

# The Saint's Bloodied Robe



A Short Story from Mateo McKoy's Questing Years

# The Saint's Bloodied Robe

## ...or, The Seer's Guidance

by Steven Rees

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Mathew McKoy answered his handler. "I think 1856 will be a greater year yet, Mr. David. Many positive signs are to be seen. Have you heard of the new steel-making process in Sheffield? The Americans are experimenting in making steel in large amounts as well. The war in Crimea must end soon. Perhaps Australia will be able to support itself and the crown will have coin to spare for programs nearer to home."

Winter light seeped in through the windows, each with their heavy drapes tied back. The parlor was sumptuously appointed: overstuffed chairs, tufted settees, hardwood tables polished to gleaming brilliance.

"You are certainly filled with optimism, Mathew. Are you up for a challenge? I've uncovered a few facts to help in tackling our next task. If you can pull it off, The Lady may start calling you our *favorite Irish Hercules*."

Mathew laughed, "That implies a great labor... for me. I hope you are not giving me too much credit comparing me to that ancient hero."

Aldith David was standing at the fireplace, he took a lit taper to ignite some incense, "I have Frankincense here, Mathew. I bought it from a merchant in Palestine. It was once worth more than gold, do you know? The Yule season is past, but I think burning a little will be pleasant." He walked over to the table and sat in his waxed and polished chair. The upholstered cushion was richly embroidered but worn a bit thin.

Mathew said, "I have no objection, of course. I recall its smell, and that of Myrrh, from my childhood in Antrim. A nice memory."

"I have received word from a source in Lyon, a reputable fellow who often travels over the Alps for Piedmontese wines. A relic has been identified; the bloodstained robe of Saint John of Bridlington."

"He's not a saint I am familiar with. What did he do?"

"He saved many fishermen from an angry sea and caused many years of good fishing around Bridlington, on the coast east of York. The bloodstain comes from when he saved the life of a fishwife and her baby. The child grew up to be a great hero at the Battle of Poitiers. He either captured the French king or saved the Black Prince. I don't recall."

“And the blood on the robe makes it a thing around which fate and history bends a knot.” Mathew smirked.

“Don’t sound so skeptical. You’ve seen enough to know there are great powers at work in the wider world. Besides, I believe it is the silver clasp sewn onto the robe that is the actual artifact we seek. Will you undertake this adventure for the Royal Society?”

Mathew looked a bit sheepish for a span and sipped some tea.

“Of course. What must I do? Go to France and steal the robe from a cheesemaker’s church?”

“Hah, nothing so simple or so far away. The robe is in a cave near Doncaster. It has been laying there safe for three hundred years because it is concealed by God’s will, or perhaps by magic. Or it was hidden there by a thief who never returned to claim it.”

“It can’t be all three, so which do you think it is and why?”

“You must see for yourself. There is a ritual to find it, however, that you will find distasteful – even though you are accustomed to many archaic rituals in your religion.” Mr. David brought out a wooden box from his wine cabinet, setting it on the table.

Mr. David started talking of magic rituals, and Mathew frowned, interjecting, “Why is there a ritual? More to the point, how does anyone know the secret rituals for long lost relics? Do all your collectors have to put up with such piffle?”

“Mr. McKoy do not think you can make your faces and talk to me disparagingly. You are still new in service to the RSC. A more civil tongue and demeanor are required. Starting now.”

Mathew was surprised by the force in David’s words. He stood up straight and apologized in a quiet voice.

Mr. David continued, “Not all of the rituals mean anything. We both know that. But for some reason they stick like glue to the tales of this relic – artifact.” He lifted open the lid on the box and began taking items out. He placed them one at a time on the table nearby. “These bags contain herbs that must be burned for two days before you can cross the stream in the cavern, and there are four squares of amber carved with runes that denote fog; shadow; reflection; and dreams. It is very Shakespearean.”

