quickly looked away again. There was something about his gaze that was deeply unsettling.

Since the woman and her gallant had taken our bench, all I could do was stand nearby with my gull. I was happy to be barged into and pushed ever nearer the fellow, and at last I was close enough to filch his finances, but even as I moved my hand, the man on the bench asked my companion to sit beside him. I was to be cheated again! And then I saw that the youth’s purse was gone. Fleetinglly, with the eyes of a professional, I saw his purse move swiftly in the hands of the man on the bench. He had not only stolen my blasted bench, but he’d taken my bird’s money, too. That was pushing arrogance to the limits! But what should I do?

There was only one thing I could do. I sat quickly, forcing the man and woman apart. The alternative would

have been for me to take residence on the woman's lap, and Ann clearly had no desire for my closer proximity. Instead, she gave me a fierce glare and reluctantly shuffled along slightly. The man, of course, had no desire to cause a fuss while he had my man's purse in his hand. He gave me a sour gaze, which I returned with a wide smile. And then, as I was considering how to acquire what he had taken, I felt a tug on my cloak, and a moment later something was thrust into my hand.

You must understand that we three were sitting so tightly packed that it was an easy mistake to make. He had thought to pass the purse to his accomplice, you see, and had no idea that my hand was resting there.

I saw all this in a flash and acted accordingly. I grasped the purse of bone counters I had taken that morning, and tugged the lady's skirt. A hand came forward, I thrust the purse into it, took up my gull's purse, concealing it beneath my cloak, and then stood and made my way to the door.

As I did so, the men playing dice looked up. The fellow in the hat stepped forward, blocking my path, and I was struck with a sudden conviction that he knew more about me than I would like. So, with an airy nonchalance, I tacked and went to the back of the tavern. A door there, I knew, gave out into the alley behind, where men made use of the walls for their privy. Once there, I searched quickly for an escape, but there was nothing to be found. I was trapped! In the absence of another idea, I hurried to conceal myself behind a stack of long planks of wood that were set like a pavilion against the wall, with a pile of trash to one side waiting to be taken to the midden. There was little enough space to hide there, but when I reached it, I discovered that, set into the wall behind the planks, there was a doorway. I hoped that it might be persuaded to open. I tried the latch cautiously.

I was not a moment too soon. Almost immediately, I heard the tavern's door shoved wide, and, peering between two long planks, I saw my young victim. He stood with an expression of baffled consternation as he stared about him, and I hastily drew my eye back in case I might be seen. My hand on the latch felt it rise. I pulled open the door, glancing back towards

my gull. As I did so, there was a slamming thud on the back of my head, and I knew no more.

And that is that.

As I said, I came to and saw the body. When I was knocked out, I had fallen forward from my concealment, and the man's body lay near me, dead. I heard the door opening and shutting, the loud footsteps, but I had paid them little heed because I was suddenly recalling everything. I had been struck down, and I had a quick panic that I could have been robbed! Patting my shirt, I soon reassured myself that the purse was still there, and I was congratulating myself when I heard the door, the steps and now a gasp.

Perhaps you will have already spotted my mistake. I had paid no heed to the man who had left the tavern, but now I was suddenly wide awake, so it seemed, although with a thundering head. I reviewed the scene that must have met the man's eyes: a fellow dead on the ground; second fellow beside him, gripping a bloody dagger. No, this wouldn't look good.

When I glanced up, wincing, I saw that Ann Derby's friend was standing in the doorway. He was looking at me with a cold face, as though I was a murderer or something. Well, perhaps he wasn't to be blamed for that, but there was no need, in my opinion, for his sudden pulling of the door wide and his bellow inside calling for the constable. And then I saw him draw a short riding sword.

You will have seen fights; so have I. I've seen men fight with sticks, with daggers, with swords, and, if I am honest, I am more than capable of defending myself. I am young, and those who have tried to injure me have tended to be older, slower and, more to the point, generally unaware that I was going to attack them. Invariably, I've noticed, folks can get hurt when their opponent is prepared. I try to avoid giving away any important clues that could allow my enemy to ready himself. More, I have also noticed that when a man with a short knife is attacked by a man with a sword – any sword – the result for the fellow with the knife can be unpleasant.

