

CHAPTER ONE

I have outdone Judas Iscariot, for he was paid only thirty pieces of silver for betraying his Lord, and I have been paid forty.

The sardonic Dominican friar at the Exchequer in Westminster told me that I should feel proud to be the first man to be paid in the new shilling coins.

“To the priest who is going to the new island,” he read from the king’s Household Account book, “forty shillings”.

He counted them out to me across the table. The light coming from the window behind him made the brand new coins sparkle among his bony fingers. He had an old man’s hands though he could not have been aged much more than twenty. The Dominicans are never young.

I admired the bright shillings as he counted them again.

“I’ve never had new coins before,” I told him. “It feels like an honour to be the first man to spend them.”

“New coins for a new year,” he replied. “We call them testoons, little heads, because they bear the king’s head.”

He pushed four neat piles of ten coins across the chequered table which gives the Exchequer its name.

“The king is paying you well for this exile.”

“It isn’t exile. Newfoundland is an English possession, as English as London or Devon; but the king is paying me well for ministering to the fishing fleet this summer.”

“I wish I could do more pastoral work, but the Church has assigned me to financial duties.”

Whenever you meet a friar, monk, or priest who is employed on administrative work,

*Fisk/Forty Testoons/2*

they always tell you that they wish they could be working with the poor or the sick, caring for souls instead of scratching on account rolls. It is a strange thing that they never prove it by actually coming forward and volunteering for pastoral work among the unwashed, the unholy, and the ungrateful.

I brought the forty coins across the ocean to Newfoundland in the same great chest in which I keep my Mass kit and my portable altar, the tools of my calling. Being a priest is an easy trade if you do only what you are obliged to do, and an impossibly hard one if you try to do all that you should, because you can never heal all the spiritual wounds that are laid before you every day in the tense whispers of confession.

It is the quiet part of my day now. The fleet are out fishing, and the shore workers have gone into the vast dark forests to cut wood. I am alone here, guarding our encampment, against what or whom I do not know.

I decided to clean out my great chest, which is so old that even my father did not know its age when he entrusted it to me for this summer in Newfoundland. When I opened it for the first time since we landed, I was pleased to find no damage to this thick blank book in which I am writing, my or to my goose quills and my ink, and that no one had stolen my forty testoons.

I write the name as testones in Latin, meaning “little heads” just as the English name does, from the head of King Henry VII which they bear. They were issued in April of this year, the nineteenth year of his reign, 1504 by the calendar. They are the first silver shilling coins ever minted. Why did I bring them here, where no one sells anything and there is nothing to buy?

I am writing in Latin because I suspect that some of the fishermen can read, and I know that a few of the ships’ officers can, but I doubt that any of them understand Latin.

They have spent all their lives listening to Latin words in church, and even speaking them by rote when the priest requires a response from the congregation, but many have no idea what they are saying, as they have told me.

Latin is a good language for secrets, and I like secrets, as does my father. How do I write my name in Latin? Well, I write it now in English, Ralph Fletcher, priest to the Newfoundland fishing fleet. The name Ralph looks strange in Latin, and I thought about calling myself Radulphus, but then I realised that I did not know the Latin for “Fletcher”, one who makes arrows. It is my father’s great shame that our very name proclaims that we come from a family of common craftsmen, but there is no way that a man can change his name. My father would if he could.

I have just gone out of the hut for an hour, weighting down my pen with a beach stone as a defence against the wind which seems never to stop blowing in Newfoundland. An unsecured goose feather might find itself carried all the way back across the ocean to England on those relentless westerlies.

As I closed the door behind me I had to stop it shut with the rock which is kept outside for just that purpose. One of the curiosities of this strange land is that although the wind never stops, the land never changes. The dark trees of the forest and the purple-grey rocks splashed with sad patches of lichen never change. Even the hut which we have built (we? My soft cleric’s hands took no part in the work) has the appearance of a natural thing, because it is the same colour as the forest of whose trees it was constructed.

Now that I had resolved to write down my impressions of Newfoundland before I sail home with the fleet at the end of the summer fishing season, I tried to put my observations into words, the precise, correct words, as I was taught to do by my composition master when I was at school at Winchester College.