Mathew’s frown twisted his words, “It smacks of alchemy, foolishness and maybe heresy. Runes? I may be a modern man, but I still have a care for my soul.”

Mr. David reached for his cup, “There is no devilry in this. Divine magic, yes – *perhaps*. But I ask you to take on this mission and complete it. These items may seem nonsensical to you – I assure you they are not – and you may feel like I’m teasing you. I’m serious about this relic and the ritual you must execute to handle it.”

“I can perform the ritual. I will keep an open mind here.” Mathew reached out to touch the bags. He sensed a tingle of lazulianite in the runes but nothing in the herbs.

“It gets worse – for you. This advice came in the form of a dream. The agent who dreamed it has proven very reliable over many years – he is a hermit in southern France but has always proven trustworthy and serious.”

Mathew cleared his throat, “It just seems so... I don’t want to say it.”

“Perhaps it is magic, or metaphor or something else. Regardless, I think you should adhere to his advice.”

Mathew nodded.

“Thank you, Mathew. Now for the rest.”

Mathew started to cross himself but scratched his nose instead.

“The relic reposes in a cave, and the cave has a stream with a bridge to cross. After you cross the bridge but before you step onto the bare rock, cast the runes before you. You should see a woman standing there, according to my dreamer. The runes are for her, but there is a guard behind her – a man. In his dream the hermit saw that the guard’s hands must be tied up with a brightly colored rope and his feet tied to a large rock. That part, I think, is probably metaphor.... The dreamer said that if you spill a few drops of wine or brandy the guard will forget his duties. Beyond the guard is what is called the Grayscale... the land nearest the underworld – Now stop looking at me like that; listen. It’s like in the stories of Hercules crossing the Styx, only here there’s a bridge not a boat, and no ferryman to pay off.”

Mathew sounded doubtful, “This is more like something out of Norse or Danish myth, but I won’t call it tomfoolery just yet. Brightly colored rope? What does that mean?”

“I’m sure you will figure it out.”

Mathew crossed his arms on his chest and waited.

Mr. David continued. “You’re expected to trick your way into the cavern, then find the hidden relic. It’s like a dark age tale told by a minstrel. Think of it as metaphorical. You aren’t supposed to charge in with a company of riflemen, is my supposition. After that, you must listen for guidance before heading deeper into the cavern.”

“Guidance?”

Mr. David gathered the items and put them in the box. “The dreamer was specific. He said, “listen for guidance.” I suppose one of the two guards will talk in their sleep. Or more likely, there is a message scrawled on the wall or some such. Oh, and you are supposed to take holy water with you. The colored rope is supposed to be wet. The hermit called it blessing-washed rope.”

“Well, Milord, you have offered me ample pay and Alexander says you’ve been right too often for me to gainsay you. I’d like to fill my brandy flask while I’m here and then go by the church for a quick prayer. I can pretend to be Anglican long enough for that.”

Mr. David had a smile for that, “I never forget that you’re catholic. How did your family survive all the years in Antrim with the Unionists looking for you?”

“My father often worked abroad, but as an engineer of bridges he was often needed by men of wealth, and he was always cautious where religion was concerned.”

“Your time in Spain made you much more open about your faith. Why is that?”

“Serving with Spaniards meant that life was easier if I publicly followed the Roman Church. Besides, it is a good feeling to have somewhere you belong, people who share your faith.”

Mathew rose from the chair and set his cup back on its saucer. He almost believed that last part.

Mr. David scooted his chair back and stood. “Finish your brandy. Return as soon as you are able. I’ll make the final arrangements and get you some money for expenses.”

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There was a dusting of snow, somewhat gray and soot-smudged, and it was melting slowly as Mathew walked along the street.

As Mathew entered the church, he heard a commotion near the altar. By the doors a boy filling the font with holy water spun about to look and knocked loose a drapery and its restraining cords. The youngster spilled holy water and let out a shriek.