I didn't intend to find out how unpleasant, which is why I took to my heels. The door that had been behind me was ajar. At the other side, there was an alley full of noisome fumes that proved men didn't always bother to seek a privy, and I was along it faster than a flea finding a new host.

I made it back to our room, a clear half mile away.

I have run from many things in my life. As a boy I learned quickly that it's better to get away than to hang around and receive punishment. I am experienced, but that mad pelting along alleys and up small streets was terrifying. All the way, I fancied I could hear boots in close pursuit, but when I run, I run to win: never look back – that just slows you. One thing you learn early on in a career as a thief is to focus on where you're going. Whence you came matters very little, and those following can take care of themselves.

I ran along to St Paul's, out towards Ludgate, then up an alley beside St Martin's until I was close to Newgate, where I turned right. I had hoped to find – and was glad to see – that the Shambles was packed with people stocking up on meats. Carcasses and barrows of joints were being carried here and there, because the rumours of Wyatt's rebel army approaching London meant many families were keen to feed well in case there would be a siege. I darted in among the people, ran into the yard of St Martin's Le Grand, then took a left and bolted down a lane to St Nicholas's, before nipping down to Paternoster Street. From there it was easy enough to take a circuitous route homewards to the great river.

There are many hovels in the city. For me, the best place always was down near the river. There you get the fresh smells of the water, rather than the foul reek of sewage in the roads. Our place was along Trig Lane, an ancient building that had been used for constructing boats, allegedly, but more recently, from the smell, had been used to fill barrels full of herrings. I shared the large room in the roof with my friends. It was where our company's leader, Bill, conducted his business, and where we all slept.

'What's the matter with you? You look like you're in a dead sweat,' Moll called from her bed. She was lying in a deliciously amorous pose with Bill, as usual.

In the circumstances, I thought hers an unfortunate phrase.

'Nothing,' I said.

'That's the first "Nothing" I've seen that's made you so pale and anxious,' Bill commented. He peered at me as he rose from the bed. 'What's happened?' he said, almost aggressively, as though suspecting that I had led the tipstaff to our home. Apart from being jealous of his bedding Moll, I also disliked his suspicion whenever I came back from an escapade.

'Aye, well,' I said grumpily.

Moll rose languidly, and I stared at her like a lecher twice my age. She came towards me and I could smell the after-effects of lovemaking. She bent past me to reach for a jug and drank from it. 'There's nothing like sex after a good morning, is there?' she said.

'You've had a good one?' I asked.

'Moll's only just back. She took a good purse,' Bill called. He climbed from his bed and pulled a shirt over his head. 'She always brings in more than the rest of you put together.'

'Where was that, Moll?'

'In the cathedral. He kept staring at me,' she said, putting a hand under each breast and raising them with a saucy grin. She could have tempted the Angel Gabriel, that woman.

'What about you, Bill?' I said. 'I saw you up at—'

He cut me off sharply. 'What have you brought?'

I set my jaw. He could be like that sometimes. I tried to be friendly, but all too often he would treat me like a wayward younger brother, one who had little brain. Well, I was not so dim.

'He's not well,' Ham said. 'Look at him.'

'He looks pale,' Moll said. She reached up and wiped the hair from my brow, peering with concern. 'You have mud on your face, Jack. Has someone been flinging shit at you?'

'I fell,' I said.

Bill gave a dry laugh. 'So you came back with nothing? What, you tripped on a loose cobble, did you? We need

money to eat, Jack. You can't live here at our expense all the time. I don't want others to run risks just because you're not capable.'

'I can do my job,' I said grumpily.

'Where did you fall, then?' Bill asked.

Moll shook her head. 'It doesn't matter, as long as Jack's all right.'

'Ach, he's not used to such news,' Wat said. 'That's why he's pale. What of it, eh? None of us are.'

'What news?' I demanded.