

## Chapter Fifteen

*Souldiers Bible extract in here, please*

**Book, Chapter and Verse**

Revulsion and hatred consume me for the next few hours.

For many, powerful emotions such as these crush and destroy the spirit and attack the soul. Perversely, at a time of the sincerest grief, I find such feelings driving me on. They help me to believe Rowland's dire situation is far from a helpless cause and ensure the responsibility I feel for Abijah's death is stored in an appropriate place.

After the traumatic events that took place on the Great North Road, I have made my way to the home of the Beaselys once again and persuaded them to give me refuge for another night. Their reluctance is plain to see in their pinched and withdrawn faces, but they voice no objections, preferring instead to curse inwardly at the enhanced dangers I have again brought to their door.

There is barely enough space to spread my mattress in the threadbare room, where I am to conceal myself until daybreak the morrow. I have plenty of time to think about Goodyear, and how I misjudged the man so badly.

Then I remember Else, the cook and friend who brought tragedy to Stathern not so long ago. I see her smiling face; it haunts me. I hear her mocking, taunting voice. Isabel and I trusted her implicitly, yet she betrayed us most grievously.

How I forget things too easily.

I shake my head, eager to disentangle the past from the present, for all that matters is what I do next.

But my actions, this day, have left me damned. Of that I am sure.

The eyes of the Lord may still be upon me, but where there was once love, there will now be only loathing and contempt. For I am no King David, who sinned and was forgiven by the Maker. I am now just another remorseless, cold-hearted killer, who is unwilling to repent.

The irony is not lost on me: I am now cut from the same stone as Holck.

Before he died, Goodyear revealed two things of importance.

He told me all he knew about the plot to kill Cromwell, and his role in 'fixing' certain things for Holck and his clutch of cutthroats. This information will be very useful when I return to Stathern, which I intend to do sometime this evening. Only then will I start to devise a plan capable of protecting the Lieutenant-General.

Before then, and of much greater importance to me, is the snippet of information I hold about the man responsible for looking after the castle's gaol, a certain Ambrose Crump.

It would appear Crump has a weakness for cards that has left him indebted to some of the town's most notorious criminals. If his superiors knew of his vice, and the extent of his problems, it would be a serious cause for concern, for it leaves the gaoler open to blackmail and bribery.

Goodyear told me, as he begged for mercy, that he had paid money to Crump on several occasions and, in return, he was able to pass vital messages to prisoners. I am told the going rate for such a service is somewhere in the region of five Laurels, a considerable sum of money by any standards.

Thankfully, I am carrying more than double the going rate with me, so I will be able to grease the palms of the greediest of collaborators and ensure very few questions are asked.

With limited time at my disposal, bribing the rogue Crump appears to be the only feasible course of action I can take. The risks are as high. If I am caught, I too will face the gallows. But that matters not. I do not fear death.

At all costs, my brother must be saved, even if I am sacrificed in the endeavour.

To live with Abijah's death on my conscience is something I must, and will, come to terms with, as I have been forced to do ever since the demise of my other sibling, Thomas, who also fought for the King and died at Colston Bassett, cut down by the hands of my own men.

These are grievous weights to carry, and one day there will be a reckoning. But knowing I am responsible for Rowland's death will be too much to bear. I must find a way of prevailing.

The knock is light, but it is more than sufficient to wake me from my troubled slumber.

"Master Hacker, I have the items you have requested."

The voice is that of Kathleen Beasely and it is the first time the mistress of the house has spoken to me with anything close to a hint of warmth. She has a soft lilt, but there remains wariness in her speech that cannot hide the fear she is feeling. It is little wonder. She, too, will face the noose if her allegiance to Parliament is ever discovered. For her husband, it will be a far more unpleasant experience.

"I am coming good mistress," I confirm, "I will be with you in a moment."

I rise from the mattress, where I have lain these past eight hours, sleeping fitfully for less than half of them. I am awake, my mind and body alert and ready for whatever the day confronts me with.

When I am composed, I open the door. As I do, a wooden tray is thrust through the gap. On it is a box containing three hens' eggs, a bowl filled to the brim with vinegar, several sheaves of paper, a quill, an inkpot and an ornate knife with a razor-sharp edge.

It seems my instructions have been followed to the letter.

"These will do perfectly," I say. "I thank you most sincerely for your assistance and forbearance, Good Wife Beasely. Be sure I will be leaving shortly. And I will not be returning."

Kathleen lifts her head and looks directly at me. Her eyes are the colour of the sky and there is an honesty and integrity within them I have not appreciated until now.