*Fisk/Forty Testoons/4*

How much easier it is to find the words in Latin than in English, even though Latin had never been heard in Newfoundland before John Cabot's crew muttered their prayers on that first voyage of discovery seven years ago. Yet somehow this is a land made for Latin, with that language's spareness and austerity and its sense of communicating a deep meaning. I wondered what Newfoundland meant for me and for England, for God must have created it for some purpose which we must find out.

I had turned my back on the shore, looking towards the forest so that I contemplate it with full concentration while I tried to find my words, when Horsfall the under-carpenter came out of the woods dragging a pile of small logs along the ground on a frame attached to his back.

"Hullo, Sir Ralph! No work to do?"

Why does everyone call a priest 'sir?', whether he deserves it or not? I suppose it is a privilege given to the deserving and the undeserving alike, in the same way that the power to turn bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ is given to all priests regardless of whether their manner of life is holy or dissolute.

"Priests don't work, Horsfall. You've all been telling me that since we left England."

"Ah, that's just rough teasing. You must not have spent much time among rough men."

"I haven't, that's true. You've been working, though. What's all that wood for?"

"Firewood, Father, for the winter crew. You know, the men who overwinter in Newfoundland until the fleet returns in the spring. We'll need a great store of firewood. The winters are bitter here. The first winter crews lost most of their men from cold."

"God help our winter crew, then."

"I hope so, for I'll be one of them. I'm staying."

“You, Horsfall? What will you find to do in the long cold of winter?”

Horsfall began stacking the logs against the front wall of our hut, fighting the gusts of wind which rolled them around as fast as he tried to lay them down in good order.

“It’s not I who want to stay. It’s Young Martin. He’s never been on a voyage before, and he wants to take in all he can of new things and a new land.”

“Has he heard the tales of what the winter is like here?”

“Oh, indeed, but he won’t listen. He’s still in wonder at having crossed the ocean, and he wants to be able to say that he’s spent the whole year in Newfoundland.”

“God grant that he sees the next spring then, and you as well.”

“Thank you for not forgetting to add me in that prayer.”

Horsfall turned away from me with that sharp shrug which signifies that a man is not interested in my conversation any more. I am accustomed that shrug of dismissal; I have been seeing it ever since we landed in Newfoundland, and indeed all my life before that. I do not know how to deal with men, and I have no experience of women. I can only hope that my religious training has equipped me to talk properly to God on behalf of myself and my surly flock.

I resumed my attempts to frame the right words to describe the new island, although it is new only to Englishmen, being five and half thousand years old like the rest of the world.

I walked to the far end of the hut and turned right to look at the sea. We are always as aware of its presence as we are of the opposing presence of the forest.

The first sight which meets anyone passing our hut is the fish flakes. These are not fish scales, as my Latin translation would suggest, but are wooden structures on which the cod are spread out to bleach and air in the sun after they have been cured by being heavily salted and left all summer. The flakes look flimsy, but they have withstood the gales of what

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passes for summer in Newfoundland, and the men assure me that they are the same fish flakes which have been in use for several years now. I am not sure that I believe them, but they tell me that one of the tasks of the winter crew is to maintain the fish flakes ready for use in the spring. This may well be one of their jokes at my expense. I sometimes wonder whether they value me more as a priest or as a buffoon.

The fish flakes are the same as the ones in Devon and Dorset from which our fleets come, but instead of looking upon the green hills of southwestern England they face the barren rock of the coast of Newfoundland and the forests which cover the land beyond.

In the seaward direction the view is different as well: Newfoundland is the only place that I have ever been where the sea is blue. Everyone speaks of the blue sea, but around England the sea is always a deep green, close to the colour of these forests. I always wondered why the sea was called blue, but off Newfoundland the ocean is a deep dark blue. Now I wonder why the sea is green on one side of the ocean and blue on the other.

When I stand by the sea the wind is at my back. In the spring, when the sea is covered by ice, men have been lost because the wind blew them out onto the ice, further and further, towards their death by freezing, with their companions watching them stagger unwillingly to their end, flailing their arms and crying for help which no man can give.

The thought of the ice makes me wish that I had started writing this account earlier, as soon as we landed, or during the voyage out, because the greatest astonishment for me was the icebergs.