“Easy son,” said Mathew, “It’s just a squirrel stealing communion bread, go and help the priest.” As the boy ran off Mathew found that he had somehow been handed the ewer of holy water and was facing the font.

A curtain by the entrance dangled loosely and a braided rope had fallen into the bowl of water. The rope was reddish purple with golden thread in it and it was slowly staining the water blue. Mathew stared, *‘I need ropes to bind the guardian, and here they are, already doused in holy water.’* Mathew filled a vial and stoppered it with a cork – just in case.

He picked up the loose ends of the skinny rope, some ten or twelve feet of it, and dumped it all into the font then poured in most of the remaining water from the ewer. The water inside the ewer was also blue now, with an inner light. He set it down and pulled the rope out. The font held blue water which would no doubt cause the boy serious trouble, but Mathew just smiled. He coiled the dripping rope and put it in his leather satchel. He left the church while the priest and the boy shouted at and shooed the squirrel.

*Well, now I know that lazulian is at work in the holy water here...or the ever... and that means I'm on the right track with this silly 'ritual' nonsense.* Mathew momentarily wondered if his mission was a hazing ritual for new agents of the Royal Society of Collectors.

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In keeping with the modern age, and not wanting to ride a horse or take a stagecoach more than 220 miles in the winter, Mathew purchased a ticket on the railroad. From the new King's Cross Station to Birmingham, on to Derby and ending at Leeds, the first-class fare was just over sixteen pounds.

He had to switch trains in Birmingham and that incurred an overnight delay. The trip to Derby was filled with three days of being catered to in a slightly smoky but comfortable coach, eating good food and drinking his fill of claret, and during the days, observing the countryside through the coach windows.

In Leeds, he encountered a new problem. A conductor and porter stood waiting for him on the platform.

"Mr. McKoy, sir. I'm Conductor Snetton and it seems that a grave error has been made. Your luggage was mistakenly sent on to Doncaster with a Mr. McLean, while his luggage is here. We'll make arrangement for a carriage to take you up to the hotel and this porter will fetch and carry for you."

Mathew was silent for a moment, "I see, well, you've already taken steps on my behalf. I should be angry, but I'm only too happy to be off the train and on solid ground. Another day added to the journey is no great hardship. Can you tell me which is faster, my going to Doncaster, or my luggage coming back here?"

"We can have your luggage back here the day after next."

"I think I should be able to hire a horse or stage and make Doncaster tomorrow afternoon, gather my things and be off to Selby and catch your train to York. I believe that would be a nice diversion." Mathew turned to the other man, "Porter, would you check on a stable and a horse for me?"

"Ah, you fancy a bit of adventure then," said Conductor Snetton. "I shall wire ahead for you."

"Thank you, Mr. Snetton," said Mathew with a tiny bow and a touch to his hat brim.

Mathew had a warm, comfortable room at a local hotel, more hot food, and claret, with port and Stilton afterwards. He also had the promise of a pair of horses waiting at a nearby stable. A thirty-mile ride to Doncaster on fresh horses with his satchel should be an easy ride compared to his months spent in the Spanish campaigns. The cost was but twelve shillings, so that was no matter, and he could keep the horses till he reached Selby then send them home with a groom. *We have a plan. I wonder what mystery is waiting for me tomorrow. It can't possibly be as bleak as my five years in the Americas. I've seen enough jungle and desert to last a lifetime.*

Stagecoaches, inns, and roadhouses had long prospered along the York Road, probably going all the way back to Roman times. But now, in less than a decade the stagecoach business had nearly died out with the

coming of the railroads. Many roadhouses had descended into poor taverns, and the fine old inns were often boarded up or replaced by modern hotels. There was no coach for him to catch, so Mathew's only choice was hiring the horses. The conductor asked him to wait in the safety and comfort in Leeds, but Mathew thought back on his days as a soldier and how he had grown to manhood wanting to be nothing more, "No, Mr. Snetton. The weather is decent, and a one-day ride is no hardship."

