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“Wighard arrived in Rome, but before he could be consecrated, he and all his companions fell victim to the plague.”

*The Lives of the Abbots of Monkwearmouth and Jarrow,
c. 716 AD*

As we left the presbytery for the Hillman, I told Nielsen about Father Healy. Although I made it clear that I thought Healy was lying, the detective didn't seem concerned one bit. Suddenly, I was angry with him, I was angry with all this death and fear, and I was sick of not knowing anything about his letters and the missing wolf. Nielsen must have sensed my building rage, for he did his best to assuage it, but I exploded.

“You will tell me everything you know. I'm nearly killed by a member of your own police force, and you still expect me to trust you? And how do I know I can? I'm not some bloody bystander now, not anymore! And I'm not your bloody Latin expert if you're not going to fill me in. If you want someone to read your letters, you can damn well find him somewhere else unless you tell me what's happening!”

At that, Nielsen at last agreed to talk. Still livid, I fired a series of pointed questions at him. “Why did you send for me today?”

“There is another letter at the station for you to translate.”

“What bloody letter?”

“I do not know. I cannot read Latin. All I can say is that the script looks similar to Ohthere's.”

“Why didn't you telephone for me instead?”

“I did, sir. I rang your department. The secretary told me you were very sick with a virus, and you were probably asleep in your rooms. I became worried. I telephoned the porter’s lodge and asked Mr Stephens to check on you. Mr Stephens rang back: you were not in your rooms. I then rang the department again, who said that you had not come in. At that, I concluded that you had gone to the library. I sent two men I trusted to pick you up: Tom Gordon, and young Hammond; the fittest man in the whole station, whom I sent in the event that Gordon might need back up.”

“Why would Hammond kill Gordon and try to murder me?”

“I do not know.”

“Why didn’t you just come and get me yourself?”

“I was on the telephone to Roby’s widow in Nottingham. The call was urgent, and could not be postponed: I had telephoned a Nottingham police station, told them it was an emergency, asked them to collect her and bring her to an office inside their building, and had them call me when she’d arrived. But that was not all. I had also been on the telephone to the hospital, learning that the monsignor was dead.”

It had been the fever; sudden, severe, that took him. The doctors said that the monsignor had tried but could not fight it. He died shivering, babbling incomprehensibly to the strangers around his bed. It was a deeply saddening thought.

“I find these fevers to be an awful coincidence, Mr Nielsen.”

“I do too. When your secretary told me of your illness, I thought that you were dying also.”

“And what would you have done if I had?”

Nielsen did not pretend. “I don’t know, Mr Haye. I don’t know.”

I shuddered. An acutely intelligent, infinitely capable man, with all the resources of a senior police detective at his disposal – cars, telephones, teams of tough constables, whole-shire lockdown powers – *and he would not know what to do if I were dead*. It dawned on me that he probably knew little more than I did, that he would have few answers as to why, that he was seeking answers as much as I was, that he was here because somehow he was involved to start with, and that his expert curiosity would not let go.

“But I *am* alive, Mr Nielsen. What do we do now?”

* * *

As we walked back to Nielsen’s car on Crawford Road, the detective apologised for what had happened. “You must understand that Hammond was someone I did not suspect would ever behave in this manner. That was why I sent him with Gordon.”

That reminded me of something. “Mr Nielsen, do you remember what I told you about the white man at The Elephant and Castle? About how strange he looked?”

Nielsen looked at me out of the corner of his eye “Yes, I clearly remember.”

“Think of the following four points,” I said, “One, his eyes were red. Two, he made no noise, even when I hit him very hard. Three, he moved, he ran, quicker than a normal person would. Four, that cold look, as though he wasn’t in his own body ... as though he had no feelings ...”

“Yes, I remember, of course.”

“Hammond was the same. Exactly the same on all counts. He looked inhuman. When we drove over the bridge he was fine. The next minute he stabbed Gordon in the throat with a knife, and tried to kill me.”

Nielsen nodded. "I believe you. But I don't know what that means."

I was getting impatient again. "Yes, but you know some things that I don't."

"And what are they?"

"You know how this started, and where those first letters came from."

"It is a very unusual story," Nielsen sighed, "and it is very long."

I started him off by confirming a hunch of mine. "You got yesterday's letter from Professor Roby, didn't you? He was bringing it to Monsignor Hough, who was going to bring it to you."

