

Who Pays the Ferryman?

I lay shivering. The weak light of a mid-winter's dawn flooded the cell, waking me from a long, dismal night to face yet another long, dismal day. I felt for the scratches, on the wall, running wet and cold: 83 days, almost three months. Soon it would be spring in La Rochelle, but I would never see the first snowdrops nor hear the first cuckoo call of 1628 – not if I remained starving and shackled in this stinking hellhole. And for what? For following my beliefs, my protestant beliefs. I was a Huguenot, and proud of it! I closed my eyes and saw again the face of Jean-Jac, my supposed friend, leering as I was dragged away, the purse light in his hand. Was *that* all I was worth? A familiar voice broke my reverie.

‘Monsieur. Wake up and make ready to leave!’ My jailer, Louis.

‘Leave? What do you mean, lea-’

‘Make *ready*, monsieur! A ransom has been paid, by Huguenot filth. Not my choice, but I have my instructions.’

I heard the turning of the great key in the lock, felt the manacles loosen then Louis hauling me unsteadily to my feet – the man reeked, worse than the vermin I lodged with.

‘Here. Take this,’ he said, and threw a hooded cape over my head and shoulders. ‘Come quickly, and keep your dirty trap shut.’

We made our way quickly and silently, Louis shoving me forward along an endless labyrinth of corridors and stairways dimly lit by candles and torches until, suddenly, I was out, beyond the city walls - and alone. The harbour and the estuary of the Charente opened up before me and I knew I had to make haste, while the sun was still low and the rising mists my friends. I headed south – towards the ferry across the Gironde, and a safe house, kept by brave and sympathetic Catholic friends. For four, maybe five days and nights, I travelled – keeping low, finding barns and empty outhouses, filching food where I could, stealing a knife, left lying around by a careless farmhand, perhaps.

On the last morning, I woke early, drank from a stream, and ate what little bread I still had in the pocket of my cloak. It was a brighter dawn and I had seen no-one for days. The sun warmed my shoulders as I started to descend, heading for the ferry point, the thought of leaving La Rochelle behind and sleeping, at last, in a warm, comfortable bed, putting a fresh spring in my step. I picked my way through farmers’ fields and vineyards – no grapes yet – and could finally see the ferry. And the ferryman...

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I made myself comfortable, the rock and sway of the boat a little disconcerting. I pulled my hood closer.

‘A fine morning, monsieur.’ The ferryman peered over his shoulder as we left the bank behind.

‘Yes. A beautiful day to be alive,’ I said, as my hand found the knife. ‘A *wonderful* day, Jean-Jac.’