"Do not think harshly of us, Master Hacker," she implores. "Our loyalty will never waiver, you can be sure of that. But we have grown accustomed to the simplicity of

our lives in this place, and the minimal dangers we are exposed to.

“The events of recent days have reminded us of the sacrifice we will both be required to make, should our true purpose here ever be exposed.”

I smile ruefully, understanding the lady’s concerns. These are the gravest and most dangerous of times. Spies can expect no mercy.

I reach out and rest my hand on hers, seeking to reassure.

“Fear not,” I say. “Your secret is mine alone. Only myself and two other people know of your existence. And none of us will compromise you. Be assured, you are safe.”

My comforting words appear to work. Kathleen grips my hand momentarily and flashes a smile, which transforms her features. She bows her head, and then she is on her way, returning downstairs to her wifely duties.

I now have just over four hours to complete the critical part of the plan I have formulated overnight: devising the means to communicate with Rowland.

Lady Lucy Hay, a woman who shares her bed and the secrets of the state with whomever she deems fit, is someone who has not been in my thoughts for a long time.

I made her acquaintance at a time when I was seeking to persuade the princes Rupert and Maurice to accept the English throne and become *de facto* allies of Parliament.

Over several months, we formed a bond that served both sides well. During one notable occasion at Banbury Castle, Lady Lucy revealed to me some of the arts and ways of spying, including how she hides secret communiqués from prying eyes.

The conversation was fascinating and illuminating, albeit I never thought for one moment that it would ever come in useful.

Today, however, is when I will put this knowledge to the test. For I intend to send my brother a message that I will conceal in a raw egg, a technique refined by Lady Lucy and used frequently to her profit.

By ten o’clock in the morning, I am ready to begin.

I have allowed the three eggs to be soaked in vinegar for the last couple of hours. The effect has been quite startling: the shell has softened significantly without breaking, just as Lady Lucy told me it would.

Holding one of them as delicately as I can, I take the knife and press the blade into the shell. Instantly it yields, and some of the egg white oozes out of the incision. It is through this opening I will insert the message for Rowland.

I put the egg down gently on the tray and reach for the paper. I will only need a small amount of velum to write my message, which will be brief and to the point.

As I extend my hand, my cuff clips the tray, sending the contents crashing loudly to the floor. The commotion forces Kathleen to call upstairs to enquire whether I am in difficulty. I quickly reassure her I am fine, and then set about the business of recovering the eggs and the tools that will serve me this day.

I look to the floor and see the crushed shells of at least two of the eggs. I groan aloud and hit the table with my fist. It would seem my clumsiness has jinxed the whole

venture. I get down on my knees in the confined space and look closer. There is little light, the room cast in near permanent darkness.

After a few seconds I find the third egg. It is undamaged, having rolled away and nestling under a nearby table. I examine it quickly, seeking signs of damage. But I am in luck as it appears to be undamaged and in near-perfect condition.

Once again, I take the knife in my right hand and hold it against the bright white shell. It's time to try again, all the while being acutely aware I don't have a second chance. I will either succeed or fail.

After a few seconds of the utmost concentration, and with sweat poring off my forehead, the knife has done its work. A perfect aperture has been cut into the egg's supple shell.

It's now time to insert the message for the eyes of my beloved brother.

As the feather of the quill dances to the tune of a forgettable melody, I drill out the words I formulated in the early hours...

*"My dearest Rowland.*

*"Forgive me brother for any part I may have played in your current misfortune. Be assured, it is my intention to find a way to make good your rescue this evening, by seven o'clock. Remain vigilant and pass on any knowledge you wish to share about your circumstances to the bearer of this message. He is in my employ and will insure I receive it.*

*"Your loving and faithful servant, Francis."*

I have done my best to write the script legibly, but as small as I can, ensuring the width of the message is no bigger than the tip of my little finger, while its overall length will fit snugly into the chamber of the egg. To protect it, I have wrapped the sheaf with another page of velum.

Only when I am happy with everything, do I insert it into the neatly formed cut, applying pressure as carefully and skillfully as I can.

Once the paper is safely inside the shell, I place the egg into the tankard located by the post of my bed. The cold water erases the evidence of my manipulation and interference. Now, should anyone take an interest in the egg, it will almost be impossible for the naked eye to detect any signs of tampering. It will appear to be nothing more than a simple egg. Or at least that is my hope.

After a few minutes, and with my self-doubts intensifying, I start to have serious doubts the validity and sense of the whole exercise.