"That is correct."

"Where did you get the other letters?"

"The monsignor and Professor Roby have given me three letters in total. I came upon one by accident."

"Where?"

"An antique shop."

"Was it Lyndon's Antiques on Lyon St.?"

"How did you know?" said Nielsen.

I ignored him. "Did it have anything to do with the assault there?"

"I don't know. The letter had been hidden in a cello that was broken in the struggle. It could simply be a coincidence."

"Could be, but it's a highly irregular place to put an early medieval document. Do you think the old man knew about it?"

"That I do not know. It was not my job to investigate the assault – it was Bernard Kraay's. Kraay and I do not care for each other. He only shared a few details with me."

"What happened? Tell me what you heard."

“The old man was Victor Gilby. He was a soldier once. His wife died many years ago and he became very eccentric, a man who went for long walks alone at night, talking to himself the entire time. Last Wednesday – in front of five other customers – he walked into the shop and accused Lyndon of stealing something that belonged to him.”

“It was the wolf, wasn’t it?”

“A wolf, Mr Hays.”

“Surely it’s the same wolf, Mr Nielsen.”

“I honestly cannot say, sir. All I can say is that Mr Lyndon denied the accusation. Mr Gilby called him a liar and attacked him. Witnesses say he was very strong for an old man – picking up heavy objects and beating Mr Lyndon with them. He even broke a cello on Mr Lyndon – that’s how we found the letter. It took many people to drag him away.”

“How did you get hold of that letter if Kraay was in charge? You just said he didn’t like you, why would he help you?”

“That is another long story. To find a document folded inside a cello is very unusual. But it was not apparently related to the assault, so some of Kraay’s men felt free to discuss it at work on Saturday afternoon. Of course, none of them knew what it said as they do not read Latin. I heard this and also considered it unusual. Why store a document in this manner? On Sunday I had little urgent work. I became curious. Now, there are many people who do not like Kraay. He is an abrasive man who thinks only of himself. I simply asked one of the junior detectives who worked with Kraay on the assault – and with whom I am friendly – to lend the letter to me behind Kraay’s back, and he was happy to oblige.”

“What do you think?”

“I think that I do not trust Mr Eric Lyndon. Years ago,

when I first arrived in Allminster, I met him in my capacity as a policeman. There were rumours that he was entering the woods near the old gaol at night with a spade and some torches, obviously to dig for artefacts to sell illegally in his shop. One night, he must have discovered quite a hoard – there were suddenly some rare coins and some jewellery for sale in his shop that he had no dealers’ receipts for, as well as some officers’ swords and other items such as manacles that were definitely associated with the gaol. But I could not prove this conclusively, and was eventually ordered to leave him alone as his case was not a high priority. Since then, I suspect that he has regularly plundered the gaol ruins. He is a thief and a liar.”

“Do you think that he stole the wolf from St Matthew’s?”

“No. The junior detective I spoke of told me that Mr Lyndon had an alibi for the time of theft: he was seen by at least half a dozen people in his shop.”

“Then perhaps the wolf was stolen by somebody acting on his orders.”

“It is possible. But Lyndon lacks the imagination for such a crime. Sneaking out at night to dig for artefacts is one thing, planning the daytime theft of valuable, well known treasure is another. This item could never be sold in a shop. A plan for moving it out of the city through some antiquing contacts is more likely, but I know that the majority of Lyndon’s contacts are not interested in artefacts, only furniture and such. You must understand that arranging a fence for a high-profile stolen item is more difficult than most people think. In this case, there is the theft itself: well planned, flawlessly and swiftly executed by a person who knew exactly where to go. Then there is the matter of removing the item safely and holding on to it long enough to sell in another country at a

later date, as the jet wolf could never be sold legitimately in England. I am convinced that Lyndon is too insignificant a man to be directly involved with a theft of this magnitude.”

“Then why was the old man so certain Lyndon had it?” I asked.

“The old man was deranged. Kraay’s own theory is that Gilby read of the theft in the newspaper and in a fit of madness mistakenly associated the antique dealer with the wolf.”

“And do you believe him?”

“No, I do not, sir. The assault took place on Saturday, but the newspaper did not carry the wolf-theft story until Monday. Nevertheless, Mr Gilby is dead, and will not be revealing the truth to us.”

