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Lucifer's Harvest

Written by Mel Starr

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Lucifer's Harvest

The ninth chronicle of
Hugh de Singleton, surgeon

MEL STARR



LION FICTION

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For Nick, Alex, Elliot, and Oliver

“A day of battle is a day of harvest for the devil”

Rev. William Hook; 1600–1677

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Glossary

Aketon: a padded coat, worn beneath armor to absorb blows, or on its own by ordinary soldiers.

Aloes of lamb: lamb sliced thin and rolled in a mixture of egg yolk, suet, onion, and various spices, then baked.

Ambler: an easy-riding horse, because it moved both right legs together, then both left legs.

Angelus Bell: rung three times each day – dawn, noon, and dusk. Announced the time for the Angelus devotional.

Assumption Day: August 15. Celebrated the assumption to heaven of Mary, the mother of Christ.

Bailiff: a lord's chief manorial representative. He oversaw all operations, collected rents and fines, and enforced labor service. Not a popular fellow.

Bolt: a short, heavy, blunt arrow shot from a crossbow.

Braes: medieval underpants.

Burgher: a town merchant or tradesman.

Captal de Buch: an archaic feudal title. In 1370 the holder was Jean de Grailly, praised as an ideal of chivalry.

Chapman: a merchant, particularly one who traveled from village to village with his wares.

Chauces: tight-fitting trousers, often of different colors for each leg.

Chrismatory: a container for holy oil.

Cinq Ports: five ports on the English Channel, closest to France: Hastings, Hyth, Dover, Sandwich, and New Romney. (Mayor of New Romney in the 1590s was Thomas Starr.)

Coppice: to cut back a tree so that a thicket of saplings would grow from the stump. These shoots were used for everything from arrows to rafters, depending upon how long they were allowed to grow.

Cotehardie: the primary medieval garment. Women's were floor-length, while men's ranged from thigh- to ankle-length.

Crenel: open space between the merlons of a battlement.

Cresset: a bowl of oil with a floating wick used for lighting.

Cuisse: plate armor defense for the thigh.

Daub: a clay and plaster mix, reinforced with straw or horse hair.

Dexter: a war horse, larger than pack horses, palfreys, and runcies. Also, the right hand direction.

Easter Sepulcher: a niche in the wall of a church or chapel where the host and a cross were placed on Good Friday and removed on Easter Sunday.

Egg leach: a thick custard, often enriched with almonds, spices, and flour.

Fast day: Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday. Not the fasting of modern usage, when no food is consumed, but days upon which no meat, eggs, or animal products were consumed. Fish was on the menu for those who could afford it.

Free company: at times of peace during the Hundred Years' War bands of unemployed knights would organize themselves and ravage the countryside. France especially suffered.

Gathering: eight leaves of parchment, made by folding the prepared hide three times.

Gentleman: a nobleman. The term had nothing to do with character or behavior.

Halberd: a long pole with axe blade attached, and topped with a spike.

Harbinger: a scout sent ahead of the army to find lodging.

Hind: female of the red deer.

Kirtle: a medieval undershirt.

Lammastide: August 1, when thanks was given for a successful wheat harvest.

Liripipe: a fashionably long tail attached to a man's cap.

Lych gate: a roofed gate through the churchyard wall under which the deceased rested during the initial part of a funeral.

Mangonel: a siege engine used to throw missiles to break down a city wall.

Marshalsea: the stables and assorted accoutrements.

Maslin: bread made from a mixture of grains, commonly wheat or barley and rye.

Merlon: a solid portion of a castle wall between the open crenels of a battlement.

Michaelmas: September 29. The feast signaled the end of the harvest. Last rents and tithes were due.

Nine man morris: a board game similar to tic-tac-toe, but much more complicated.

Ninth hour: about 3 pm.

Palfrey: a riding horse with a comfortable gait.

Poleaxe: also called a halberd.

Pomme dorryse: meatballs made of ground pork, eggs, currants, flour, and spices.

Porringer: a small round bowl.

Portcullis: a grating of iron or wood hung over a passage and lowered between grooves to prevent access.

