

The Drowned Priest

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Prologue – Winchester, 2015

Secure behind the parapets of Winchester Cathedral, high above the Rose Window, a pair of peregrine falcons look down over the city. Like the citizens below, they have simple needs. To eat, to mate, to breed, to pass their genes on to future generations. And in that short existence, they seek some semblance of pleasure. The rich, plump meat of a pigeon breast or the soapy copper taste of the fresh blood of a baby rabbit. The satisfaction of regurgitating a church mouse's liver into a chick's craving beak. The lazy circles in a summer thermal and then the thrilling swoop to lift a basking trout from the Abbey fishpond. The moment of procreation. The peregrines do all of these without conscious thought, living and acting in the moment, as they had always done. They know nothing of and care even less about the human concerns below. The idea of mortgages, a new Mercedes, Council Tax, voting for your MP, a round of golf and quiet pint are as alien to the peregrines as the bottom of the Atlantic. Yet, had the birds been able to see inside the human minds below them, they would have found a much more familiar world, where human flesh was torn and human blood was spilt, and mere existence was the only prize.

Chapter 1 - The Well beneath the Cathedral, May 2015

Canon Peter moved closer to the South Transept wall as the intermittent drizzle of the last ten minutes started to intensify. Above him, the tower of Winchester Cathedral rose into the early morning darkness. Anya was late. In a moment, the rain was sheeting down and the gargoyles above him gurgled in glee as they spouted the rain onto the stones below. Peter's Canterbury cap, a square hat of limp cloth with sharp corners, did little to keep him dry, as the water simply ran off it and down the collar of his cassock. He wondered for a moment if he should have been a Roman Catholic – then he would have had the benefit of the broad brimmed cappello romano and would not be feeling quite so damp. It was far from the first time he questioned his past decisions. Not about Anya – there he knew with absolute certainty he had done the right thing. But other matters– his failure with Charlotte, his

uncertain contract with God, his desire to achieve something, somewhere in his life. Now he had the opportunity to put at least some of these things right.

Finally, Anya was there with him, like some ghost, blown in by the squall.

‘Sorry, you must be soaked,’ she said.

‘It doesn’t matter. I’m going swimming in a few moments.’

He handed her the bag with his towels and a range of spare clothes, and then unlocked the Chancel door. She followed him through. To the right was the Lady Chapel, and in front of them the Retrochoir. He turned left, towards the base of the South Transept tower. He felt they should perhaps tiptoe or take their shoes off, but there was no-one to hear their footsteps on the worn flagstones. Well, no-one but the bones of assorted Anglo-Saxon and mediaeval kings, and the souls of their subjects. At the base of the tower another key opened a studded oak door. A spiral of stone steps invited them down into the darkness of the crypt.

‘There’s a torch in the bag,’ he said. ‘I don’t want to use the lights. Even at this time of night there could be someone outside.’

‘Okay.’

She handed him the torch.

After they had descended a dozen steps the staircase opened out onto a small dais.

‘This is as far as you go,’ he said.

He slowly swept the torch beam into the distance.

‘It’s beautiful,’ she whispered.

In front of them was a clear, pool of still water. Thick stone arches rose out of the water, vaulting across the ceiling. The torch light flickered over the surface of the pool. ‘I’ve never seen it this deep before,’ he said. ‘In the summer it dries out and you can walk on the crypt floor, but now there must three or four feet of water – ‘

‘Stop, shine the torch back over there – I think I saw something!’

Peter swept the torch beam toward the back of the crypt. A tall figure appeared out of the blackness; a figure made of lead, soldered at its joints, smooth and broken, matte in finish yet gently glowing in the dull light. By some hidden mechanism, the water in the pool was being drawn up and overflowing from its cupped hands, flickering and sparkling in the torchlight. It appeared transcendental, but without any relation to religion. The figure seemed to stand like a perpetual sentry entombed under the stone mass of the cathedral. Guarding, but guarding what? They stood, absorbed by their thoughts for a moment. Then Peter handed Anya the torch, and he discarded his robes.