I had thought that the sea froze in winter, but it is not so: the ice comes down in the spring, if one can call it spring, in the month of May, a merry month in England but a bitter one in Newfoundland and the northwest seas.

After weeks upon the ocean, the ship had become the whole world, with nothing else

to see except water and the clouds overhead, but as we approached the shores of England's newest possession, still invisibly distant, my eye was caught by strange unnatural specks of colour on the horizon.

"What are they?" I asked one of the fishermen who had sailed to the Newfoundland fishing grounds several times before.

"Icebergs. You'll see them clearly later, although we won't come too close. They're great floating blocks of ice."

"But the colours! Look, they're like a rainbow laid out along the horizon. Ice isn't coloured."

"If you say so, Father. You're an educated man who can read the words of scholars and prophets. I can only speak from experience, and I tell you that they're icebergs."

The next morning we passed by the icebergs, and I was able to tell that the fisherman had been right. We came within a land mile of the vast floating palaces of ice, in dull and wet weather, but the colours silenced me with their beauty. The ice was attempting to be white, but it was washed through with blue-green, a colour which seemed too pure and heavenly to be natural, and the edges of the blocks of ice reflected shocks of pink and purple even in the gloomy light.

I believe now that this was the moment when I first truly understood that I had come to a New World, as many men now call these lands on the western side of the ocean. I had not then noticed that the sea was blue instead of green, but I could not fail to be astonished by the icebergs, the first sight I had seen which I could never have seen in England.

Those who have stayed in Newfoundland with the winter crew tell me that sometimes in April the ice covers the sea, and that if you stand on the shore and look east, you see only a sculptured field of ice, so that you can hardly believe that it will ever clear to allow the

fishing fleet to come and take the winter crew home.

What else must I describe? Ice, sea, forest, rock, wind, fish flakes, living huts; surely that is all of Newfoundland for us? No, there is something more which always frightens me.

I have written of what the forest looks like from our huts by the sea. When you walk into the forest, and I have never gone far for fear of becoming lost, you are attacked by a disturbing silence.

The trees are small compared to those in English forests. Perhaps the harsh climate and poor soil prevent them from growing larger. What is eerie is the lack of birdsong, and the absence of life. The fishermen tell me that they have never seen a snake in Newfoundland, and that few birds sing here. It is troubling to the spirit that the great silence somehow exists together with the roar of the sea in the distance and the howling of the wind overhead. How can there be silence in such noise? Yet there is, as though one had walked into a kingdom ruled by unhallowed powers.

So much for the land. What of its people? I have not seen them, and I have not found a fishermen to admit to having seen one, but there are people in Newfoundland.

We have never met the inhabitants of Newfoundland, but other English expeditions have done so. I wanted to meet the three men of Newfoundland whom Sebastian Cabot brought back to England two years ago.

They live in Westminster Palace, and I am told that they now live like Englishmen, but when I was in Westminster for my visit to the Exchequer the officers of the palace told me that I would not be allowed to see them. I am sure that they were taken prisoner, or brought onto the ship by a trick and taken to England against their will.

The fishermen with whom I have spoken have seen only strange pieces of carved wood are found along the shore, and broken needles of bone on the floor of the forest among

the trees.

Since I have found out nothing about the people who belong here, I must describe instead those who come here every spring from England.

They are all of one class, the fishermen. (No women are ever brought here, and so far as I know no English woman, or indeed any European woman, has yet seen this new continent.) The only distinction is that between the mass of men and the fishing captains, and among the captains there is yet another, and ultimate, distinction: the first captain to arrive on the coast of Newfoundland is called the Fishing Admiral, and holds a pre-eminent position among his fellows.

The fishermen themselves, all from the West Country, are a rough sort of man as one might expect, but because I have been brought up in the Church since infancy this is all as much of a discovery to me as the sight of the new island itself. I am not happy to be among them, but it is my duty as a priest. I would prefer a gentle life among the priests of an old and tranquil cathedral, but I must go where I am sent and do as I am ordered. I can see that this experience may benefit me by teaching me how to deal with all conditions of people, if I am later sent to be pastor of a parish, but I am not sure whether it has been of benefit to my coarse and scornful flock here. How I hope that none of them can read Latin.

