



## The Beating of His Wings (Left Hand of God Trilogy Book 3)

By Paul Hoffman

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**Following the bestselling novels *The Left Hand of God* and *The Last Four Things* comes the final installment of Paul Hoffman's stark, epic trilogy. *Thomas Cale has been running from the truth....***

Since discovering that his brutal military training has been for one purpose—to destroy God's greatest mistake, mankind itself—Cale has been hunted by the very man who made him into the Angel of Death: Pope Redeemer Bosco.

Cale is a paradox: arrogant and innocent, generous and pitiless. Feared and revered by those who created him, he has already used his breathtaking talent for violence and destruction to bring down the most powerful civilization in the world.

But Thomas Cale's soul is dying. As his body is racked with convulsions, he knows that the final judgment will not wait. As the day of reckoning draws close, Cale's sense of vengeance leads him back to the heart of darkness—the Sanctuary—and to confront the person he hates most in the world....

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

#### Praise for the Left Hand of God Series

“Brooding and magnificent. Hoffman has created a terrifying world and fitted it with strange and complex characters.”—Eoin Colfer, *New York Times* Bestselling Author of *Artemis Fowl*

“The *Ender’s Game*—meets-the-Inquisition premise should draw fans like moths to a flame....A rousing next step for fans of Terry Goodkind, R. A. Salvatore, and their ilk.”—*Library Journal*

“[An] increasingly epic tale, full of grand passions that twist in the hand like a knife blade.”—The A.V. Club

#### About the Author

**Paul Hoffman** studied English at New College, Oxford, before becoming a senior film censor at the British Board of Film Classification. He is the author of *The Left Hand of God* and *The Last Four Things*.

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### PRAISE FOR THE *LEFT HAND OF GOD* SERIES

#### ALSO BY PAUL HOFFMAN

#### The Beating of His Wings

THE Publishers of *The Beating of His Wings* are ordered by the International Court of Archaeological Artifacts to print this judgment on the first page of each copy.

#### Moderator Breffni Waltz

#### 38th of Messidor AD 143.830

SUMMARY of Preliminary Judgment dated Republican Era 143.710 from the International Court of Archaeological Artifacts concerning the *Left Hand of God* trilogy and administration of the so-called “Rubbish Tips of Paradise.” These “tips,” for the avoidance of doubt, constitute the four square miles centered on the first discovery by Paul Fahrenheit of large amounts of printed paper dating from extreme antiquity. My judgment is preliminary and subject to review in the first instance by the Court of Pleas. However, an immediate decision is required because of the claim by UNAS that irreplaceable documents and artifacts are being lost forever, citing the routine use of the contents of the Rubbish Tips of Paradise as toilet paper by the nomadic tribes that frequently pass through the site.

The facts of this case are not in dispute and are as follows: This litigation has its origins in the first landing on the moon by Captain Victoria Ung Khanan some thirty years ago. That within days Captain Khanan

discovered she had been beaten to this greatest of all firsts by some 165,000 years was as great a shock, perhaps, as has ever been delivered to WoMankind. The fragile remnants of what must have been an even more fragile spacecraft revealed that it had its origins in a vanished terrestrial civilization we knew nothing about, a civilization which soon became known as the Flag People, after the starred and striped insignia planted next to the craft. As a result, the Unified Nations Archaeological Survey was founded with the sole purpose of searching for evidence of the Flag People on earth itself.

So far this search has proved fruitless and for one simple reason: ice. UNAS quickly discovered that 164,000 years ago a period of major glaciation, now known as the Snowball, covered nearly the entire planet in ice, often to a depth of several miles. Ice that brings low vast mountain ranges has little problem removing the veneer of even the most complex civilization—clearly only the smallest rump of the population could have survived. Further investigation, however, revealed a later and significant period of warming during the Snowball, which for fifteen thousand years caused the ice to retreat far enough and long enough for new civilizations to emerge, before they in turn were swallowed up by the returning ice.

It is at this point in this frustrating story that Paul Fahrenheit emerged to criticize, to put it at its mildest, his colleagues for their obsession with technological solutions to this great problem. He pointed out that trying to find such wispy traces of the past was like “looking for hay in a haystack” unless they used “some mechanism” to guide the technology. The “mechanism” likely to prove most effective in narrowing down the haystack, he argued, was that of legend and folk story. He claimed that real historical events from the distant past could become embedded in what were apparently entirely imaginary stories of gods and monsters and other fantastical tales. His ideas were dismissed out of hand and the relationship between Fahrenheit and his colleagues and superiors at UNAS became what could only be called vituperative.

As a result, in the Ventose of Republican Era 139, Paul Fahrenheit left UNAS in pursuit of what to his colleagues was the very definition of a wild-goose chase—in search of what the isolated Habiru people called the Rubbish Tips of Paradise. It was here Mr. Fahrenheit thought he might be able to find the first terrestrial evidence if not of the Flag People then of the civilizations that briefly followed.

Four years after Paul Fahrenheit’s disappearance the first volume of a “fantasy” fiction trilogy entitled *The Left Hand of God* was published. It was widely translated into some twenty-six languages but its reception by both audiences and critics was highly polarized: it was greatly admired by some but much disliked by others for its peculiar tone and odd approach to the art of storytelling. How are these two apparently unrelated events connected? It turns out that Mr. Fahrenheit was behind the publication of *The Left Hand of God* and a subsequent volume, *The Last Four Things*. These books were very far from the contemporary works of escapist fantasy they were presented as. As it happens, Fahrenheit’s belief in the potential of the Rubbish Tips of Paradise was entirely on the mark. To cut a long and bitter story short, Fahrenheit took it into his head not to tell his former employer of his discovery, as he was legally bound to do. Instead, he claimed UNAS would, and I quote, “smother the undoubted brilliance of what I have called *The Left Hand of God* trilogy in a dreary academic translation worked over by an army of self-serving pedants who would bury its vitality under a layer of high-minded dullness, footnotes and incomprehensible and obscurantist analysis.”

Fahrenheit became obsessed with his belief that the modern world should confront these three books in something of the way their original audience might have confronted them. As a result, he took it upon himself to translate them (a considerable intellectual feat recognized even by his detractors) and have them published under his mother’s family name as the above contemporary works of fiction. Who knows how long this curious subterfuge might have worked were it not for Mr. Fahrenheit’s indiscreet pillow talk with a young woman, who, it turned out, was not as trustworthy as he believed and who promptly sold the story to a news tablet, which in turn led to UNAS applying to this court for an injunction putting the Rubbish Tips of

Paradise under their legal control.

The Unified Nations Archaeological Survey is granted, as requested, complete but temporary control over the site.

However, its suit to prevent the publication of the final “novel” in the *Left Hand of God* trilogy, *The Beating of His Wings*, in a translation by Paul Fahrenheit, is denied. Publication may proceed under the condition that the summary of this judgment is printed at the beginning of *The Beating of His Wings*. Both UNAS and Paul Fahrenheit are given leave to add an appendix at the conclusion of the work in which they may explain their positions.

## PART ONE

I came alone and I go as a stranger. I do not know who I am, or what I have been doing.

Aurangzeb

1

### **A brief report on Thomas Cale, Lunatic. Three conversations at the Priory on the Island of Cyprus.**

*(NB This appraisal took place after Mother Superior Allbright's stroke. The notes she filed have been mislaid along with Cale's admission details. This report needs to be read in the light of this absence and so I will not be held liable for any of my conclusions.)*

#### PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

Medium stature, unusually pale. Middle finger of his left hand missing. Depression fracture to the right side of his skull. Severe keloid scar tissue in wound in left shoulder. Patient says he experiences intermittent pain from all injuries.

#### SYMPTOMS

Severe retching, usually in midafternoon. Exhaustion. Suffers insomnia and bad dreams when able to sleep. Loss of weight.

#### HISTORY

Thomas Cale suffers no hysterical delusions or uncontrolled behavior beyond that of his sour nature. His midafternoon retching leaves him speechless with exhaustion, after which he sleeps. By late evening he is able to talk, although he is the most sarcastic and wounding of persons. He claims to have been bought for sixpence from parents he does not remember by a priest of the Order of the Hanged Redeemer.