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Mathew's rump and legs were sore after the ride, but it was nothing a night's sleep wouldn't cure.

Doncaster was a large town that had medieval importance but Roman roots, not to mention its part in the legends of Robin Hood. The inns were suffering, with many boarded up, but trains had brought a new kind of business, so the town had hope again. The day's business was still going strong, though it was midafternoon. Teamsters and tradesmen were in abundance. Hadley Inn had a good room for the night, and the horses were in a stable nearby.

Mathew wanted to stay on the north side of the river so he could get an early start; Hadley's was ideal. Mathew hired a carriage to take him to the railway station and get his luggage, which had only just been returned by the angry Mr. McLean.

Mathew walked up as the Scotsman was haranguing a rail clerk. "Pardon me."

Both men looked at him with differing expectations.

"Mr. McLean, I am Mathew McKoy. Thank you for taking care of my luggage. I can assure you the railroad is sending yours forthwith and was most apologetic to me."

"I am not at all satisfied. My trunk and books will be a day late. Are you with the rail. No, of course. A fellow Scot, are you? You sound Irish but are too well dressed."

"Allow me to buy you pint of ale, or perhaps a whisky, if that is to your liking. My hotel is just over the North Bridge, and they have rooms if you have not found one yet."

Mr. McLean shook hands and said, "Good to meet another traveler who has had rotten luck like my own. Whisky is what I need to bring my temper down."

Two hours after dinner Mathew went for a walk before turning in.

He passed a hedge and gate, noting a down and out fellow in an old army coat and mud caked boots. He was crouched against the gate with his collar turned up. The miseries produced by an unforgiving world were not limited to the squalid neighborhoods of London.

The man looked up and held out a hand, “Milord, can you spare the price of an ale for an old soldier?” The man was grubby and wore a ragged greatcoat. Maybe the man actually *had* been a soldier once. Mathew paused, unbuttoned his overcoat, and reached into a vest pocket for a few schillings.

The man twisted his feet under himself and rose; he knew the value of fast, violent action and rushed Mathew with knife in hand. The wine with dinner slowed Mathew’s reactions. The grubby man’s knife cut the coat, shirt, and left arm that Mathew threw outward to block the attack.

There was no time for the pistol in his pocket or the boot knife; Mathew spun to the right as he tried to step back from the attacker, but the fellow charged in. Mathew threw a punch, a hard one that landed just as his back leg locked firmly. His weight and adrenaline were behind it. He hit the knifeman just under the jaw and something vital crunched inward. The man staggered, leaning away, gasping, or choking, then buckled to the ground. Mathew took two steps back and pulled his pistol from his jacket pocket, cocking it with a sweep of his left hand. The man on the ground twitched as though in great pain or in his death throes.

No one was on the street or in sight. Mathew carefully checked the man, who was wearing better clothing concealed beneath the greatcoat. He noted his light beard and thought the fellow was too clean for a street beggar or a regular drunkard. He put his pistol away so he could search the man’s pockets faster. Nothing – no money, no papers, nothing but the hidden knife sheath inside his belt and a second knife in his left boot.

He pulled two handkerchiefs from his coat pocket and shrugged off his coat so he could bandage his arm as he called loudly, “Robbery! Constable!”

He called out several times more. Within a minute or two he heard a whistle and around the corner came two constables. Other men were on the street by then, but they watched from ten or fifteen paces away.

“Constable, this man attacked me. He asked me for ale money and then stabbed me in the arm. I punched him and he fell hard.”

“Stand back man. Someone bring more light!” The constable raised his oil lantern and studied the corpse.

“He’s dead, Neal. Musta bashed his head on the cobbles. He doesn’t look none too familiar. You know him?”

“Hmmm, Nope.” Neal was matter of fact.

“I’ll go get a cart.” The second constable was older than Neal, half-bald, a wild fringe of gray hair tickling his ears. He sauntered up the lane.