“Gilby died? I thought that it was Lyndon who came off second best in the fight.”

“He died of a fever in hospital on Sunday morning.” Oh God, another one ... I thought. “But I have more pressing concerns, Mr Haye, such as keeping you alive and finding more of the documents.”

We walked in silence, my mind buzzing. What the devil was happening? Did Nielsen consider the behaviour of Brown, Hammond and Gilby as strange and terrifying as I did? Where – how – did this dreadful story begin? “I still don’t understand how all this started,” I blurted out.

Patently, the detective answered. “It started when I called Monsignor Charles Hough on Sunday afternoon and asked him to read Kraay’s letter for me.”

“You knew him before this?”

“I knew him well,” He said. “I am a Roman Catholic. When my wife died of the influenza in 1919 I came here from Denmark to stay with a cousin. The monsignor has

been my good friend ever since this time.”

Of course, I thought. They were *friends*. They were also Roman Catholics. There were only three million in Britain at the moment, three million out of a population of forty-six million. They shared a close bond in this country. Roman Catholics were outsiders. They were barred from most of the professions, forbidden from high-ranking public offices; mistrusted by all right-thinking Englishmen; shunned like a disease. No wonder Nielsen had turned to Charles Hough for help.

“Go on.”

“He read the letter and fell silent. I prompted him for more information. Nothing important, he said, just some correspondence between churchmen. But he left looking quite troubled. Half an hour later he telephoned me, sounding hurried. Something awful was happening, he said. It concerned the jet wolf that was stolen from St Matthew’s on Friday. From his voice I could tell that he was completely serious. He came to my office and gave me a document – the first letter you read – to keep safe for him, and told me that there were more to come. When I asked him what the letter said, he did not answer me properly, he simply repeated that he needed me to keep it safe. He said that he would give another letter to me when a friend of his arrived into town, and that he and this friend would give me a better explanation.

“When he had gone, I looked at the letter. It reminded me considerably of the one from Lyndon’s cello, so I compared them. They were strikingly similar. The parchment was almost exactly the same. I do not read Latin, but after looking carefully I could see that the letters also had some words – names, perhaps – in common. In my opinion they had to be related.

“But the monsignor did not answer his telephone,” Nielsen continued. “By this stage I wanted very much to know what the letters said, so I went to St Matthew’s College to find you.”

“So how do I fit in? Was I simply the only man in the department on Sunday?”

“No, it was not like that, sir. Monsignor Hough specifically said that if anything happened to him, you should be the one to take over.”

“You’re joking. Why would he say that?”

“Think about it, Mr Haye. You have swum together at the Baths often, for nearly ten years. Monsignor Hough was no fool. He knew you well enough to trust you. You also trusted him – just think of why you sought refuge in his presbytery, despite not being a member of his congregation. And there is more: you are young, quick-minded; you are strong and can even box if needs be, and you are a scholar whose fields of expertise exactly match the requirements of our situation. You are, in fact, a very obvious candidate.”

Dreadfully aware of how little choice I had, I forced myself to maintain my manly bearing and keep walking. Shadows crowded my already dark mind. I was the champion – the Hector – of doomed men.

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“The one who seemed to be chief among [the devils] ... took a volume of enormous size and almost unbearable weight, horrible to behold, and ordered one of his followers to bring it to me to read.”

*The Ecclesiastical History of the English People,
731 AD*

Half grinding my teeth, I forced myself to ask another question. “What about the telephone calls you made earlier?”

“I asked the professor’s wife about his behaviour in the week before his death. She said he had been anxious, but he had not explained to her why. That was unusual for him, apparently; the Robys were very close.

“I then asked her some questions concerning the monsignor. He and the professor were friends throughout their school lives in Newcastle. The monsignor joined the priesthood after school, and moved to London. Dr Roby read theology and classical history at Trinity College in Cambridge, and moved to Nottingham for his first job in 1897. They saw one another regularly after that, once or twice a year at the minimum.

“Mrs Roby repeatedly informed me,” continued Nielsen calmly, “of what a kind man Charles Hough was. His example even inspired the Robys’ only son to the priesthood. Foremost, however, Mrs Roby gave me the impression that these men were primarily scholars who constantly discussed matters of mutual interest, namely the Bible, English history, and the history of the Catholic Church in England particularly. I

think the last two fields are of some significance to us.”