Thomas Cale is droll, not his least irritating affectation, and always tries either to make his interlocutor unsure as to whether he is mocking them or, by unpleasant contrast, to make it abundantly clear that he is. He tells the story of his upbringing in the Sanctuary as if daring me to disbelieve the daily cruelties he endured. Recovering from an injury which caused the dent in his head he claims—again it is not possible to tell with what degree of seriousness—that his already great prowess (he seems boastful in hindsight, but not at the

time) was greatly increased as a result of the injury and that since this recovery he is always able to anticipate in advance any opponent's movements. This sounds unlikely; I declined his offer of a demonstration. The rest of his story is as improbable as the most far-fetched children's story of derring-do and swashbuckling. He is the worst liar I have ever come across.

His story briefly. His life of deprivation and military training at the Sanctuary came to a dramatic end one night after he accidentally came upon a high-ranking Redeemer in the middle of performing a live dissection upon two young girls, some kind of holy experiment to discover a means to neuter the power of women over mankind. Killing that Redeemer in the ensuing struggle, he escaped from the Sanctuary with the surviving young woman and two of his friends, with more Redeemers in vengeful pursuit. Evading their pursuers, the quartet ended up in Memphis, where, plausibly, Thomas Cale made many enemies and (rather less plausibly) a number of powerful allies, including the notorious IdrisPukke and his half brother, Chancellor Vipond (as he then was). Despite these advantages his violent nature asserted itself in a brutal but unusually nonfatal altercation with (so he says) half a dozen of the youths of Memphis in which (of course) he emerged triumphant but bound for prison. Nevertheless, Lord Vipond again mysteriously intervened on his behalf and he was sent into the countryside with IdrisPukke. The peace of the Materazzi hunting lodge where they were staying was interrupted shortly after he arrived by a woman who attempted to assassinate him, for reasons he was unable to clarify. His murder was prevented not by his own wonderful abilities—he was swimming naked at the time of the attack—but by a mysterious, unseen and insolent stranger who killed his would-be assassin by means of an arrow in the back. His savior then vanished without explanation or trace.

By now the priests of the Sanctuary had discovered his general whereabouts and attempted to flush him out (he claims) by kidnapping Arbell Materazzi, daughter of the Doge of Memphis. When I asked him why the Redeemers would risk a ruinous war with the greatest of all temporal powers for his sake, he laughed in my face and told me he would reveal his magnificent importance to me in due course. The inflated mad, in my experience, take their importance most seriously but it is a feature of Thomas Cale that his demented state only becomes apparent a few hours after a conversation with him comes to an end. While you are in his company even the most implausible stories he tells cause you to suspend disbelief until several hours later, when a most irritating sensation creeps over you, as if you had been tricked by a marketplace quack into parting with ready money for a bottle of universal remedy. I've seen this before in a lunatic, though rarely, in that some are so powerfully deluded and in such a strange way that their delusions run away with even the most cautious of anomists.

Of course, Thomas Cale rescues the beautiful princess from the wicked Redeemers but, it must be said, not by means of the fair and noble fight against overwhelming odds but by stabbing most of his opponents in their sleep. This is another unusual feature of his delusion—that each one of his endless triumphs is not generally achieved by heroism and noble audacity but through brutal trickery and conscienceless pragmatism. Usually such madmen present themselves as gallant and chivalrous, but Thomas Cale freely admits to poisoning his enemies' water with rotting animals and killing his opponents in their sleep. It's worth recording briefly one of our exchanges in this regard.

ME

Is it a matter of course with you that you always kill unarmed prisoners?

PATIENT

It's easier than killing armed ones.

ME

So you believe the lives of others are a matter for sarcasm?

PATIENT (NO REPLY)

ME

You never consider showing mercy?

PATIENT

No, I never did.

ME

Why?

PATIENT

They wouldn't have shown it to me. Besides, what would I do but let them go only to find I'd have to fight them again? Then I might become their prisoner—and be killed myself.

ME

What about women and children?

PATIENT

I never killed them deliberately.

ME

But you've killed them?

PATIENT

Yes. I've killed them.

He claimed to have built a camp to sequester the wives and children of the Folk insurrection and that because of his having been removed elsewhere almost the entire cantonment of five thousand souls died through famine and disease. When I asked him what he felt about this he replied: "What should I feel?"

To return to his story. After his brutal rescue of the beautiful Arbell Materazzi (are there any merely plain princesses in the world of the delusional?) he was promoted, along with his two friends, to guard the young woman toward whom he maintained throughout our three long conversations a deeply held resentment as to her ingratitude and disdain for him. This bitterness seems to hold a great sway over him because of his belief that when Memphis later fell to the Redeemers, it did so because the Materazzi failed to execute his plan to defeat them. (He is, by the way, very insistent that his skill in generalship is greater even than his talent for personal savagery.)

Usually sarcastic and matter-of-fact as he boasts of his great rise to power—again, his droll tone makes it seem not like boasting until one reflects upon his claims in tranquillity—he became most indignant as he

recounted the way in which he was caught by the Redeemers after the Battle of Silbury Hill (certainly a disaster for us all whether or not Thomas Cale was involved). It is possible he was caught up in the battle in a minor way; his description of the events there has the note of real experience. Like all skilled romancers he can use his actual events to make the imagined ones truly plausible. For example, he frequently expresses repentance for any noble or generous actions he has performed. He says that he risked his life to save a Materazzi youth who had bullied and tormented him—an act of sanctity which he says he now bitterly regrets. When I asked whether it was always bad to act generously toward others, he said that in his experience it might not be bad but it was always a “bloody catastrophe.” People thought so well of doing good, he said, that in the end they always decided it should be done at the end of a sword. The Redeemers thought so highly of goodness they wanted to kill everyone including themselves and start again. It turns out that this was the reason his former mentor, Redeemer Bosco, wanted him back at any price. Thomas Cale is (of course) no ordinary boy but the manifestation of God’s wrath and destined to wipe his greatest mistake (you and me, for the avoidance of doubt) off the face of the earth. I have treated shopkeepers who thought they were great generals and men who could barely write who thought they were poets of unparalleled genius but I have never encountered an inflation of such magnitude before—let alone in a child. When I asked him how long he’d had such feelings of importance, he began to backtrack and—with very bad temper—said that this was what Bosco thought, not what he, Thomas Cale, thought. More circumspectly, I asked him if he believed Redeemer Bosco was mad, and he replied he had never met a Redeemer who wasn’t and that in his experience a great many people who seemed to be right in the head, once you got to see them “put under grief,” were “completely barking”—an expression I have not encountered before though its meaning was clear enough.

He is clever, then, at avoiding the implications of his delusions of grandeur: in the opinion of great and powerful men he is mighty enough to destroy all the world but this delusion is not his but theirs. When I asked him if he *would* do such a thing his reply was extremely foul-mouthed but to the effect that he would not. When I asked whether he had the *ability* to do such a thing, he smiled—not pleasantly—and said he had been responsible for the deaths of ten thousand men killed in a single day, so it was only a question of how many thousands and how many days.

After his recapture by the Redeemer Bosco, his role of Angel of Death to the world was explained to him in detail and he was put to work by his former mentor. This “Bosco” (the new Pope is called Bosco but Thomas Cale clearly likes a big lie) is much hated by Cale although, since buying him for sixpence, training him and then elevating him to the power almost of a god, Bosco is paradoxically the source of all his excellence. When I pointed this out he claimed to know this already, though I could see I had scored a hit to his vanity (which is very great).

He then detailed an endless series of battles, which all sounded the same to me, and in which he was, of course, always victorious. When I asked if, during all these successes, he had not suffered even a few setbacks, he looked at me as if he would like to cut my throat and then laughed—but very oddly, more like a single bark, as if he could not contain something very far from high spirits or even mockery.

These numerous triumphs led in turn to his being less watched over by Bosco than formerly. And after yet another great battle, in which he overcame the greatest of all opponents, he slipped away in the resulting chaos and ended up in Spanish Leeds, where he suffered the first of the brain attacks that brought him here. I witnessed one of these seizures and they are alarming to watch and clearly distressing to endure—his entire body is racked by convulsions, as if he is trying to vomit but is unable to do so. He insists he has been sent here by friends of some power and influence in Spanish Leeds. Needless to say, of these important benefactors there is no sign. When I asked why they had not been to see him, he explained—as if I were an idiot—that he had only just arrived in Cyprus and that the distance was too great for them to travel to see him regularly. This great distance was a deliberate choice in order to keep him safe.