At the hotel Mathew went to the bar and got brandy to wash the wound. “One for the cut, and one for me.” He’d known a man in Spain who claimed all wounds should be washed in strong wine or brandy, it seemed to work. He treated himself several more times. After Neal left, Mathew sipped his brandy.



The older constable looked on with an ale in hand. He'd had some questions and listened to Mathew's answers. "Pretty clear, thinks me, that the ruffian had it comin'. I'll report it o' course, but I see no reason for you to stay around. Neal has your statement. God watch o'er you Mr. McKoy."

A doctor came and made five sutures with fine silk then applied a poultice and a bandage to Mathew's arm. "Keep it dry, if you can, and drink plenty of tea for the next three days. Here's another clean bandage – wrap it again tomorrow and smell it to make sure it doesn't go sour. Have you had a serious cut before?"

"I know what to do, doctor, and what to look for. Thank you. Take a few shillings for your trouble, please."

Come morning Mathew rose later than hoped for, thanks to the wine and whisky the night before. He felt the need to scrub his teeth with baking powder and a rinse of lime juice before bathing and going for breakfast. They had no coffee downstairs, but the tea was quite good and plentiful. Mathew studied Mr. David's map of the area. It appeared that a wooded hill a short walk north of Askern was where the hidden cavern had its mouth.

His arm hurt, a pulsing throb. Some spots of blood had soaked through the bandage, but he let it be.

The six-mile ride from Doncaster to Askern was solitary but not lonely; uneventful yet not boring. Or it would have been except the cut on his arm opened up when he stopped to adjust the portmanteau on the second horse. He wrapped the arm tightly with a spare scarf and mounted again. Clouds were building in the west, but it was still a clear, cold morning. He could see his breath and it was already midmorning.

"Askern and the cave first, then on to Selby where I can catch a train back to London. That's the plan." It was a sound plan done in by the bleeding cut. The stitches had pulled through and blood soaked his glove and stained his trousers. He'd only come 4 miles.

A woman by the roadside was beating a rug she had hung over a fence rail. Behind her Mathew could see smoke from a chimney and several dogs and goats. She called out to him as if he was a mile away, "I'll trade you a cup of tea and a scone if you have news to share." When he got closer, she noticed the bloody arm, "You had trouble on the road, sir? That's a fresh one." She pointed at his arm.

"Not serious, ma'am, a small cut I got in town, but I pulled out a stitch or two and it is making a bit of a mess."

"Don't be 'ma'am-ing' me now, young'un; you can call me Grams like the rest. Come and sit a spell. Let me look at it. Young men like you have no sense about these things... you'll end up with blood poisoning

or an age without a mother's care. Nine boys I raised up till they was old enough for the army, though one joined the navy and drowned for his mistake."

At the table he sat with his left arm in his lap and sipped the strong tea without milk. "You have good tea. Thank you."

"And your arm is paining you. I have some knowledge of healing – the old arts too, if you're of that belief."

"I'm a modern man and a Christian. I put no faith in the old gods."

"Your loss then, young 'un. The old ways still have power here away from the fancy cities. But I also know something of poultices to draw and others to sooth. I know how to keep the black rot away."

His arm burned and throbbed with each beat of his heart. He winced as he unwrapped it. It didn't smell like it was going bad, but there was a bright redness around the puffy wound.

He looked at her, "It would be easier with two hands, but I only have one. Perhaps you can look at it and put a fresh bandage on." Her old-woman smirk reminded him of someone....

She filled her cup with a woodsy-smelling brew and then refilled his cup. "Drink the evergreen now, and I'll tend this nick." She rinsed away the old poultice and blood. "Sit there quiet. Don't move the arm at all. Drink your tea, I'll make more later." She pounded some herbs and rocks and sticks in a mortar and poured in a watery oil mixture then stirred it well and scooped it onto a silver dish. While it sat in the dish she went to the stove and fussed with a pouch of herbs and a pine branch. She came back and put two new stiches in to draw the skin together, and then applied the poultice, wrapped it and poured a small measure of pine-pitch syrup on top and wrapped another layer of cloth overtop it all.