“Oh there’s letters ...” I said.

“I spoke to several of Professor Roby’s colleagues, including his secretary. It seems that five days before his death, Dr Roby received a telephone call from Monsignor Hough at work, and began behaving strangely after that. He was visibly worried, and abnormally secretive. He and the monsignor telephoned each other daily. Also, a mutual friend of theirs, a Benedictine monk named Brother Rupert Baird, called the professor at work and at home over three consecutive days. Mrs Roby informed me that Brother Baird had once been a student of Dr Roby’s, and was now also a good friend of their son’s.”

“The monk – is he significant, do you think?”

“He is from Abbey Celydden in Wales. Does that mean anything to you?”

It certainly did. Celydden: a Welsh name, pronounced Keluthen. The monastery was dissolved by Henry VIII between 1536 and 1540. In the nineteenth century it was re-established, and had apparently gone from strength to strength: it now enjoyed a reputation for producing brilliant scholar-monks. “Abbey Celydden is one of the biggest storehouses of early medieval documents in the whole of Britain. It’s exactly the sort of place that might have the letters we’re looking for.”

Nielsen looked thoughtful. “Then I believe that Brother Baird’s third telephone call is crucial. Not long after speaking to him, Dr Roby abruptly told his wife that he was going to Allminster to stay with Monsignor Hough at the presbytery. He stated it was very urgent that he go but did not explain further. He simply said that he would return within a few days. He had arranged with their son Walter – the Roman

Catholic priest – to use his annual leave from duties to stay with her to keep her company. That was the last conversation Dr Roby had with his wife.”

Nielsen and I stopped at an intersection and waited for the traffic to clear. It would take a while. A wide removal van, pulled by four mammoth Clydesdales, was rattling at a snail's pace up the street. Behind it was an impatient-looking line of grocery trucks, cars, horse drawn carts ... the streets of my city were getting busier every year.

This was the Langstone District. A mess of sagging tram wires, spiked at angled intervals by ugly, unreliable gas streetlights. An eyesore of paint peeling from the walls of nearly bankrupt butchers, tobacconists, cobblers and grocery stores. On the rust-coloured brickwork of the shop over the road, the once-bold advertising signs had faded into cheerless, watery phantoms:

TAKEN DAILY WITH MILK, SOUP,
PUDDINGS OR FRUIT
BETMAX
IS AN IDEAL VITAMIN TONIC FOOD
1/6 AND 2/6
IN CARTONS AT COUNTER
LET YOUR “BREAD” TODAY BE “RYVITA
CRISPBREAD”
DELICIOUS WITH BUTTER, ALSO
CHEESE

I was beginning to feel the way they looked, as though my own bright hopes for life already belonged to another age.

The houses and flats in this area were even more in need of attention than the shops. On most roads, grimy rows of identical workers' tenements stretched out on either side. Behind them, I imagined, in the serial of small, stony yards, were armies of aproned matrons stooping over washing

baskets and heaving dirty buckets of coal, their backs breaking under the endless weight of life. There were no trees, there was no shade, no rest for the army in the heat. Just chores.

We all have chores, I realised. Duties that we often do reluctantly. Sometimes I understand those who would rather ignore them. Why waste a moment of life on drudgery, on unpleasant tasks? At other times, I do not understand such men. I have worked hard, I have built my sense of dignity on the back of prosecuting my duties to Uncle Albert and my parents. Why ignore the tasks that, when done well, will add to the quality of one's life and attest to the soundness of one's character? But duty was not the right word for what Nielsen had put in front of me. This was life and death.

A few days ago, life was something I took in my stride. It was crammed with work, sport, books, good fellowship. Now life seemed full of horror. I had a knot in my stomach. I had the unshakeable feeling that I would see more death. The more I learned about this jet wolf, the more it terrified me. I would have to dig deep – very deep – into myself if I wanted to survive, let alone help Detective Sergeant Aage Nielsen recover this artefact.

There was a break in the traffic, and Nielsen's soft, Danish voice drew me back into the moment. "I spoke to the professor's son, Father Walter Roby. We talked about the letters."

Straight away, I knew what he was getting at. "There's another one, isn't there?"

"*Three* more, sir. I have one in my office – one of the Monsignor's. There is another in Nottingham with Father Roby. And the other is in Wales with Brother Rupert Baird.