“From what?” I asked. “From all those who want me dead,” he replied.

He told me that he had arrived with an attendant doctor and a letter for Mother Superior Allbright. Pressed, he told me that the doctor had returned to Spanish Leeds the next day but that he had spent several hours with the Mother Superior before his departure. Clearly Thomas Cale must have come from somewhere, and there might indeed have been some sort of attendant who arrived with him bearing a letter and who spoke with the Mother Superior prior to her stroke. The loss, as it were, of both letter and Mother Superior leaves this case somewhat in the Limbo in which unbaptized infants are said to wait out eternity. Given the violent nature of his imaginings (though not, to be fair, his behavior) it seems wisest to place him in the protective ward until the letter can be found or the Mother Superior recovers enough to tell us more about him. As it stands, there is no one to whom I can even write to make inquiries about him. This is an unsatisfactory state of affairs and it is not the first time by a long chalk that records have gone missing. I will discuss the alleviation of his symptoms when the herbalist comes the day after tomorrow. As to his delusions of grandeur—in my opinion, treating those is the work of many years.

Anna Calkins, Anomist

For weeks Cale lay in bed, retching and sleeping, retching and sleeping. He became aware after a few days that the door at the end of the twenty-bed ward was locked at all times, but this was both something he was used to and, in the circumstances, hardly mattered: he was not in a fit state to go anywhere. The food was adequate, the care kindly enough. He did not like sleeping in the same room as other men once again but there were only nineteen of them and they all seemed to live in their own nightmares and were not concerned with him. He was able to stay quiet and endure.

2

THE Two Trevors, Lugavoy and Kovtun, had spent a frustrating week in Spanish Leeds trying to discover a way of getting to Thomas Cale. They had been thwarted by the cautious nature of the inquiries forced on them in Kitty the Hare’s city (as it had now become). It didn’t do to upset Kitty and they didn’t want him to know what they were up to. Kitty liked a bung, and the amount of money he’d expect for allowing them to operate in his dominion was not something they were keen to pay: this was to be their last job and they had no intention of sharing the reward with Kitty the Hare. Questions had to be discreet, which is not easy when fear is usually what you do, when threats are your legal tender. The two were considering more brutal methods when discretion finally paid off. They heard of a young seamstress in the town who had been encouraging a better class of client to come to her by boasting, truthfully, that she had made the elegant suit worn by Thomas Cale at his notoriously bad-tempered appearance at the royal banquet held in honor of Arbell Materazzi and her husband, Conn.

Who knows what helpful information Cale might have let slip while he was having his inside leg measured? Tailors were almost as good a source of information as priests, and easier to manipulate—the tailors’ immortal souls were not at risk for blabbing a bit of dropped gossip; there was no such thing as the silence of the changing room. But the young seamstress was not as easily menaced as they’d hoped.

“I don’t know anything about Thomas Cale, and I wouldn’t tell you if I did. Go away.”

This response meant that one of two things was going to happen. Trevor Kovtun had by now resigned himself to committing an atrocity of some kind, Kitty the Hare or not. He locked the shop door and brought down the shutter on the open window. The seamstress didn’t waste her time telling them to stop. They lowered their voices as they worked.

“I’m fed up with what we have to do to this girl,” said Trevor Lugavoy. This was both true and a way of frightening her. “I really do want this to be our last job.”

“Don’t say that. If you say it’s our last, then something will go wrong.”

“You mean,” said Lugavoy, “some supernatural power is listening and will thwart our presumption?”

“It doesn’t do any harm to act as if there were a God sometimes. Don’t tempt providence.”

Trevor Kovtun walked over to the seamstress, who had by now realized something dreadful had come into her life.

“You seem to be a clever little thing—your own shop, a sharp tongue in your head.”

“I’ll call the Badiel.”

“Too late for that now, my dear. There are no Badiels in the world we’re about to take you to—no defenders or preservers, no one at all to watch over you. Here in the city you believed you were safe, by and large—but being an intelligent girl you must have known there were horrible things out there.”

“We *are* those horrible things.”

“Yes, we are. We are bad news.”

“Very bad news.”

“Will you hurt him?” she said—looking for a way out.

“We will kill him,” said Trevor Kovtun. “But we’ve given our word to do it as quickly as we can. There will be no cruelty, just the death. You must make a decision about yourself—live or die.”

But what decision was there?

Later, on leaving the shop, Kovtun pointed out that even a year earlier they would have killed the girl in such an unspeakably vile way that any question of resistance to their investigations would have evaporated like the summer drizzle on the great salt flats of Utah.

“But that was a year ago,” said Trevor Lugavoy. “Besides, I’ve a feeling we’re running out of deaths. Best be thrifty. Cale should be our last ticket.”

“You’ve been saying we should stop almost since we started twenty years ago.”

“Now I mean it.”

“Well, you shouldn’t have said anything to me about finishing until we were done—then we could just have finished. Now that you’ve made a thing about this being our last job you’ve turned it into an event, so. If you want to get God’s attention, tell him your plans.”

“If there was a God who was interested in sticking his nose in, don’t you think he’d have put a stop to us by now? Either God intervenes in the lives of men or he doesn’t. There’s no halfway.”

“How do you know? His ends might be mysterious.”

They were experienced men and used to difficulties and they were not especially surprised to discover that Cale had gone somewhere else for reasons the girl was unclear about. But they had the name of Vague Henri, a good description of a boy with a scar on his face, and a convincing assurance that he'd know exactly where Cale had gone. Three days of hanging about followed, asking their unsuspicious questions and trying not to be conspicuous. In the end, patience was all that was required.

Vague Henri liked people but not the kind of people who lived in palaces. It wasn't that he hadn't made an effort. At one banquet at which he'd accompanied IdrisPukke he'd been asked, with a polite lack of attention, how he'd come to be there. Thinking they were interested in his extraordinary experiences he told them, starting with his life in the Sanctuary. But the details of the strange privations of the place did not fascinate; they repelled. Only IdrisPukke overheard the chinless wonder who said, "My God, the people they're letting in these days." But the next remark was heard by Vague Henri as well. He'd mentioned something about working in the kitchens in Memphis and some exquisite, intending to be overheard, drawled: "*How banal!*" Vague Henri caught the tone of contempt but couldn't be sure—he didn't know what it meant; perhaps it was an expression of sympathy and he'd misunderstood. Deciding it was time to leave, IdrisPukke claimed he was feeling unwell.

"What does barn owl mean?" asked Vague Henri on the way home. IdrisPukke was reluctant to hurt his feelings but the boy needed to know what the score was with these people.

"It means commonplace—beneath the interest of a cultured person. He was a drawler: it's pronounced *ban-al*."

"He wasn't being nice, then?"

"No."

He didn't say anything for a minute.

"I prefer barn owl," he said at last. But it stung.

Most of the time IdrisPukke was away on business for his brother and so Vague Henri was lonely. He now realized he wasn't acceptable to Spanish Leeds society, not even its lower rungs (who were, if anything, even more snobbish than their betters), so several times a week he took a walk to the local beer cellars and sat in a corner, sometimes striking up a conversation but mostly just eating and drinking and listening to other people enjoying themselves. He was too used to wearing a cassock to be comfortable in anything else and, like Cale, had got the seamstress to run him up a couple in blue bird's-eye: twelve ounce, peaked lapel and felted pockets, straight, no bezel. He was quite the dandy. But in Spanish Leeds, a fifteen-year-old in a cassock with a fresh scar on his cheek was hard to miss. The Two Trevors watched Vague Henri from the other side of the snug as he enjoyed a pint of Mad Dog, a beer he marginally preferred to Go-By-The-Wall or Lift Leg.

For the next two hours, to the irritation of the Two Trevors, he chatted away to various locals and was cornered for half an hour by an amiable drunk.

"D'yew liked metaled cheese?"

"Sorry?"

"D'yew like metaled cheese?"

"Oh," said Vague Henri, after a pause. "Do I like melted cheese?"

“Shwat I shed.”