Mathew watched her closely, studied the ingredients he could see and her technique. She went to fetch a cup of tea that smelled strongly of pine needles and pitch, she slid it across the table toward him. He took it, "I've never had pine tea before." He examined the bulky, and tight, bandage on his arm. *I'll have to be careful putting on my coat.*

"Two cups for you tonight and you will sleep by the hearth. In the morning I'll give you another poultice to take on your journey and a clean bit of sheet. I'll go out and unsaddle and feed your horses. Now rest."

Which is exactly what Mathew did. Without a complaint or comment, he fell asleep.

He awoke with a start, unaware at first how long he'd slept. After a moment, though he knew it was morning, even though the window was shuttered. He saw his boots by the hearth, checked his pockets. His coat had been his pillow and he had slept on a bag filled with straw and covered by two wool blankets.

The stove was barely warm, so the old woman stirred up the ashes and coals, added kindling and started her day like she had so many before.

“How long did I sleep?” He rubbed his eyes and looked at her by the stove, “What was in that tea?”

“The mushroom should have eased the pain, not put you in the Land of Nod. Not unless that cut was poisoned somehow. Maybe then.”

“Perhaps it was, but it didn’t burn or tingle.”

“Did you drink anything back in town? Too much whisky? Bad water?”

“Yes, wine with dinner and whisky after.” Mathew thought then about Mr. McLean and whether the luggage mix-up was an honest mistake.

Porridge, bread, cheese, and black tea made for a sound breakfast. His arm hurt less, even after saddling the horses. The woman told him Askern was only two to three miles up the road, and he’d be there before it started raining at noon. He felt he should complain about her medicine trickery, but let it go. He left two candles and several coins on her table. When he mounted his horse, he looked at her and said, “Thank you Grams. You do indeed have a mothering touch with those medicines. Maybe the old gods do have some sway around here still.”

Mathew took a room at the first inn he came to in Askern. The rest of the day he favored his left arm and walked about town talking to folks.

“Yes, I’m on a bit of a holiday. Never been to Yorkshire before. I’m collecting folktales and legends for my sister who is studying in London.” He made a lot of small talk and figured out that he was one of many strangers in town, but Mathew was “the only odd one.”

Mathew took that to mean there were no other relic collectors around, no murderous assailants, though some local bandits might be waiting for some easy prey. He made a point of talking to a constable and making it known he was armed with a pistol in case he was out at night and wolves came around, and he planned to walk up and down the riverbank talking to bargemen, fishermen and boat builders. “I have no coin to spare, so I must find cheap ways to entertain myself while I am traveling. Nothing is cheaper than talking!”

He nursed several beers in a couple pubs and asked for tales from any who would tell them. He even made notes in a small book.

After full dark he changed from the lightweight slacks one wears in the city into his stout wool trousers and dark gray winter jacket. He gathered his satchel and locked his room. He slipped out of town and walked north to the hill he had seen earlier. The moon was up, and the rain had passed before dinner. His arm was bothering him, but he strode onward. He found a faint trail on the hillside and started up. He came to a flat

rock standing waist high by the game trail and paused, then climbed up on it. An even fainter trail continued across the slope.

He followed it. In a few minutes he was in front of a cave partially concealed by a hazel tree. A scraggly pine tree grew just below the cave mouth, and he was reminded of the pine tea and his aching arm. He wanted a fire for tea, so he settled in at the cave's mouth.

He sat by his fire facing out of the cavern and heated pine pitch from the stunted tree. He changed the dressing on his wound and put the warm pitch over the new poultice, then wrapped his last clean bandage around his arm. The pitch had none of the fresh woodsy smell; it had a mustiness to it. A sip of brandy made him feel better.