Pottage: anything cooked in one pot, from soups and stews to a simple porridge.

Reeve: an important manor official, although he did not outrank the bailiff. Elected by tenants from among themselves, often the best husbandman. He had responsibility for fields, buildings, and enforcing labor service.

Remove: a course at dinner.

Runcie: a common horse of lower grade than a palfrey or ambler.

St. Bartholomew's Day: August 24.

St. John's Day: June 24.

St. Thomas the Apostle's Day: July 3.

Shingle: a stony, heavily graveled beach.

Solar: a small private room, more easily heated than the great hall, where lords often preferred to spend time, especially in winter. Usually on an upper floor of a castle or great house.

Sole in cyve: sole boiled, then served with a sauce of white wine, onions, bread crumbs, and spices.

Squire: a youth who attends a knight, often in training to become knighted.

Stockfish: inexpensive fish, usually dried cod or haddock, consumed on fast days.

Stone: fourteen pounds.

Trebuchet: a medieval military machine which could hurl stones with great force – similar to a mangonel.

Tun: a large cask capable of holding over 200 gallons.

Victualer: responsible for finding food for an army on the move.

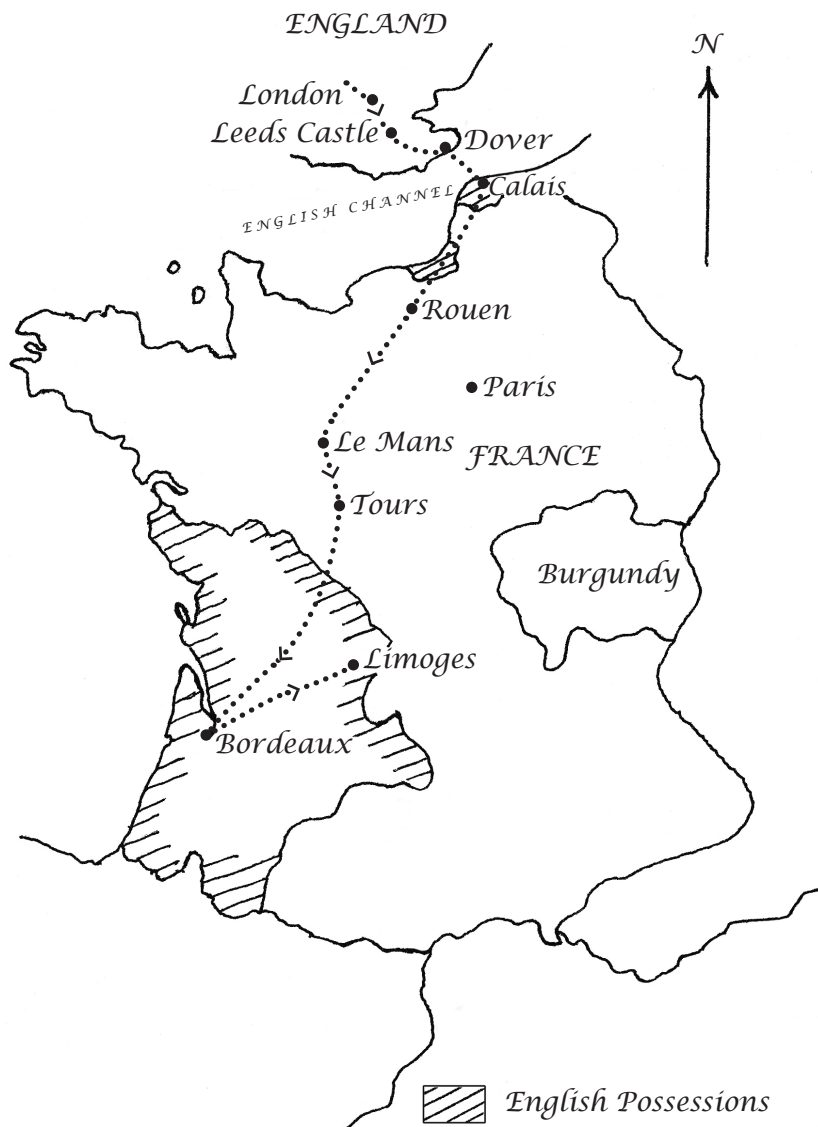
Villein: a non-free peasant. He could not leave his land or service to his lord, or sell animals without permission. But if he could escape his manor for a year and a day he would be free.