It may be so, because perhaps not all of them have always been fishermen. Harry Chard, the Fishing Admiral, took me aside one day by the sea and asked me what I thought of Gloucester.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’ve never been there. I know only the south and east of England, and not much of that.”

“Ah, the city of Gloucester,” he replied, as if he had just received a new and unexpected thought. “No, I’ve never been there either, not as a place,” and with that

mysterious comment he left me staring baffled at the cold sea while he strolled away with his hands clasped behind his back like a schoolmaster.

At that I finally began to think. I do too much thinking; the men are right, I do too little work, but I was born not to work. I must admit that most of them, in spite of their sinful lives, would make better priests than I would make a fishermen. At least they have the power to lead and master other men, which all can see that I lack.

My thoughts led me to the notion that Harry Chard had not been asking about the city of Gloucester, but about the late Duke of Gloucester, who usurped the throne of England under the title of Richard III, and fell nineteen years ago when King Henry VII defeated him. Is Harry Chard a supporter of Richard? Was he an eminent man under Richard, now hiding in the disguise of a master of the fisheries? Was he sounding me out to see whether I was also a sympathiser? These words are dangerous to him and to myself. I must blot them out before we return to England, which we shall do at any day now.

I hate those writers who begin a passage with the words "I now take up my pen again", but indeed I do take up my pen after four days' lapse, including a Sunday. My pen has been repeatedly sharpened, and is so worn and resharpened that it would have earned me a whipping at school, but I must conserve my pens. There are no geese in Newfoundland for me to chase for a new quill, not that I have ever tackled that perilous task myself.

We are waiting for Harry Chard as this year's Fishing Admiral to declare the end of summer. This is not a reference to the climate. I do not believe we ever had a summer as we know it in England. There have been a few warm, sunny days, but most of the time the weather has been like that of a kind autumn or a promising spring. The end of summer means that the fishing season is over and the summer crew sail back to England with all the ships loaded with dried cod to feed the pious every Friday.

Here in Newfoundland the cod feeds both the pious and the impious. The fish merchants do not pay to provide the men with food, so they must find their own, which means fish. The land has hardly any soil, and I wish I understood what the trees grow in. They always remain thin and spindly, and seem never to grow up, like Young Martin. Everyone, not only Horsfall, calls him Young Martin, although he must be about thirty years old, old enough to remember when Richard was king. I must try not to mention that again; that it is a dangerous name for suspicious men to find among your writings.

Young Martin, who, as I say, is not young, is so called because there is something about him which has remained becalmed in childhood while the winds of the years have turned his fellows into tough and ruthless men. His body is fully grown, so much so that he is often called upon for tasks which need a particularly strong man. His mind is that of a man, too; he can speak as well as anyone, unlike the unfortunates who keep the minds and manners of babes all their lives, and who groan and shriek among the monks and nuns who nurse them because even their own families will not do so.

Young Martin's affliction, if it is right to call it that, is that he is an innocent. He laughs and cries. He will run after an animal which he glimpses darting across the forest floor, and sometimes he breaks into vulgar songs while I am celebrating Mass, not to mock me but in an excess of cheerful spirit.

The men are frightened when he does such things. They live ungodly lives, and have no respect for me as a man, but they fear God and glower at Martin when he behaves wrongly at the Mass.

"Make him quiet, Horsfall," they say, because Horsfall is always able to rule him.

The fishermen are afraid that Martin's antics will bring them to damnation, although I reassure them that the Mass is valid whatever the behaviour of the congregation. After all, the

character of the priest does not affect its validity; no matter how sinful and corrupt a man I may be, a subject which I ponder too much for my own good and that of my flock, I can still invoke the Holy Spirit to turn bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ.

Yes, the church. I set up my portable altar in one of the huts in which spare fishing gear and food are stored. The hut stinks, but probably no worse than the streets of Jerusalem whose smells must have sidled in through the windows of that famous upper room in which Christ first gave that command to his disciples which they were to do in memory of him. I have tried keeping the door open, so that the incessant wind will remove the smell, but it does not do so, and a smell which cannot be blown away by the winds of Newfoundland will surely offend noses until the Day of Judgement. The wind even blows draughts through the cracks and joins of the huts, and I fear for the winter crew who must live in them until the fleet comes again.