I stand and walk over to the table, where I pick up the egg and take it to a candle that is flickering wildly as the draught from the door breathes life into its golden flame. I check it thoroughly once again for any obvious signs of trauma. To my utter amazement, I can find none.

By three o'clock in the afternoon, I have made myself scarce from Ironmonger Lane and the home of the Beaselys. I am now waiting for first sight of the man who fits the description of Ambrose Crump.

I am standing on the pavement opposite The Saracen's Head Inn, located in Newark's bustling Market Place, when a bald-headed man of a score and ten years,

and wearing the distinctive uniform of a gaoler, limps out of the hostelry and takes off in the direction of the castle. I allow him to get a start on me before setting off in pursuit, all the while doing my best to use the shop fronts and houses to safeguard the anonymity I crave.

As we walk up the deserted Kirk Gate, and the spire of the church of Saint Mary Magdalene casts its dark shadow across the thoroughfare, it is time to make my move.

“Master Crump,” I call as discreetly as I can, while crossing the street. “Master Crump, I have some urgent business I need to discuss with you.”

The gaoler stops suddenly as he hears my cries. He looks startled. His hand moves quickly to his side. There is no sword, but as I get closer, I detect a small dagger tucked in to a pocket close to my quarry’s midriff.

“Who are you? How do you know me?” asks an alarmed Crump, drawing the blade and running his left forefinger down the blade.

“Do not be alarmed,” I say as soothingly as I can. “A mutual friend has given me your name and suggested you may be willing to provide an important service for me, if the price is right.”

Crump’s face stays stony, but I detect a flash of interest in his eyes.

“Before we say any more, is there anything our friend told you to say to me to confirm he sent you my way?” enquires the gaoler. “You could simply be seeking to entrap a loyal King’s man. So be on your way, sir, unless you can give me the reassurance I need.”

I have no way of knowing whether Goodyear’s information is accurate, or merely words designed to bring an end to the suffering I was inflicting on him. But I have no option; I am being put to the test.

“My friend told me you are a man of words,” I say as boldly as I can. “And he says Chaucer’s great *Tales of Canterbury* is a favourite book of yours, particularly the verse ‘If gold rusts, what then can iron do?’

Crump stands still for a moment. He is processing what he has just heard.

A minute passes. Suddenly the bells of the church ring out, calling believers to its early evening service. When the world is gripped in war, the need for the Lord is as great as ever. I look at my pocket watch: it is now three-thirty in the afternoon.

“Follow me,” barks Crump, as he tucks the knife away. “Edmund Goodyear is a man I trust. If he has sent you, I will be happy to listen to what you have to say.”

We walk to the church graveyard, from where I can see the towering walls of the castle. Earth has been disturbed in many places, such is the number of people who have been claimed by a resurgence in Typhus and the plague. The diseases have infected Newark ever since the garrison expanded to its current size.

There will be many more to bury in this hallowed place before this bloody and senseless conflict is ended.

Crump knows where he is going.

He leads me along a well-trodden path to a burial mound in the far corner. It is set away from the rest. And it is a place that clearly has some meaning to my companion.

“This is where my wife has been laid to rest,” he explains. “She was taken from me in the summer by the plague. It was merciless, ravaging her fine features and reducing her to a shell of a woman in just a few days.

“She was the dearest of wives. I miss her terribly.”

I nod sympathetically.

Whatever I feel about Crump, I understand pain when I see it. And this man is suffering.

“I am sorry for your loss,” I say. “Fate can be a cruel princess. I know it to be so.

“But I am afraid I must talk to you about business, for I am told you may be able to get a message to a man held prisoner in the castle. Is this so?”

The gaoler looks at me appraisingly before speaking. After seemingly deciding he can trust me, he says: “That would most certainly be possible, but it is a dangerous task, even for me. If I were to be caught, I will be in serious trouble. I could even be hanged. However, if you are willing to pay a generous price, I am open to being persuaded the opportunity outweighs the risk.”

Speaking like the experienced negotiator he is, Crump waits for his words to sink in. When they have, he gestures with his hand, making it clear he is awaiting my answer.

“I can pay you five Laurels, not a shilling more,” I state. “In return, I need to get a message to a prisoner who means a lot to me, and who needs to know he is not alone in this world. Nothing more. Can you do that?”

My would-be accomplice laughs aloud. I have clearly humoured him.

“Anything is possible, my dear sir,” he responds. “But my fee is double what you are offering. For ten Laurels, I am at your service, as would be the new governor, if he had the opportunity. If you offer anything less, I will be bidding you a good day.”