As the night cooled a breath of air drifted out of the cave depths. The air was neither sweet nor foul. He waited and listened. The moon felt its way across the black sky and after it had traversed a span or so, Mathew got up to stretch and give his backside a rest from the hard ground. A stray thought reminded him that it was Burn's Night – a thing his grandmother had taught him.

He heated water for tea, of which he had only enough for one cup, so he cut some needles and branches of the old tree and copied what he'd seen the old woman do. The tea tasted stale and a bit dirty but there was nothing to be done – he was out of real tea, and it was going to be a long cold night. Bad tea was better than no tea at all. His dinner of bacon and bread did not sit well that night. He got up and paced around the small clearing and into the cave mouth making a circuit. His belly ached and he felt a bit feverish, he cursed himself for making the pine tea. He paced the circuit until it became a habit. He wondered how long he'd been pacing and stopped. He knelt to get a drink of clean water from his canteen, and nearly fainted when he stood up again. He sat and leaned against the cave wall and nodded off.

Hours after sundown and moonrise, with his fire burning down and his blanket lying on the rock beside him, Mathew awoke. He was cold but felt alert. He remembered the ritual and figured he should burn the first box of herbs. "It will soon be midnight. This is the first day, or night rather, and the first box. The other can wait till morning. Two boxes, two days is what Mr. David said." He added twigs and a few sticks to the fire, blowing on it to encourage the light and heat. He warmed his hands over it.

The herbs flared on the coals and added a touch of fuzziness to his half-muddled brain. That's when he heard the voices under the moonlight. His arm itched and his brandy was nearly gone. The flames subsided, to coals again and smoke.

He drank from his water flask and wandered deeper into the cave. It was past midnight and his stomach had settled down, but he heard the buzzing of flies and whispering voices. With a small torch he walked into the cave and followed its turns first one way and then the other. He stumbled once or twice. He walked

downward and into warmer air – very still air. Somewhere ahead he could hear a trickle of noise, so he kept on, moving slowly. He knelt when the sound of water was louder – the stream – and touched the water with one finger. A bunch of sticks, grasses and twigs had collected here during some long past rain, so he laid his torch on it and a small blaze grew. In the light he noted a few pieces of sturdy wood at hand, and he put them on the fire.

A voice came to him, swelling and fading. “The dead come over in ones and twos...” It was a woman’s sing-song voice; it rose and faded. “...down and down no going back... in sleep’s coils or field-black, from landscape to Grayscale... the dead carry no news.”

Mathew took the second pouch of the herbs from the box and dumped the herbs on the fire. It flared brightly. In the light he could see a bridge spanning a stream some ten paces distant. At the far end he saw a smoke-wrapped woman and heard a man snoring in the farther darkness. He stood, a bit unsteadily at first, and put the empty herb box back in his pocket.

A ghost took shape nearer to Mathew and looked at him. Her eyes were the palest gray, the rest a blur of white and blue. She seemed to grow more real as he stared. Her voice came to him firmly, “The bridge is of old rope and mossy planks. It floats upon the midnight stream.”

He thought she must be an illusion or a dream, but his mind seemed clear and his body alert. The voice was real.

“Once on the bridge you must not stop as it begins to settle into the Stillwater – in that *Stillness* you can be lost between life and death – keep moving – or turn back at once and admit failure.”

The apparition spoke again, “You must speak to the seer. She stands watch for those who cross to the Grayscale.”

Mathew looked at the bridge, then at the ghost. *I am in a Poe story. I wonder which one.*

He walked to the streamside, then across the bridge but stopped before taking the final step. The stream flowed without moving; shivered between its banks. *Stillwater* oozed up around his boots. Something smelled a bit sour, or perhaps acrid; Mathew’s feet were chilled. The pouch with the amber runes was somehow in his hand and open, “Here are the runes, Seer. Perhaps you can tell what they say.”

“They call me a seer, but it is because I see newly arrived souls, not the future.”

The other voice, the ghost – in his mind perhaps – said, “Stand and look across her station and ask her for the robe. Toss the runes to the woman’s feet and spill a drop or two of brandy for the guard.”