Wattle: interlacing sticks used as a foundation and support for daub in forming the walls of a house.

Whitsuntide: Pentecost, seven weeks after Easter Sunday:
“White Sunday”.

Wimple: a cloth covering worn over the head and around the neck.

Master Hugh's route to Limoges



Chapter 1

When I first traveled to France I did not rue the journey. I was a student, and like most lads eager to see new lands and learn new things. I was then on my way to Paris to study surgery at the university.

I was less eager to cross the sea in the year of our Lord 1370 when Lord Gilbert Talbot, my employer, required it of me. France was no longer a new land to me, and perhaps I had lost the desire to learn new things. I learned many new things anyway. Knowledge is not always desired or intended. It is, however, often useful, even if unwanted, and accumulates like the grey whiskers which Kate occasionally finds in my beard. At least for this journey I would ride a palfrey rather than walk.

Three days before Whitsuntide I awoke to a pounding upon Galen House door. My Kate was already from our bed and called out that Arthur must speak to me. Arthur is a groom to Lord Gilbert Talbot and has been useful to me and his employer in helping untangle several mysteries which fell to me to solve. The fellow is made like a wine cask set upon two coppiced stumps, with arms as thick through as my calves.

I am Hugh de Singleton, surgeon, and bailiff to Lord Gilbert Talbot at his manor of Bampton. I assumed that Arthur's early appearance at my door meant that someone in the castle required my surgical skills.

This was so, but not in the manner I expected.

I drew on chaucers, donned my cotehardie, ran my fingers through my hair, and descended the stairs. Arthur stood dripping upon the flags at the entrance to Galen House. The day had dawned grey and wet. Arthur would not, I thought, be about in such weather unless propelled by some important matter.

"I give you good day," he said, and continued before I could ask his business. "Lord Gilbert wishes speech with you this

morning. 'Tis a matter of import, he said, and asks for you to wait upon him without delay."

"Is m'lord ill, or injured? Or some other in the castle? Shall I take instruments and herbs?"

"Nay. Lord Gilbert's well enough, an' all others, so far as I know. Didn't tell me why he wished words with you; just said I was to seek you an' give you his message."

"Which you have done. Return to the castle and tell Lord Gilbert I will be there anon."

I splashed water upon my face to drive Morpheus from me, hastily consumed half of a maslin loaf, and swallowed a cup of ale. Weighty matters should not be addressed upon an empty stomach. Half an hour later I walked under the Bampton Castle gatehouse, bid Wilfred the porter "Good day," and set my path toward the solar where I expected to find Lord Gilbert.

But not so. John Chamberlain was there, and told me that my employer was at the marshalsea. I descended the stairs to the yard, crossed to the stables, and found Lord Gilbert in conversation with Robert Marshall and a gentleman I had not before seen.

"Ah, Hugh, you have come," Lord Gilbert greeted me. "I give you good day. Here is Sir Martyn Luttrell with news from France. Hugh, Sir Martyn, come with me. We will speak in the solar."

News from France which must be discussed in the solar could not be agreeable. I had no hint of Lord Gilbert's topic, but assumed the conversation would have something to do with the burly stranger who had appeared at Bampton Castle. So it did.

When we were seated Lord Gilbert explained his reason for calling me to him.

"Sir Martyn has brought disquieting news from France," he began.

'Twas as I feared. News from France is often troubling. Much like news from Scotland.

"King Charles has announced that he is confiscating Aquitaine, in violation of the Treaty of Bretigny. No matter how many times we vanquish the French they will not remain

subdued. The Duke of Berry has even now an army approaching Aquitaine.

“Prince Edward has sent for knights and men-at-arms from England to assist him in opposing the French king. I am his liegeman, and am required to provide five knights, twelve squires, and twenty archers and men-at-arms. My chaplain will accompany us, and I wish to have a surgeon as a member of my party.”