But he didn’t mind. There was something miraculous to him still about the talk, buzz and laughter, the ordinary good times being had by almost everyone except the occasional maudlin boozier or angry bladdered toper. At chucking-out he left with the others, the inebriated and the sober. The Two Trevors followed at a cautious distance.

These experienced men were never careless; they were as prepared for the unexpected event as if one took place daily on the backs of their hands, but their position as they closed on Vague Henri was a little more hazardous than even these careful murderers had reckoned.

Cale’s reputation as an epic desperado had not so much overshadowed Vague Henri’s as caught it in a general eclipse. To the Two Trevors he was dangerous, no doubt—they knew his background as a Redeemer acolyte and that you would have to be unusually hard-wearing to make it to the age of fifteen—but they were not, in truth, expecting a nasty surprise, even though nasty surprises were something they were used to.

Be clear, two against one is hideous odds, particularly when it’s night and the Trevors are the two who want a word with you. But Vague Henri had already improved his chances: he knew he was being followed. They soon realized their mistake and stepped back into the shadows and called out to him.

“Vague Henri, is it?” said Trevor Lugavoy.

Vague Henri turned, letting them see the knife in his right hand and that he was easing a heartless-looking knuckleduster onto his left.

“Never heard of him. Buzz off.”

“We just want a word.”

Vague Henri opened his mouth as if in joyous surprise and welcome. “Thank God,” he said, “you’ve come with news of my brother, Jonathan.” He moved forward. Had Lugavoy, who was ten yards in front of Kovtun, not been an assassin of a very superior kind he would have had Vague Henri’s knife buried in his chest. Unluckily for Vague Henri, Lugavoy instantly backed away, alarmed by the boy’s oddness as he stepped forward and struck out. The trick that had earned Vague Henri his nickname, the sudden incomprehensible question or answer intended to distract, had failed, if only just. Now they were alert and the balance was in their favor once again.

“We want to talk to Thomas Cale.”

“Never heard of him, either.”

Vague Henri backed away. The Two Trevors moved apart and then forward—Lugavoy would make the first jab, Kovtun the second. There would be no more than four.

“Where is he, your friend?”

“No idea what you’re talking about, mate.”

“Just tell us and we’re on our way.”

“Come a bit closer and I’ll whisper it in your ear.”

They wouldn't have killed him right away, of course. The knife driven in three inches deep just above the lowest rib would have taken the fight out of the boy long enough to get some answers. Never before in his life and only once afterward was Vague Henri rescued—but tonight he was. In the almost silence of the trio's scuffling maneuvers there was a loud CLICK! from behind the two advancing men. All three knew the sound of the latch of an overstrung crossbow.

“Hello, Trevors,” said a cheerful voice from somewhere in the dark.

There was a moment's silence.

“That you, Cadbury?”

“Oh, indeed it is, Trevor.”

“You wouldn't shoot a man in the back.”

“Oh, indeed I would.”

But this wasn't quite the rescue in the nick of time so loved by magsmen and yarn-spinners and their gullible audiences. In fact, Cadbury had no idea who the young person in the peculiar clothes was. For all he knew, he might entirely deserve the fate the Two Trevors were about to hand out to him—the people they were paid to murder usually did. He had not been watching over him but, only in a manner of speaking, the Two Trevors.

They'd had a change of heart about Kitty after talking to the seamstress; it was no longer plausible to imagine he wouldn't become aware of their presence. So they'd observed the proper form by paying him a visit and, while declining to say what their business was in Spanish Leeds, assured Kitty that it would not conflict with his own. As he pointed out to Cadbury later, who were these pair of murderers to know what did or did not conflict with Kitty the Hare's multitude of concerns? Kitty invited them to stay as long as they wished. The Two Trevors replied that they would almost certainly be gone by the following Monday. The result was that, at considerable expense and some difficulty, Cadbury had been keeping tabs on them, not the easiest of things to do. The reason he was here in person was that his watchful intelligencers had lost them for several hours and Cadbury had become nervous.

“What now?” said Trevor Lugavoy.

“Now? Now you buzz off like the young man said. And I mean out of Spanish Leeds. Go on a pilgrimage to beg forgiveness for your shitload of sins. I hear Lourdes is particularly horrible at this time of year.”

And that was that. The Two Trevors moved to the wall opposite Vague Henri, but before they merged with the dark, Lugavoy nodded toward him. “See you.”

“Lucky for you, old man,” said Vague Henri, “that he came when he did.” Then they were gone.

“This way,” said Cadbury. As Vague Henri stepped behind him he let go of the overstrung bow and with an enormous TWANG! the bolt shot into the blackness, bouncing between the narrow walls in a criss-cross series of pings. As Vague Henri and his not-exactly rescuer put on some speed down the road, a mildly offended distant voice called out to them,

“You want to be careful, Cadbury. You could've had someone's eye out.”

It was unfortunate that Cadbury and Vague Henri met under such circumstances. The latter was no fool and

was getting less foolish all the time—but if someone saves your life only the most disciplined could fail to be grateful. And he was, after all, still just a boy.

Cadbury's offer to stay with him for the evening was well taken and Vague Henri very much needed the several drinks he was offered on top of the ones he'd had already. No surprise then that he told Cadbury a great deal more than he should have. Cadbury was, when not murdering or carrying out doubtful business on behalf of Kitty the Hare, an amiable and entertaining presence, and as capable and desiring of affection and friendship as anyone else. In short, he quickly developed a fondness for Vague Henri, and not one like that of IdrisPukke's for Cale that was particularly difficult to understand. It even had the mark of true friendship, if by that one means the willingness of friends to put aside their own interests for the other's. Cadbury decided it might be better if Vague Henri were not drawn to Kitty the Hare's attention in any more distinctive way than he already had been (as an unimportant familiar of Thomas Cale). Kitty was skilled at not letting you become aware of what he knew or did not know.

“They are *hoi oligoi* of assassins,” Cadbury replied to Vague Henri's questions. “The Two Trevors cut down William the Silent in broad daylight, surrounded by a hundred bodyguards; they poisoned the lampreys of Cleopatra even though she had three tasters. When he heard what they'd done to her, the Great Snopes was so afraid that he ate nothing he hadn't picked himself—but one night they smeared all the apples in his orchard using a strange device they made themselves. They leave no survivors. Whoever it is that Cale has upset, they have money and a great deal of it.”

“I'd better disappear.”

“Well, if you can vanish into thin air, then by all means do so. But if you can't evaporate you're better off where you are. Not even the Two Trevors will ignore Kitty the Hare's instruction to stay away from Spanish Leeds.”

“I thought they could get to anyone?”

“So they can. But Kitty isn't just anyone. Besides, no one has paid them for such a risk. They'll look for another way. Just stay out of sight for the next week, until I can say for certain that they've gone.”

3

IT was midmorning and Cale was waiting to go mad again. It was a sensation something like the uneasy feeling before a chunder heaves out the poisons of a toxic meal: the sense of a horrible, almost living creature gaining strength in the bowels. It must come but it will take its time, not yours, and the waiting is worse than the spewing up. A juggernaut was on its way, passengered by devils: Legion, Pyro, Martini, Leonard, Nanny Powler and Burnt Jarl, all of them gibbering and shrieking in Cale's poor tum.

Face to the wall, knees to his chest, waiting for it to be over with, he felt a hefty shove in the back. He turned.

“You're in my bed.”

The speaker was a tall young man who looked as if his clothes were filled not by flesh but large ill-shapen potatoes. For all his lumpiness there was real power here.

“What?”

“You’re in my bed. Get out.”

“This is my bed. I’ve had it for weeks.”

“But I want it. So now it’s mine. Understand?”

Indeed, Cale did understand. The days of invincibility were over for the foreseeable future. He picked up his few possessions, put them in his sack, went over to a free corner and had his attack of the conniptions as quietly as he could.