Unclothed, he sat on the edge of the dais and swung his legs into the water, sending ripples like messengers to explore the distant corners of the pool. They made him think of the journey he was about to make. He wondered, if like the ripples, he too would simply vanish into the dark. He eased forward, then pushed off into a breaststroke, resisting the temptation to submerge fully under the dark, subterranean water. The water was cool, cold even, but he felt warm, as if the cathedral was welcoming him into its viscera. He felt his heartbeat slow, his limbs becoming sluggish. He was becoming leaden like the silent statue, as he contemplated the water that passed through his fingers in each stroke. Barely moving, he reached the limit of the torch's beam. Almost lifeless, his body followed his thoughts as he drifted into the distant darkness at the pool's far edge.

'Peter, are you alright?'

He heard her call from the edge of the pool but could do nothing to respond.

'Peter.... PETER!'

He was secured in the cathedral's embrace. Slipping away, into an eternal sleep, becoming another soul, a vassal to the bones of the ancient kings and queens, lying in their caskets in the Nave above. But there was pain too, a sharp, stabbing pain in his knee. In the fog in his brain he realised he was floating over the well. His knee had struck the protective railing, erected to stop careless tourists or their children falling into the well in the dry season, but now hidden in the depths of the pool. This was what he had come for. With sudden clarity he filled his lungs and reached down, grasped the railing's edge and pulled himself down, through the clear, cool water and into the dark, black hole that was the mouth of the well. The brick wall of the well was smooth and regular.

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Not for the first time, Father Hugh Longfellow looked up the Norman Cathedral, and wondered in whose praise the stone masons had toiled. God or man? The tower, placed at the centre of the cruciform plan, seemingly reached up to beckon an Almighty presence. Father Hugh indeed thought it a spectacular, awe-some sight and had often said so to his friend and colleague, the master stone-mason Rufus Elinwinson. In private though, Father Hugh also allowed himself to see the cathedral in a different light – a symbol of the Norman yoke thrust upon the neck of English liberty. The new building loomed over the adjacent Anglo-Saxon minster, like a falcon standing over its prey. The fabric of the old Minster would soon be broken down, stone by stone and reused to form a retrochoir in the new

Norman Nave. The business of religion and worship would still go on, in more or less the same way, but like the manors, lands and forests in the surrounding diocese, the reins of power would now be held in Norman hands. The dispossessed English, be they abbots or earls, would be no more. Father Hugh sighed. He knew his time was coming to an end. He still had hope though. Hope perhaps in the next generation. A generation that would apparently adopt the new Norman ways, only to rise up at the opportune moment. Until then the old ways must be preserved.

Father Hugh turned round to see his novice, Will Wickham approach, ready for his evening instruction. Unlike Father Hugh, whose substantial beard was turning white, Will was clean shaven in the Norman fashion, and did not yet wear the Benedictine tonsure. Nor did he have the black woollen cloth scapula worn by Father Hugh, nor its substantial cowl. Instead, as he wore a simple grey woollen cassock, to mark his novice status.

‘Follow me,’ instructed Father Hugh.

They walked in single file, Father Hugh leading, past the refectory, and through the cloisters and then to the priory dormitory. Here, Father Hugh led Will through a side door and into the Father’s cell, a prerogative earned from more than 30 years of seniority in the Benedictine order. The privilege brought little benefits though and had the distinct disadvantage that in winter he no longer had the shared body warmth in the adjacent dormitory to keep him warm at night. The room just contained an oak chest, and a rough table with two stools. A couple of bolsters, leaking straw, formed a crude bed in a corner. A yew cross stood in a small alcove.

‘Sit,’ said Father Hugh, placing the bundle of cloth he had been carrying on the table.