I am momentarily caught off-guard. I wasn’t expecting Crump to seek such a large payment.

“Whatever message you wish to pass on, it must be important,” he continues. “So show me your money; ten Laurels, nothing less. Prove you can pay.”

With no ability to get the terms I am seeking, and time of the essence, I must concede.

I wait a few minutes for a couple to pass. They are walking through the church grounds and look at Crump and myself as we seek to be as inconspicuous as two soldiers possibly can be.

When they are out of sight, I reach for my purse. It is kept close to my own dagger, on the opposite side of my body to where my scabbard is belted into place.

Crump edges forward when he sees the bulging bag, the metallic clink of coinage drawing his attention. He edges forward, eager to see my true worth.

“Back off,” I bark. “Stand your ground and I will show you the money I have promised for this endeavour. Come another inch forward, and you will find my sword at your throat.”

My warning has the desired effect. Crump keeps his distance.

I quickly withdraw ten large coins. They are heavy, made of gold and emblazoned with the portrait of Charles, the tyrant King.

“These are yours if you do my bidding,” I confirm. “I will give you three of them as an advance, the remaining seven will be yours when you return, and tell me all you have learned. Agreed?”

The gaoler looks disappointed.

“I was hoping you might be a little more generous, considering the risks involved,” he protests, testing my resolve. “What say you we make this an equal division: five gold coins now, five when we meet again?”

I think about the proposition and quickly decide it is not to my advantage.

“That is out of the question, Master Crump,” I say with as much gravitas and authority as I can muster. “You have my terms, it’s three or nothing. You decide.”

Crump’s greedy hand, a rich tapestry of tattoos and tobacco stains, reaches out and takes the first installment. It is the equivalent of three months’ pay. Once he has pocketed the gold, he extends his feral paw again.

“Shake it,” he commands. “I want your word you will not go back on your word.”

I am getting tired of the ridiculous game we are playing. Nonetheless, I do as Crump asks, gripping his sweaty, weak hand. Eventually, he is satisfied.

“So who do you wish me to speak to on your behalf?” enquires Crump nonchalantly.

We have been rooted to the same spot in the graveyard for almost fifteen minutes, while the drama has been played. More and more people are walking through the thoroughfare that runs alongside the church. I decide it is time to move on.

As I walk, Crump moves alongside me.

“I want you to get something into the hands of Captain Rowland Hacker, who I believe is languishing in one of your cells. I then want you to relay to me exactly what he says to you. That should be easy enough, even for a man like you.”

Crump starts to cough and retch, as though he has been taken by surprise and punched in the stomach. It would appear my request has taken him by surprise.

“My God, are you insane man,” he splutters when he recovers his poise. “It can’t be done. Rowland Hacker is being guarded around the clock. He is sure to die. They suspect him of betraying the King and undermining the garrison for two years or more. If I am caught passing him messages, I am done for.”

I stop abruptly and turn to face Crump. My expression is as dark as the night will soon be. I see fear on the man’s face; his cockiness has deserted him.

“You have accepted payment from me,” I say. “A contract has been entered into. If you want to live, you will not dare break it.”

For the next five hours I amuse myself in the taverns and inns of Newark, never staying too long in one place to arouse suspicion, but long enough to pick up important pieces of intelligence.

After spending the best part of an hour in The Angel that is located in Mill Gate, I make my way back to the centre of the town and the popular White Hart Inn. Here I mix with cavaliers and locals alike, as the hostelry is one of the places the Royalist army’s officers has taken up lodging.

On my travels, I hear Rowland's name mentioned repeatedly.

It appears it is no secret he has been arrested, although the reasons for his gaoling are as wild as they are misinformed and highly speculative. I have heard the gossip-mongers cite murder and theft several times, and everything in between. If only they knew the truth!

By the time I reach The Ram, I have less than thirty minutes to wait for Crump. I have agreed to meet him in the run-down coaching inn conveniently situated in Castle Gate, just a short walk from the misery of the dungeons he polices for governor Willis.

Apart from a couple of drunkards propping up the ramshackle bar, the inn appears to be deserted, which means it is perfect for my purposes.

I order a tankard of foul-smelling ale, giving the appreciative innkeeper a couple of pennies for her wares.

After exchanging the briefest of pleasantries with her, I seek out a convenient spot at the rear. Here I will pass the time and keep a watchful eye on the entrance.

At precisely eight-thirty, the unkempt figure of Crump walks in.

He is clearly nervous and agitated. By the time he has walk from the entrance to where I am sitting, he has looked over his shoulder at least three times.