In Spanish Leeds, Vague Henri was on his way back to his room in the castle, protected as far as the gate by four of Cadbury’s stooges, and with a promise of financial help from his new friend in the matter of the Purgators. Vague Henri detested all one hundred and fifty of these former Redeemers who Cale had saved from Brzca’s knife—for the simple reason that they were still Redeemers as far as he was concerned. But they were valuable because they would now follow Cale anywhere, under the entirely mistaken belief that he was their great leader and as devoted to them as they were to him. Cale had used them to fight his way across the Swiss border, intending to desert them as soon as he and Vague Henri were safe. But Cale soon realized that controlling so many trained soldiers willing to die for him would be extremely useful in the violent times ahead, however much he loathed their presence. There was one weakness in Cale’s plan: how to pay the ruinous amount of money it cost to keep so many in idleness until the expected war started—which, of course, it might not. With Cale gone, Vague Henri desperately needed money for himself and for the keep of the Purgators. He also needed a friend and he had found both in Cadbury, who thought it useful to have someone indebted to him who could draw on such a resource in these uncertain times. It was clear that Vague Henri was unwilling to discuss Cale’s whereabouts and would only say that he was ill but would be back in a few months. Cadbury was too smart to raise Vague Henri’s suspicions by pressing him. Instead of asking questions he offered help—a winning strategy in all circumstances.

Now Kitty had an influence over someone who knew and understood the Purgators and who possessed information about the whereabouts of Thomas Cale. This information might become important in due course and now he knew where to get it should this prove necessary. Kitty the Hare was a person of intelligence but also considerable instinct. When it came to Cale, he shared Bosco’s belief in his remarkable possibilities, if not their supernatural origin; but news of Cale’s illness, however vague, meant that Kitty’s plans for him might have to be revised. On the other hand, they might not. It would depend on what kind of sickness was at issue. Desperate and dangerous times were coming and Kitty the Hare needed to prepare for them. The potential usefulness of Thomas Cale was too great to let the question of his current ill-health entirely diminish Kitty’s interest in what became of him.

A thumb on every scale and a finger in every pie was Kitty’s reputation, but these days most of his concentration was on what was being weighed and cooked in Leeds Castle, the great keep that scraped the skies above the city. Its fame for not having required a defense in over four hundred years was now threatened, and King Zog of Switzerland and Albania had arrived to discuss its defense with his chancellor, Bose Ikard, a man he disliked (his great-grandfather had been in trade) but knew he could not do without. It was said of Zog that he was wise about everything except anything of importance—a worse insult than it appeared, in that his wisdom was confined to skill at setting his favorites against one another, reneging on promises and a talent for taking bribes through his minions. If they were caught, however, he made such a show of punishing them and expressing complete outrage at their crimes that he was generally more renowned for his honesty than otherwise.

All the posh with power, the who whom, the nobs who had gathered in Leeds Castle to discuss the possibility of staying out of the coming war were anxious to become favorites, if they were not already, and to stay that

way if they were. Nevertheless, there were many who disliked Zog on a matter of principle. They were particularly agitated at the great gathering because on his way to Leeds he had stuck his royal nose into a village council inquiry (he was a relentless busybody in minor affairs of state) regarding an accusation that a recently arrived refugee from the war was, in fact, a Redeemer spy. Convinced of the man's guilt, Zog had stopped the proceedings and ordered his execution. This upset many of the great and good because it brought home to them the fragile nature of the laws that protected them: if, as one of them said, a man can be hanged before he has been tried, how long before a man can be hanged before he has offended? Besides, even if he were guilty it was obviously foolish to upset the Redeemers by hanging one of them while there was still, they hoped, a chance of peace. His actions were both illegal and thoughtlessly provocative.

Zog was of a fearful disposition and the news from his informers that a notorious pair of assassins had been seen in the city had unnerved him to the extent that he had come into the great meeting hall wearing a jacket reinforced with a leather lining as protection against a knife attack. It was said that his fear of knives came from the fact that his mother's lover had been stabbed in her presence while she was pregnant with Zog, which was also the reason for his bandy legs. This particular weakness also caused him to lean on the shoulders of his chief favorite, at that time the much despised Lord Harwood.

There were perhaps fifty *hoi oligoi* of Swiss society present, most of them beaming with witless subservience as is the way of people in the presence of royalty. The remainder looked at their monarch with much loathing and distrust as he shuffled down the aisle of the great hall, leaning on Harwood, with his left hand fiddling around near his favorite's groin, a habit that increased in intensity whenever he was nervous. Zog's tongue was too large for his mouth, which made him an appallingly messy eater according to IdrisPukke, who had in better times dined with him often. Careless of changing his clothes, you could tell what meals he had gobbled in the previous seven days, said IdrisPukke, from looking closely at the front of his shirt.

After much royal faffing about, Bose Ikard began a forty-minute address in which he set out the present situation regarding the intentions of the Redeemers, concluding that while the possibility of war was not to be discounted, there were strong reasons to believe that Swiss neutrality could be maintained. Then, like a magician producing not merely a rabbit but a giraffe out of a hat, he took a piece of paper from his inside pocket and waved it before the meeting. "Two days ago I met with Pope Bosco himself, just ten miles from our border, and here is a paper which bears his name upon it as well as mine." There was a gasp and even a single cheer of anticipation. But on the faces of Vipond and IdrisPukke there was only dismay. "I would like to read it to you. 'We, the Pontiff of the true faithful, and Chancellor of all the Swiss by consent of the King of Switzerland, are agreed in recognizing that peace between us is of the first importance.'" There was a loud burst of applause, some of it spontaneous.

"And"—more applause—"and that we are agreed never to go to war with one another again."

Cheers of high relief rang up to the roof and echoed back.

"Hear, hear!" someone shouted. "Hear, hear!"

"We are resolved that discussion and dialogue will be the means we shall use to deal with any outstanding questions that concern our two countries and to resolve all possible sources of difference in order to maintain the peace."

There were hip hip hoorays for Chancellor Ikard and a chorus of "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow" all round.

During the commotion, Idris Pukke was able to mutter in Vipond's ear. "You must say something."

"Now is not the time," replied Vipond.

“There won’t be another. Stall it.” Vipond stood up.

“I am prepared to say without any hesitation or doubt that Pope Bosco has another paper,” said Vipond. “And in this paper he sets out the general scheme for the attack on Switzerland and the destruction of its king.”

There was the distinctive murmur of people who had heard something they didn’t care for.

“We are negotiating acceptable peace terms,” said Bose Ikard, “with an enemy we know to be violent and well prepared. It would be astonishing only if Pope Bosco did not have such a plan.”

The murmur was now one of sophisticated approval: it was reassuring to have a man negotiating for peace who was such a cool realist. Such a man would not have his pocket picked by wishful thinking. Later, as the meeting came to an end and the conference filed out, mulling over what they’d heard, King Zog turned to his chancellor. Ikard was hoping, with good reason, to be complimented for dealing so skillfully with an opponent like Lord Vipond.

“Who,” said Zog, tongue aflutter in his mouth, “was that striking young man standing behind Vipond?”

“Oh.” A pause. “That was Conn Materazzi, husband of the Duchess Arbell.”

“Really?” said Zog, breathless. “And what kind of Materazzi is he?” By this he meant was he one of the clan in general or of the direct line of descent from William Materazzi, known as the Conqueror or the Bastard, depending on whether he had taken your property or given it to you.

“He is a direct descendant, I believe.”

There was a wet sigh of satisfaction from Zog. From Lord Harwood there was a thunderous look of resentment. The royal favorite, who signed his letters to the King as “Davy, Your Majesty’s most humble slave and dog,” now had a rival.

An equerry, somewhat hesitant, sidled up to the King.

“Your Majesty, the people are raising a clamor to see you at the great balcony.” This impressive platform, known as El Balcon de los Sicofantes, had been built two hundred years before to show off King Henry 11’s much adored Spanish bride. It looked out over a vast mall on which more than two hundred thousand could gather to praise the monarch.

Zog sighed. “The people will never be satisfied until I take down my trousers and show them my ass.”

He walked off toward the great window and the balcony beyond, calling out to Bose Ikard casually, “Tell the young Materazzi to come and see me.”

“It would send a wrong signal to many, including Pope Bosco, if you were to see Duchess Arbell personally.”

King Zog of Switzerland and Albania stopped and turned to his chancellor. “Indeed it would be a mistake. But you are not to teach me to suck eggs, my little dog. Who said anything about seeing Arbell Materazzi?”

• • •

CONN had barely returned to his wife’s apartments when Zog’s most important flunky, Lord Keeper St.