Will dutifully sat and said nothing. There was a long pause. Father Hugh was considering the wisdom of his next move. He trusted Will, as much as he trusted anyone. Will’s grandfather had been the Earl of Wickham and had fallen at Hastings nearly 30 years before. Will’s father held the Earldom for less than a decade before he too had been brought down by the Normans. Now his son had a Norman name and no land or title – plenty of reason for Will to help Father Hugh with his plan, then.

Father Hugh gestured at the bundle.

‘Unwrap it.’

Will dutifully did so.

‘In the name of the blessed Mary!’ he exclaimed.

The contents of the bundle belied its coarse cloth wrapping. Will had only seen gold once before, the previous year when the Norman Cathedral had been consecrated. Here

though, there was gold, silver and precious stones in abundance. Amber and amethyst encrusted a fine gold cross, while in the centre of the blanket gold with diamonds, rubies, emeralds, sapphires, enamel and pearls adorned a regal gold crown. But it was the silver chalice that sat partly hidden in the folds of the cloth that most fascinated Will. He looked at Father Hugh:

‘May I touch them?’

‘By all means. You will be among kings and princes.’

Will paused, uneasy about this unexpected promotion, then slowly uncovered the chalice and raised it front of him. The silver was worn with use, but Will could still see the decoration around the rim. The motif was the five senses, each being depicted several times over, with kings, princes, abbots, saints, warriors, monks and plain men in various poses. In the centre of the bowl of the chalice an engraved figure kneeled with clasped hands, in silent, penitent supplication. No matter which way Will rotated the chalice, the eyes of the figure looked directly back at the drinker.

‘Many of the kings of Wessex and of England wore this crown at their coronation, and drank from that chalice. More than rest now in the Minster. These are the lifeblood of the English, this is our past, our heritage. It is in our promise to those who have gone before to hold and cherish these things, in readiness for a new time. They were hidden in the grave of Saint Æthelwold after Harold’s fall at Hastings. But the Minster will soon be no more. It is our responsibility now to keep them safe.’

‘Tell me what I must do, master,’ said Will, his gaze still fixed on the chalice

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The February full moon shone down on the two churches as two figures flitted from shadow to shadow. Each breath they took hung around them, frozen like white smoke in the cold air. Then they were inside the cathedral. The moonlight filtering through the crude glass in the southern windows was enough for them to find their way to the entrance to the crypt. As ever, Father Hugh led the way. Will followed, carrying the cloth bundle, now waterproofed with candle wax and tallow and sealed in a leather firkin. Father Hugh reached into his cassock and drew out a short, stump candle and a simple wooden candleholder.

‘Here, light this at the altar,’ he said.

‘Shall I say a prayer, master?’

‘Two.’

Will was quickly back, the flickering candle throwing its shadows up on the stone walls around them. In a moment they were down in the crypt. The winter rains had flooded the water meadows in the Cathedral grounds outside and the water was a foot deep in the crypt. Father Hugh quickly slipped off his cassock, took the leather parcel, and a lead weight manufactured from an offcut of flashing from the new roof, and strode out into the water. He left the dim glow of the candlelight behind and the darkness gradually enveloped him. At the distant end of the crypt, he could just make out the low circular stone wall marking the well's position. He intoned:

Send thy light, O Lord, into the dark places of our hearts. In thy love, discover to us the snares set by our enemy in the hours of night, that, saved by thy protection in soul and body, we may deserve again to see the morning light. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

After one brief look back at Will he stepped over the wall and sank into the depths.

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Peter swam down and down and down, and then he was no longer swimming, but drawn down by an unseen current, further and further into the arteries of the cathedral. He could feel, no, he could hear the pulse in his head as his lungs started to burn? The cool, clear water was turning red in front of his eyes, even when he screwed his eyelids tightly shut. The cathedral caressed and held him in its embrace as he lost consciousness.