Mathew did as the voice told him. The runes landed in puffs of dust and stared upward with a faint green glow. His flask glowed a pale turquoise as he took a sip.

The Seer bent to study them – she slumped into sleep... but she had heard Mathew’s question. She began to dream-talk, “The robe is around three corners and lays on a slab of pale stone. The Saint is nowhere to

be found – he has passed beyond the veil and only the lost and the discarded linger here.” The amber tiles blazed with blue light where the runes were deeply etched.

The other voice – the ghost – came from behind him or in his head, “The guardian must be bound hand and foot with the rope. Go past him and find the Saint’s raiment – it will show the stains upon it.”

The ghost voice seemed to grow stronger, and in front of Mathew’s eyes he beheld a man with a scarred face and only one hand. Blue smoke draped the scarred man, and he whispered in the woman’s voice, louder than the mutterings of the sleeping Seer, “The brandy and let me rest.”

The ghost pointed at a reclining guard behind the Seer.

Mathew didn’t recall moving but found himself at the man’s side. He dribbled brandy on the ground by the guard. He reached into his satchel and found the damp cord from the church in London and pulled the coil out. He held it, one tail dangling and dripping a few drops of holy water.

Guard or ghost, he had the look of a Roman soldier but with ancient, withered skin drawn tight on his bones. Mathew twirled the fancy rope with his right hand, letting the loose tail fly free, the other end was clamped in his left hand. The loose end snaked around the guardian’s ankles and then Mathew looped it around the guard’s hand and tossed the remaining coils over a rock outcrop. The cord seemed to know the proper path to take as it bound the guard in place. The cord was still damp and gleamed redly in the light.

Both the guard and the seer snored and seemed more ethereal as the moments passed. Mathew stood upright and closed his eyes and then pulled out his bottle of holy water to wet the cord again. Nothing happened. He dropped the bottle when he tried to put it back in his pocket – the neck broke off, but it did not shatter. The dust around it turned the moisture to a deeper shadow. The Seer and Guardian remained at rest. Mathew stepped past them.

“Three turns, a pale stone and something else...” Mathew ran along the tunnel, torch in hand. When he stumbled, he stopped, leaning against the rough wall. “Three turns brings me here... the pale stone bench.” His torch lit the whole chamber... nearly. He looked to his left. *A knapsack, some rope, an oil lamp, and a water jug. Why would those be here?*

Three paces to the pale slab. He held the torch up and saw what lay upon the bench.

“A cloak, and a fine one by the feel. With metal buttons and a silver and bronze clasp. A Bishop’s cloak? A saint’s cloak.” Mathew saw the dark stains in several places on the cloth.

His torch sputtered and brightened with blue flames.

He reached into his deep coat pocket and pulled out his deck of tarot cards. He slipped The Moon from the case and held it lightly as he touched the Robe again.

He felt the telltale bite of magic in his thumb and fingers. *The Robe... the relic.*

Slumped in the shadows behind the bench was a desiccated human wearing a torn, dust covered coat, slashed pants, and cracked leather boots. One sleeve of the jacket was missing below the elbow. Mathew was not the first to make it this far.

He left the cavern as the earliest light showed the gray world a brand-new day. The flat rock before the cave mouth was paler than the pine tree. All color was washed from the world and not yet restored by the sun. A robin called in the distance. Mathew walked down the hill toward Askern.

...

He pulled the herb box from his coat pocket and admired it. He placed it in his satchel and secured the strap. The Saint's Robe was rolled up with his spare blanket and tied behind his saddle. He flipped up his coat collar and pulled his hat a little lower. The train for London would have him home on Tuesday, the thirtieth of January – if all went well. He looked forward to seeing Nuria and the children.

...

Mr. David met Mathew at King's Cross station and they walked to a waiting carriage. "So, Mathew, was it a success?"

"Oh yes. I suppose so."

*The End of one Thing....*

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