John Fawsley, arrived to command him to attend the King in two days' time at three o'clock in the afternoon. The Lord Keeper was known to the older princes and princesses as Lord Creepsley On All Fawsley—like royalty everywhere, they demanded servility and also despised it. It was said that on hearing his nickname Lord St. John was beside himself with delight at the attention.

“What was that about?” wondered a baffled Conn after he’d left. “The King kept looking in my direction and rolling his eyes at me with such distaste I almost got up to leave. Now he wants to have an audience with me on my own. I’ll refuse unless he invites Arbell.”

“No, you won’t,” said Vipond. “You’ll go and you’ll like it. See what he wants.”

“I’d have thought that was obvious. Did you see him fidgeting about in Harwood’s groin? I could barely bring myself to look.”

“Don’t fash yourself, my Lord,” said IdrisPukke. “The King was badly frightened in the womb and as a result he is a very singular prince. But if he’s mad about you, then it’s the best news we’ve had in a long time.”

“What do you mean—mad about me?”

“You know,” taunted IdrisPukke, “if he looks on you with extreme favor.”

“Don’t listen to him,” said Vipond. “The King is eccentric, or at any rate, given that he is a king, we’ve all agreed to call it nothing more. Except for a certain over-familiarity with your person you’ve nothing to worry about. You’ll just have to put up with his strangeness for the reasons my brother has referred to.”

“I thought I wasn’t supposed to listen to IdrisPukke?”

“Then listen to me. This is a chance for you to do all of us a great deal of good. God knows we need it.”

Arbell, still plump but pale after the birth of her son, reached up from her couch and took Conn’s hand. “See what he wants, my dear, and I know you’ll use your good judgment.”

4

KEVIN Meatyard might have looked like a sack of potatoes with a large turnip resting on the top but he was tack-sharp and his malice had a subtle ring to it. In other circumstances—if, perhaps, he’d had a loving mother and wise teachers—he might have made something remarkable of himself. But probably not. Murdering a baby in its cradle is, of course, something that should never be done—except in the case of Kevin Meatyard.

We all know we should not judge people by their appearance, just as we also know that this is what we generally do. And this weakness in us all makes this regrettable reality a self-fulfilling prognostication. The beautiful are adored from birth and they become shallow with the lack of effort required in life; the ugly are rejected and become angry. People rejected Kevin Meatyard for the wrong reasons but there were those, not so shallow, who were ready to show him some human sympathy despite his giftless appearance and character. One of these kind people was Headman Nurse Gromek. If he’d never met Meatyard and felt sorry for him then he would have carried on being the blandly good man that he’d been all his life: harmless, competent, pleasant enough, a little blank.

Sensing Gromek's open-mindedness about him, Meatyard began to make himself useful, making cups of tea, cleaning tables, fetching and carrying, listening and watching for any occasion to lighten Gromek's considerable load. Gromek began to realize that mealtimes, always an occasion for the awkward among the patients to kick up a fuss, became much easier when Kevin Meatyard was helping him with the serving-up. How was he to know that Meatyard was issuing threats to his fellow lunatics ("I'll tear off your head and remove your bollocks through the hole") and backing them up at night, most successfully, using a twelve-inch piece of twine and the smallest of stones? Whatever pain you've ever felt was unlikely to compare with that inflicted by Meatyard putting a tiny pebble between your two smallest toes, wrapping string around them and squeezing tight. He liked best of all to do this to Little Brian in the bed next to the one he had instructed Thomas Cale to sleep in.

Something sly and clever in Meatyard drove him to provoke Cale by making him witness cruelty against the weak—and there was no one weaker than Little Brian. Meatyard, along with the grosser pleasure of causing pain, enjoyed the cries of the boy reaching out to Cale as he lay impassively on his back, neither turning away from nor toward the horror happening next to him. Meatyard could sense Cale's weakness: a certain compassion for the frail. It was this weakness that had forced him, however reluctantly, to kill Redeemer Picarbo as he was about to slaughter the beautifully plump Riba.

But he'd been strong then; now he was weak and he had no choice but to endure Little Brian's agony. The trouble was that he could not endure it. What gave Meatyard so much pleasure was that he could feel Cale's soul eroding in front of him. Meatyard's coarser appetite for physical suffering was regularly satisfied, and this place was like a sweetshop to a greedy boy, but he also liked to enjoy the more subtle suffering he got from his awareness of Cale's soul wasting away.

Soon, with Meatyard in charge of the handing out of medicines, even this worst of all occasions for calamity and distress became hushed and orderly.

At night, in Headman Nurse Gromek's little workroom off the ward, Meatyard would talk to him and listen carefully to all his woes. Over days and weeks Meatyard nourished all the nurse's many resentments in life, and one in particular. That Nurse Gromek was an ugly man it would be unkind but not untrue to say. This was partly what drew the two of them together: Gromek felt sorry for Meatyard because he was so unprepossessing in the way he looked. This pity was a way in for Meatyard, and soon he found the weakness in Gromek that lay under his decent qualities and ruled over all the others: he was a man with a loving disposition yet not loved by anyone. He cared for women but they did not care for him. When Meatyard cottoned onto this it showed him at his sharpest best. He could feel the disappointment and resentment in Gromek's apparent resignation to the fact that no one loved him. He could see how angry he really was.

"It's wrong," said Meatyard, drinking tea and eating toast in the little room, "that women don't mind you looking at them if they think you're handsome. But if they don't like your face, then all of a sudden you're a dirty man—a who-do-you-think-you-are-to-look-at-me skank. They put their tits on display for everyone—except for you or me. We're not worthy to look." After a few weeks of this, Gromek was puffed up with rage and as easy for Meatyard to play with as a ball. Soon Gromek, a man who'd had enough of being shit upon by girls, was bringing in women from the ward next door. Used to being treated with kindness in the Priory, these women were trusting and were left unsupervised at night because they were among the milder cases of insanity. Meatyard persuaded Gromek to bring them into his little room, knowing he could keep shut the mouths of the patients listening outside. Besides, the patients here were often raving mad and full of stories of the terrors of hell that happened solely in their tortured minds. Now Meatyard brought them experience of the real thing. Wherever he went was hell, but in that hell he made a heaven for himself. There was no angry despair involved in being Kevin Meatyard, no torment in his soul acting out revenge against an unkind world. It was bliss: inflicting pain, tormenting of souls, rape. He delighted in

being himself.

At night the lunatics listened to the girls whimpering softly—Meatyard liked a bit of crying but it must be quiet. There was the occasional loud cry of pain, and an answering yelp from a madman in the ward thinking it was the call of his own devils coming at last to drag him down. From time to time Meatyard would pop out to have a smoke, playfully swinging the pebble knotted in his piece of string, and chat to Cale as he lay in his bed, staring at rafters and the black beyond.

“You take it easy,” said Meatyard to Cale. “And if you can’t take it easy, take it anyway you can.”

It was during one such break, as Kevin Meatyard, having left Gromek in his little room to take his turn with a girl alone, puffed on a snout and gave Cale the benefit of his opinions, that events took an unexpected turn.

“You have to have the right attitude,” Meatyard was saying to Cale, who was as usual staring up into the void above.

“You’ve got to make the best of things. There’s no point just lying back and feeling sorry for yourself in life. That’s your problem. You just have to get on with it, like me. If you can’t do that, then you’re a nonrunner. This world is a pig—but you just have to get on with it, like me, see.” He did not expect a reply, nor did he get one.

“What do you want, Gibson?”

This question was addressed to a man in his late forties who had appeared at Meatyard’s shoulder. The man didn’t reply but stabbed him in the chest with a blade about ten inches long. Meatyard jerked to one side in agony as Gibson tried to wrench the blade free, snapping it off in Meatyard’s chest in the process. It was a cheap kitchen knife that one of the men in the ward had found rusting away at the back of an old cupboard in the cookhouse. Horrified and astonished, Meatyard fell and in a moment half a dozen lunatics were on top of him and holding him down. Cale, meanwhile, rolled off his bed and away from the fight, shaky and kitten-weak after a recent visit from Nanny Powler and the rest of his devils. He watched as four other men piled into the annex and dragged Headman Nurse Gromek out into the main body of the ward, his struggles much restricted by the trousers around his ankles from which he was trying to free himself.

The lunatics had decided to kill Gromek first in order to give Kevin Meatyard a chance to appreciate properly what was to come and to give him a brief taste in this life of what he could expect for all eternity in the next.