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Anya continued to shine the torch into the distant recesses of the pool after Peter disappeared. The disturbance caused by his descent had long died away but the reflections of the beam on the arched roof of the crypt were still dancing, dappled shadows. After a moment, she realised that the water falling from the leaden statue's hands was sending out a sequence of regular, ever expanding ripples across the surface of the pool. The figure's hands seemed now to be cupped in supplication, as if it was praying. She was increasingly anxious and wondered if she too should pray. Peter had been gone for several minutes. She did not know quite how long, but she was increasingly sure he could not have held his breath for all that time.

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Wet. Cold. A dim light. Peter was floating again, now relaxed both in mind and body. For a moment, his eyes would not focus. Then, he gradually began to perceive the stone arches vaulting over his head. He was still in the crypt. But a strangely different crypt, now crowded with lead and stone caskets, carefully arranged on stone columns rising out of the water. Peter realised he was not really floating but more lying on the stone floor of the crypt. It was now only covered with six inches of water. He rolled onto his side and looked into the distance for the source of the light.

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Father Hugh felt as if something was burning the linings of his lungs. Even with the lead weight of the leather package he had not been able to reach the bottom of the well. He had tried to grasp the brickwork of the well with his one free hand and push himself down. But the water beneath seemed to somehow be holding him up, supporting and caressing him, showing him, directing him back upwards. His breath exhausted, he dropped the leather package, and allowed himself to be borne back to the surface.

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Peter could see a candle dimly burning in the distance, set down on the floor. As he stood up, he saw that he was beside the well. The protective railings had vanished and now a small stone wall marked the well. Other things were different too. For one thing he was naked. He reached up and touched his face only to discover a luxuriant beard. His hands were no longer smooth and white – now they were larger, rougher, stained with soil, with dirt under each fingernail. He looked into the distance again and saw a thin, clean shaven man in a grey cassock crouched by the candle. Easing himself up, he started through the water towards the light...

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Borne up by the cool water, Father Hugh floated on his back over the well mouth. He was still light-headed and gasping for breath, his vision blurred by the water and lack of oxygen. It took him a moment to realise that something had changed in the crypt. Then he realised

the water was much deeper now – he hadn't be able to float freely in the pool before. The light was brighter too – and he could hear a woman's voice in the distance, calling:

'Peter – PETER – is that you? Are you all right?'

He rolled onto his front and tried to put his feet down. How deep was the pool? He found he could stand, half in and half out of the water. As he turned towards the voice, he stumbled and nearly fell back as a tall man appeared to loom out of the shadows. He thought the figure was accusing him, clasping its hands forward, pointed at his naked body. But it did not speak, nor did it move. He looked towards the light, beyond the immobile apparition, and saw a woman, standing on a stone platform, holding up a dazzling lantern. She was beckoning him towards her. He felt dazed, unsure how the crypt could have changed in such a short time. As he skirted the leaden figure, he intoned

*In martyrio martyrum,
In uirtute iustorum,
In formis spiritalibus,
In diuinis sermonibus,
In benedictionibus,
Deus tuarum protege me.*

but the figure remained unmoved, immobile, continuing its fixed stare towards an unseen horizon.

The woman pointed at a bag containing cassock and a rough towel.

'Benedicite! You are welcome here,' she said, averting her eyes from his naked body.

'Dry and clothe yourself, Father Hugh, and then I will explain.'

* * *

As Peter reached the figure by the candle the enormity of his task became clear. He had no idea who this person was. Indeed, he had no idea who anyone was in this new world. He had certainly been told about Anglo-Saxons, and Normans, monks and abbots, barons, vassals, jesters, peasants and knights in secondary school. But this was hardly adequate preparation for actually meeting them. Mostly though he remembered being told that life in medieval England would have probably been dirty, dangerous and short.