"Has it been a tough day?" I ask mischievously, followed by: "I hope you have been able to fulfill your part of our arrangement?"

Before Crump has time to answer, the woman behind the bar appears at the side of the table we are sitting at. She is keen to ply us with beer and fatten our bellies.

"Will your friend be joining you in having a drink, sir?" she enquires. "I can recommend the eel pie and the rabbit stew, if either of you are hungry?"

Trying to conceal my impatience, I order two plates of the eel concoction; a dish Cromwell introduced me to several years ago. It is one of my favourites. I also buy a tankard of ale for Crump. It is a necessary expense, as I need to loosen his tongue and glean every bit of information my ten Laurels will buy.

"Are you sure you are not exaggerating?" I ask Crump when he has finished telling me all he knows.

"I swear on the life of my late wife, and on everything that is holy, Captain Hacker" he retorts. "Your brother does not wish you to rescue him. He told me to tell you such, and that he considers any bid to secrete him away to be unnecessary. He believes it will put everything you have both been working towards at risk.

"He urged me to seek your earliest return to Stathern. He is confident he will be able to convince the governor of his loyalty, and believes the grievous injury he has suffered has already planted serious doubts in the minds of his interrogators.

"He will soon be a free man again, of that he is sure. But he is adamant he does not want you to stay in Newark any longer than you have to. He wants you gone by midnight, and asked me to impress that upon you most urgently."



While the news is better than I anticipated, Crump's tidings have left me reeling.

His casual reference to Rowland experiencing a serious injury is the first I have heard about it. It leaves me feeling nauseous, angry and deeply concerned.

Crump goes on to explain my brother has lost his right hand, cut off by Holck and one of his Bohemian mercenaries when questioning was at its most savage and Rowland was at his least cooperative.

"It happened four days yonder," adds Crump, who continues to show no signs of rejoicing at my obvious distress now he has discovered who I am. "Your brother lost quite a bit of blood, sir. He is weakened by his injury and his spirits are at a low ebb, but he also believes he has paid the fullest of prices and will be allowed to regain his liberty in due course.

"He is adamant there is no evidence that can be used against him, only speculation and conjecture. They were his exact words.

"He told me the surgeon has made good his stump, at least as well as can be expected, and you are to worry no more. He vows to get in touch when it is safe to do so."

I look away into the gloom, unable to control my emotions.

Sorrow is stalking me this night.

I stay silent for a long time, thinking things through and regretting everything that has happened that has put my family and friends in such peril.

As I mull over my thoughts, Crump watches me keenly, waiting to press his claim for the payment he has been promised. It doesn't take long for the opportunity to arise.

"It is getting late, Captain Hacker, time for you to be on your way and for me to return home," he says, his voice snapping me out of my melancholy. "I have kept my side of the bargain, putting myself at considerable risk on your behalf. Will you now settle what is owed?"

From the moment I first saw Crump I didn't like him. I perceived him to be nothing more than a profiteer, exploiting the misery of others; and this he has certainly proven to be.

But I find myself having a begrudging respect for this uncouth and violent urchin, a man who walks with a pronounced limp and shares a table with me. He is clearly terrified at the prospect of being discovered taking a bribe from a notorious rebel. And so he should be.

I know many men who would have turned me in by now in return for a pardon, the desire for life greater than their promises. Yet Crump hasn't done so. He has stayed true to his word. These days, that is a rarity.

The gaoler is an avowed enemy, someone I should feel bitterness and anger towards. But I don't. I feel nothing more than a sense of gratitude, even though the information I now possess has been bought for a high price. So I fish out my purse and lay seven more Laurels on the table.

Even in the gloom of the dimly lit inn, the brightness of the gold lights up the room.

"These are yours," I say. "A fair day's pay for a fair day's work. I thank you most graciously, Ambrose, for all you have done. It is a shame we are on opposing sides in

this barbarous conflict. But I am reassured you will be keeping a watchful eye on Rowland.

“Should anything change, and Rowland is not released, make sure you send word to me as quickly as you can at Stathern. My home can be easily found and you will find me most generous.”

When there is clearly nothing more to say, I reach out and grip Clump’s limp and damp fingers once again, unintentionally half crushing them. He winces, stutters a couple of inadequate sentences, confirming he will do as I request, then he is gone.

I watch him leave. He is as nervous as he was when he first arrived.

The tankard is empty, so I reach for my pocket watch. I can just make out the Roman numerals on the ornate dial. It is almost eleven o’clock.

It is time to leave this cursed place and start grieving for the dear friend I have lost.

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