Terror can either make men weak or miraculously strong. Freeing one leg from the trousers around his ankles, Gromek managed to get enough purchase, despite the men holding him, to stagger down the ward and get to the locked door, shouting for help as he went. The lunatic with his arm around Gromek’s neck immediately shifted it to his mouth, stifling his cries enough to make anyone passing think it was just a patient kicking off. As if they were wading upstream in fast water, the five of them lurched down the ward, then two more grabbed Gromek’s legs until his panic-strength gave out and he collapsed onto the floor. Determined to get him away from the door and back to where Meatyard was being held they started to pull Gromek down the central aisle. While this was going on, Kevin Meatyard was loudly but calmly listing what he was going to do to his captors when he got free:

“I’ll shove you back up your mother’s crack. I’ll piss down your throat. I’ll fuck you in the ear.”

Once they’d dragged Gromek in front of Meatyard, he was pulled upright with his back against the wall so he could get a good view of Gromek’s death.

Without the kitchen knife the lunatics needed to think again. Naturally, anything in the ward that could be used as a weapon had been removed—but even though the bed legs were carefully bolted into place, they had managed to unscrew one. As he was still struggling, grunting and gasping, one of the lunatics grabbed Gromek under the chin and yanked his head up to expose his throat so that two of the others could press the bed leg across his neck. A terrible muffled scream erupted from deep in Gromek's chest as he realized what they were going to do. Terror again gave him unnatural strength and this, combined with the sweat pouring off his face, meant the man holding his chin lost his grip. Two more attempts followed as the watching Meatyard kept up his threats of hideous revenge—"I'll chew off your plums and shove 'em up your winker"—but even he fell silent when Gromek's neck was arched back and the leg of the bed held across his windpipe with a man kneeling on each side. It wasn't quick. The sounds were from out of this world—a wet choking and a crushing of breathing flesh. Cale was transfixed by Gromek's hands, fluttering and quivering in the air, one of his fingers pointing and shaking as if telling off a child. After an age the shivering hands became taut for a moment, then dropped suddenly to the floor. The kneeling lunatics stayed as they were for a full minute and then slowly stood up. They looked at Kevin Meatyard lying pinned down with his back to the wall.

As they moved toward him, Cale called out to them. "Be careful. Make sure you've got him tight. Don't let him get to his feet."

But why pay attention to the warnings of a boy who'd done nothing but lie on his bed and retch for a couple of hours a day? They moved on Meatyard. The six lunatics who had a hold on him pulled him to his feet and, knowing this was his one chance, Meatyard took advantage of the momentum of the lift and with all his lumpen strength shook them free. Then he grabbed the astonished Little Brian in his arms and ran up the ward using the boy as a battering ram. He got to the door and turned to face them as the lunatics began edging around him in a semicircle. He squeezed the boy around the throat and made him cry out in fear and pain.

"Stay where you are or I'll break his bloody neck." Then he back-heeled the door, making it rattle and thud as if a giant was trying to get out. "Help!" he shouted as he kicked it over and over. "HELP!"

Now the lunatics were scared—if Meatyard got away they were done for. They'd planned to say the pair of them got into a fight over who'd have the girl first and that they'd killed Meatyard while trying to save Gromek.

With Meatyard free and only the word of murderous lunatics against him they'd be shunted off to the madhouse in Bethlehem, where the lucky ones died in the first year and the unlucky ones didn't.

"Put him down." Cale pushed through the men surrounding Meatyard.

"I'll break his neck," said Meatyard.

"I don't care what you do to him, as long as you put him down."

It's a truism that isn't true that all bullies are cowards—and it was certainly not true of Kevin Meatyard. He was afraid, as he had every reason to be, but he was in control of his fear as much as any brave man might be—although his kind of courage was not bravery. Neither was he a fool and he was at once alert to the peculiarity of Cale's insolence. Cale was one of his victims and he knew how victims behaved, but for the second time that night they weren't behaving as they ought to and, to be fair to Meatyard, as they usually did. Cale was behaving oddly and in an odd way.

"We can all come away from this," Cale lied.

“How?”

“We say that it was Gromek who took the girl and that all of us, you included, ashamed to let such a thing take place, were forced to drag him off her and he died in the struggle. The girl will back that up.” He looked over his shoulder, still moving forward slowly. “Won’t you?”

“No, I fucking won’t!” the girl shouted back. “I want him hanged.”

“She’ll see reason—she’s just upset.” All the time Cale was closing in on the suspicious but hopeful Meatyard, his mind fizzing as he tried to think what to do next.

“They nearly squashed his neck off,” said Meatyard. “No one will believe he got killed by accident. I’ll take my chances.” He back-heeled the door again and the first syllable of a scream for help was already out when Cale hit him in the throat with all his strength. Unfortunately for Cale and the lunatics, all his strength didn’t amount to much. It was the precision of the blow that hurt Meatyard, that made him jerk to the left and caused the back of Little Brian’s head to knock the rusty blade sticking out of his chest. In agony from the knife, he dropped Little Brian. Cale hit the heel of his hand into the middle of Meatyard’s chest. When he was ten years old either blow would have dropped Meatyard as if he were standing on a trapdoor, but he was not ten anymore.

Meatyard lashed out and missed, but the follow-on landed a clout on the side of Cale’s head. He fell as if he’d been hit by a bear. The blood pounded in his ears and what little strength he had in his arms was draining away to pins and needles. Meatyard took two steps and would have given Cale a kick big enough to land him in the next world, but there was still some brawn left in Cale’s legs so he kicked away Meatyard’s standing foot and he went down with a wallop on the wooden floor. Luckily for Cale, Meatyard was winded and this gave him time to get to his feet. His head was full of wasps, his arms shaky. He had one punch left in him, but not a good one.

In the struggle the lunatics had backed away, as if Cale emerging to take charge had robbed them of the collective will that had brought them this far. It was the girl who saved them. “Help him,” she shouted, rushing forward and leaping on top of Meatyard. This decided Meatyard on his most desperate plan, one he’d thought up while his flesh was crawling as he was made to watch poor Gromek choke to death. He grabbed hold of the girl and swung her like a club at the three men barring his way to the large window on the other side of the room. They let him go because it was keeping him away from the door that mattered. Anywhere else he moved was a trap—so they let him back away to the window and shaped up to surround him for the last time. Earlier, desperation and a lack of anything to lose had given them a reckless courage but now none of them wanted to get their neck broken when more caution would see this to its end. So they gave him more time to back away than they might otherwise have done.

“Quickly,” said Cale, on the verge of fainting as the blood swirled in his ears. He felt as if his very brains would burst. Most of them didn’t hear him. Meatyard made his way to the window and the lunatics stood and watched. He was, after all, going nowhere. The window was nailed down but it wasn’t barred because it was on the fourth floor and some sixty feet from the ground. Meatyard knew this, but he also knew, from his voluntary efforts to get on Gromek’s good side by cleaning the ward, that there was a rope anchored to the wall and coiled out of the way behind an old tallboy cupboard. It had been put there many years before as a cheap way of escaping a fire.

The lunatics watched him back off toward the window, then stirred as he reached behind the tallboy and pulled out the long rope. It took them a few seconds to realize what he was going to do and then they moved forward together. Meatyard pulled the tallboy over with an enormous crash and, holding onto the end of the rope, he ran to the window, turning his back at the last moment. The entire frame, much of it rotten, gave

way and Meatyard vanished into the night, the rope trailing behind him. It snapped tight for a second; then it went loose.

Never tested, the rope was too short. The result was that Meatyard, after falling headlong through the air, had come to a jerking stop twenty feet above the ground, flinging him into a tree which broke the fall that otherwise might have killed him. Good luck, vicious nerve and immense physical strength saw Meatyard limping off painfully to freedom. Cale watched from the shattered window as Meatyard merged into the darkness. He turned away and called the lunatics to him.

“What happened tonight was that the two of them brought the girl here and got into a fight over her. Isn’t that right?” Cale said.

The girl nodded.

“Meatyard killed Gromek and when you tried to take hold of him he smashed through the window—and that’s all you know. Now each one of you is going to walk past me and repeat what I just said. And if you get it wrong, now or later, you won’t need Kevin Meatyard to chew off your plums and shove them up your winker.”