Chapter 2 – St Alfred's, September 1982

Driven by the October easterlies, the rain sheeted down under grey skies. It fell with unwavering determination onto the equally grey Warren Drive, on the edge of the Winnall trading estate in the northeast corner of Winchester. At number 23 Peter looked out of his bedsit window, wondering how the others in his undergraduate year were faring. In reality, his room was much more bed than sit. A faded pine single bed was pushed up against one wall and occupied a good portion of the room, while a matching wardrobe, which apparently needed a little help to remain upright, lent against the opposite wall, tilted back by small third wall, a 1960's gas fire hissed quietly next to a meter which also supplied a single gas ring. Peter had never seen such a fire before and was convinced it had seen many more birthdays than he had. And the fire certainly seemed to be wearing its age rather less well than wedges under its front legs. On the Peter. Next to the meter there was a small sink. A tiny cupboard above contained exactly one plate, one cereal bowl and a single saucepan. A few pieces of cutlery concluded the inventory. The room's contents were completed by the table and the chair at which Peter was sitting. They seemed somehow familiar to Peter, and after a moment, he realised they were made of the same veneered plywood he had seen in a TV program showing what life had been like after the second world war.

He could hear the murmur of the landlady's TV in the sitting room below through the thin carpet on the floor. He wondered if that room was as meanly furnished as his, but he did not think he would ever find out. She had made it clear that morning, on his short introduction to the house, that he was expected to remain in his room and only make the briefest of sorties to the bathroom or his shelf in the fridge.

The raindrops continued to beat a rhythmic tattoo on the window. He looked out at his bicycle, checking that it was still chained to the railings that separated the well-tended garden from the road. He considered an escape into college, but the sodden saddle and the thought of the twenty-minute ride in the rain quickly dissuaded him. Besides, he knew no-one who actually had rooms in the college and, considering the particularly steep streets of Winchester, that journey seemed too much of a hill to climb, at least for the moment.

He found he had been holding his breath as he pondered his isolation. He exhaled with a deep sigh and turned to the first chapter of 'The Geography of European

Agriculture.’ His studying only lasted a moment as he kept recalling his headmaster’s words,

‘Go to University, my lad. You should try for Queens - best college in Cambridge, I had a tremendous time there when I was demobbed! Hardly went to a lecture, spent most of my time on the river – when I wasn’t in an eight, I’d be punting up to Grantchester. Of course, that’s the advantage of a Classics degree – you’ll probably have to put in an appearance at least a few of your lectures if you’re doing engineering.’

Well, Peter had tried for Cambridge – and even done quite well in the entrance exam. He knew that though he had messed up the subsequent interview. It was the first time he had been away from home on his own. He put it down to nerves, mostly. It had been a complicated train journey, with three changes, and he was late as he had had trouble finding the college. Then, slightly overawed by sitting in front of two college Fellows, each wearing gowns, and offering him sherry, he was totally silent when asked:

‘If the second law of thermodynamics says that you can’t unscramble scrambled eggs, what would you have for breakfast if you wanted to increase your entropy?’

Perhaps it was not surprising then he had abandoned doing Natural Sciences and had settled for Environmental Sciences at King Alfred’s College in Winchester. The college originally specialised in teacher training and had only just started expanding to provide ‘proper’ degrees under the supervision of nearby Southampton University. Maybe the need to fill their extra places was the reason he had got in. He was really only there because his friend John had already applied to St Alfred’s to do Geography. Peter was not sure he wanted to be a teacher. Maybe he would look for a job in TV? But first he would have to get through the next three years.

‘A pity I didn’t know the College was strapped for money,’ Peter thought. If he had, he would have known that that St Alfred’s had yet to complete the funding of its expansion and had found it expedient to place its first-year intake in various lodgings and bedsits provided by the more permanent residents of the town. Maybe he would just drop the idea of a degree, but he had no idea what to do instead.

‘If only my surname had begun with F instead of G,’ he thought. ‘Then I would be next to John in the allocation list - with a bit of luck we could have ended up in the same house.’

‘Bugger!’ he said. He put another 50p in the gas meter and started to make some toast.