Two more days have passed, with nothing for me to do but to celebrate the Mass for surly and impatient congregations, and to watch the men packing up and carrying boxes, bags, and baskets out to the ships in little rocking dories which were brought out in earlier years. One of the winter crew's duties is to repair them after the season is over.

Any day now Harry Chard the Fishing Admiral will declare the end of summer. I must prepare to leave too. I have little enough to pack. My portable altar and Mass items can be tidied away quickly enough, no doubt a reminder of the days when Christians were a persecuted minority and priests had to be ready to flee in a hurry with all that they possessed or had been entrusted with.

This morning the sun is shining, the wind is gentle, and the sea is oddly calm. The world must feel like this just before a great miracle or revelation. I decided to take a last walk into the forest.

Once again I found myself in that silence which was yet not silence, with the oppressive lack of sound among the trees lying over the rip of the wind and the growl of the sea. It was like the four-level allegory we were taught for understanding the Bible, where the layers of meaning in a sacred text, Literal, Figurative, Anagogic, and Tropological, all express themselves in the same words; and yet it is not the same, for none of the four levels of allegory is stronger than another. They are all equal, but in Newfoundland the forest seems stronger than the sea. I do not understand how that can be.

I seem to be the only man in the fishing fleet who does not fear the forest. I respect it, and never go into it without telling someone that I have done so and how long it will be before I expect to return. Would they search for me? They would, for fear of having no priest to conduct Mass.

There is a thought which keeps coming to me, whether from my own mind or from Satan, which I do not like thinking but which I cannot suppress; it is like a painful memory to which one cries "No!" whenever it returns, as if it could be forbidden from arising. That hateful thought is that the men see me as a wizard, casting spells, and that my portable altar is a place at which magic is daily performed. If there were no priest they would be defenceless before the powers of evil. I keep explaining that this is not so, that God does not grant favours to the righteous any more than to the sinful.

I nearly reminded Horsfall once that the only promise which Our Lord ever made to Christians was not that they would be granted an easy life in this world: he promised them only trouble, whippings, and the hatred of their neighbours. I do not know whether I would be brave enough to preach Christ in the face of such opposition, but I am safe, because all Englishmen have been baptised as Christians even if they do not lead the Christian life. I stopped myself from telling Horsfall that, realising that his simple mind might draw strange

and dangerous conclusions from such an idea.

For the first time I sat down on the forest floor. I listened for animals, but I could hear none. We know that there are catamounts in the woods, great cats with tufted ears. Harry Chard swears that the same cat is found in the north of England, but I have no desire to meet one either in England or in Newfoundland.

I noticed something that I had never seen before: the tracks made by people, pressed into the wet ground. I am no country poacher and have no skill in these matters, but I could tell that at least one person had passed by. The prints showed no trace of a heel, so I wondered whether they could have been left by an Englishman. It rains so often here that I could not judge how recently my unseen companion had passed.

No animals, no men, no birdsong, and no sound; there was nothing for me in the forest. I had been sitting on the twigs and fallen leaves for half a morning. I stood up awkwardly, clawing at the air as if it could help to support me, and trudged back to our huts and the rocky frontier of the sea.

I saw Horsfall piling more wood in front of our hut, and our over-carpenter William Durdle carrying water inside as though for some ritual. It would certainly not be for washing.

Beyond, out to sea, I was amazed by the sight of strange ships, all abreast, with full sails set. Who could be sailing to Newfoundland at this time of the year? Was it a foreign attack? Had some great or terrible thing happened in England, and were these the bearers of that news?

I cried out to Horsfall.

“What ships are those, Horsfall? Who’s coming?”

“Nobody is coming, Sir Ralph. Those are our own ships of the fishing fleet. Harry Chard the Fishing Admiral has declared the end of summer.”

“But does that mean -”

“Yes, Sir Ralph. That is the fleet sailing back to England. I am staying behind until the spring. I told you that Young Martin and I were going to be in the winter crew.”

Horsfall put down his logs, shaded his eyes to look out at the departing ships, and then dropped his hand and stared straight at me.

“We are part of the winter crew, and Harry Chard has ordered that you are to be one of the winter crew too.”

“He never told me that!”

“He told us that you knew, and had put yourself in our service, and that you had already been paid forty testoons to stay with the winter crew.”