While the well-intentioned people who ran the asylum were shocked at the terrible violence of the death of Headman Nurse Gromek, brutal attacks by deranged patients were not unknown. What caused more shock was that Gromek was abusing his patients in such a revolting manner. Patients who could pay for their treatment—a small number that should have included Cale—were taken into the asylum in order to provide money to pay for the care for those who could not. It was as kindly a place as such an institution can reasonably hope to be and Gromek had been rightly regarded, at least until the arrival of Kevin Meatyard, as an uninspired but trustworthy overseer. Cale’s warning to the lunatics to stick to the story he had outlined taught him subsequently to be more careful when making jokes to people he did not know, particularly those who were not quite right in the head and who were prone to deal with the terrible confusion that existed in their minds by grasping with a grip of iron onto anything they were told with a clear and unambiguous determination. So it was that the unusual repetition of learned phrases about the incident began to make the superintendents suspicious. Initially the story had been generally accepted—after all, Gromek *had* raped a number of female patients with the help of Kevin Meatyard and he *had* been murdered and the person accused *had* run away and in a desperate manner—but now they were preparing to mine for the truth and would undoubtedly have succeeded in finding out what had really happened had events not turned in Cale’s favor. Vague Henri and IdrisPukke arrived expecting to find him lying in the comfort for which they’d paid and hoping he was on the way to being cured.

“Must you always,” said IdrisPukke to Cale when he was brought down to the private room kept solely for important visitors, “prove your detractors so unerring in their view that wherever you go calamities follow?”

“And,” said Vague Henri, “another funeral.”

“And how is,” said Cale to Vague Henri, “one of God’s greatest mistakes?”

“Speak for yourself,” replied Vague Henri.

Cale resentfully explained that not only had he gone to humiliating extremes to avoid trouble, he had been too sick to do anything even if he had wanted to. The details of Meatyard’s bullying he kept to himself.

He gave them a detailed account of the truth, the lies he had made everyone tell to cover it up as well as the peculiar bad luck that had put him in the lunatic ward in the first place. IdrisPukke went off to see the newly

appointed director of the asylum and gave her hell about the treatment given to such an important person. What kind of institution was she running? he'd asked, and other rhetorical questions of that sort. In a short time he had gouged a promise from her to end the investigation into the events of that night, and to have Cale brought under the personal daily care of their most skilled mind doctor and at no extra expense. IdrisPukke demanded and received a further promise to cut the fees for Cale's treatment in half.

By no means all of his anger was simulated. He had not expected a cure, given that Cale's collapse had been so great, but he'd hoped for an improvement both because of his great affection for the boy but also because he wanted to work with Cale on a much grander long-term strategy for dealing with the Redeemers. But Cale could not even speak for long without pausing to rest and gather his thoughts: and besides, there was the dreadful look of him. When Cale gave away in passing that today was an unusually good day, IdrisPukke realized that the help they desperately needed from Cale might come too late, if it came at all.

IdrisPukke demanded the Director summon the mind doctor who was to take care of Cale so that he could put his mind at rest as to his quality. The Director, knowing that IdrisPukke had to leave the next day, lied that the doctor was away on retreat and would not return for another three days.

"She's an anomist," said the Director.

"I'm not familiar with the term."

"She treats anomie, diseases of the soul, by talking, sometimes for hours a day and for many months. Patients call it the talking cure." He could be reassured, said the Director, that she was a healer of uncommon skill and she had made headway with even the most intractable cases.

Although he was not sure he believed her about the convenient "retreat," IdrisPukke could sense the sincerity of the Director's admiration for the supposedly absent woman. He took more hope from this, because he wanted it to be true, than his pessimistic nature would normally allow. That nature would have reasserted itself in full measure when, five minutes after he left to return to Cale, there was a knock on the Director's door, which was opened even before she could say "come in." The woman who entered, if it was a woman, was of a very curious appearance and holding in her left hand something so strange that not even IdrisPukke, with all his many experiences of the singular and the fantastical, had seen anything like it.

5

KEVIN Meatyard was unwell. He had a badly sprained ankle, a dislocated shoulder, a large cut on the left side of his head and assorted welts, cricks and tears. But none of them would kill him. It was the knife in his upper chest that would do that. The Island of Cyprus was not an island at all but a large isthmus that ballooned out into the Wooden Sea. Its system of parochial justice extended fifty miles into the hinterland so that even small villages had a special constable—even if he was only the blacksmith. Meatyard had every reason to believe he would be followed although he also realized it would be too expensive and difficult to keep half a dozen men on the road for long. The problem for him was that he knew he must stay away from any place where he could get the knife removed and the wound cleaned. In the end, he trusted in his constitution to keep him alive long enough to get so far away that no one would have heard of him. So it was that while Kevin Meatyard was trying to leave Cyprus on a road out of the way of nosy strangers, the Two Trevors were trying to enter Cyprus on a road out of the way of nosy strangers. So it was less of a coincidence than it might have been when the two assassins came across Kevin Meatyard lying in a heap beside a small pond. For obvious reasons, while out in the bundu even people very much less experienced in wickedness than the Two Trevors regarded a body lying in the road as something it would be wise to pass by

on the other side of. On the other hand, they and their animals were parched. Having satisfied themselves it was not a trap (and who knew more about bushwhacking than they did?), Trevor Lugavoy threw a large rock at the lumpily prone body and, getting only a faint groan in response, decided that whatever danger there was could be avoided by keeping a close eye and not touching him.

A few minutes later, with the horses still slurping the deliciously sweet water, Kevin stirred and awkwardly got to his feet, watched carefully by the two men. He started to walk over to the pond to get a drink but, still unsteady and weak, he collapsed with such a hefty thud it made both Trevors wince.

It might be thought that given their bloody profession the Two Trevors were men without compassion. But while it was certainly the case that they were no nicer than other people, neither, except when they were being paid to kill you, were they very much worse. This was particularly true the older they got and the more superstitious. They were beginning to wonder if a few acts of generosity might be of some help if it turned out that one day there might be an eternal act of reckoning—though they both knew in their heart of hearts that they would have to rescue an epic number of children from a vast number of burning buildings to weigh much in the balance after all the evil deeds they'd been responsible for. Still, it was mean-spirited to leave a clearly wounded man lying within a few feet of a desperately needed drink of water. They frisked him, then woke him up and gave him a drink from one of their own cups.

"Thanks," said a truly grateful Kevin, after downing five straight cups of what felt like life itself.

"Look, John Smith." Kevin had, of course, given them a false name. "You're not going to make it to Drayton—it's fifty miles away, rough going too. That"—he nodded at the broken blade in Meatyard's chest—"comes out now or we loan you a spade and you can start digging."

"What's a spade?"

"An implement," said Trevor Lugavoy, "that can be used for digging holes several feet deep and six foot long."

"You can do it?" said a doubtful Kevin. "Take this out without killing me?"

"Pretty far gone, boy—I'd say seventy/thirty."

"For?"

"Against."

This let out of Kevin what little air was left.

"D'you think there'd be a proper surgeon in Drayton?"

"You aren't going to get to Drayton. And even if you did, which you won't, he'll be the local barber. And he'll want paying. And some questions will be asked. Have you got any money? Have you got any answers?"

By now the Two Trevors were beginning to feel their patience wane in the face of Kevin's lack of gratitude.

"My generous friend here is as good as you'll get within two hundred miles. You're lucky to have him. And you don't have much choice. If you want to stay out of heaven, I'd do some groveling."

The mention of heaven concentrated Kevin's mind and he made a good fist of apologizing to the now miffed

Trevor Lugavoy. After which, Lugavoy got on with it. In fact, he could have earned a fair living as a surgeon. Moved to become skilled for practical reasons, he also took pride in his ability and had paid for tuition from Redeemer surgeons considered by all to be the best, not that this was saying much. He had paid a high price for the medical pliers with which he grasped the little that was left of the blade sticking out of Meatyard's chest. It was out in a moment, accompanied only by a hideous scream of agony.

Worse was to come, as it was clear from the two pieces missing from the blade that there was more to do.

"Don't move or I won't answer for the consequences." Meatyard was skilled at handing out pain, but he could take it, too.

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