So far as I knew Lord Gilbert had but one surgeon in his employ; me.

I was speechless at this announcement. Lord Gilbert saw my mouth drop open and continued before I could voice objections which were forming in my mind.

“You have crossed to France once already,” he said, “so know that the passage is not arduous in summer.”

When we might return no man could know. Returning to England in December did not bear thinking about.

“And I am not so young as I once was,” he continued. “I am yet fit for battle, but ’twould be well to have you at hand should some French knight strike a lucky blow. Or unlucky, depending upon one’s loyalties,” he laughed.

“But what of folk here?” I finally stammered. “If I travel with you to France there will be no bailiff to see to the manor. Who will serve in my place to collect rents at Michaelmas?”

“John Prudhomme has served well as reeve. I intend to appoint him to your post till we return. Your Kate I would have oversee the castle,” he continued. “’Tis not a duty beyond a woman. Lady Petronilla did so when I was at Poitiers and she was then younger than Kate. I have no one to leave in charge of Richard but his nurse, and ’tis not meet for a woman of such station to supervise a castle. John Chamberlain will deal with most matters. Kate will not be much troubled.”

I knew what Kate’s opinion of this move would be, but before I could explain my wife’s loyalty to Galen House Lord Gilbert continued:

“Kate will lodge in Lady Petronilla’s chamber. It has been

empty since the Lord Christ took her from me, but I will see that it receives a good cleaning. 'Tis a large chamber. Plenty of room for Bessie and Sybil."

Lord Gilbert had considered that I might object and answered my protests before I could voice them.

But for one matter.

"Warfare is a perilous business," I said. "What if I am slain in battle or captured and held for ransom? Who will care for my family? I am not wealthy. Kate would find few resources if I was taken and held for ransom."

This assumed that a French knight would believe a poor surgeon's life worth the trouble of sparing for a trifling ransom.

"Oh," Lord Gilbert said, pulling at his beard. "Just so. I pay your wages, so have some thought as to your value. What say you, Hugh? What are you worth?"

"To you, or to Kate and Bessie and Sybil?"

"A fair question. Would one hundred pounds serve for ransom if you are taken, and ten pounds each year to Kate if, the Lord Christ forbid, you are slain? Neither is likely, mind you. 'Tis my thought that, if this expedition comes to a battle, you will be far from the field, prepared with your instruments and physics to deal with wounds."

"What if you also are slain?" I said. "Or seized? Who then will provide for Kate?"

"I will see an Oxford lawyer and have drawn up a document which will serve as your security in this matter. Does that satisfy you?"

The tone of his voice told me that Lord Gilbert was becoming exasperated with my objections. I decided that I must make no further protest. If a great lord wishes a man to accompany him to France it is best for the fellow to see the journey as an opportunity rather than an obligation and make the best of it. Priests often assign travel as a penance, and with good reason, but after all, France is not Scotland.

Sir Martyn was present for this conversation but took no part in it other than to turn his head from me to Lord Gilbert as

we spoke in turn. Lord Gilbert's conversation now turned to his visitor.

"Where are you bound this day?" he asked.

"I am to seek Sir John Trillowe, then Sir Richard Coke and Sir Ralph Lull on the morrow."

"How many knights and men-at-arms has the prince called for?" I asked.

"Three hundred knights are bid come to France," Sir Martyn replied. "With a thousand squires, pages, archers, and men-at-arms."

"We are to assemble at Dover on St. Thomas the Martyr's Day," Lord Gilbert added, speaking to me. "Where ships are even now being assembled to carry us to Calais."

"This being so," Sir Martyn said, "I must be away to complete my task. You and the others have but a month to prepare and make your way to Dover. I came first to you."

"Stay for dinner," Lord Gilbert said. "You can easily travel to East Hanney this afternoon to inform Sir John of Prince Edward's command."

Throughout the realm other messengers were informing knights and their men of this requirement for their services. Many, perhaps most, would welcome the summons. Peace can be boring and war may be profitable – if a rich castle can be plundered or a wealthy French knight captured and held for ransom.

Lord Gilbert invited me to stay for dinner that day at the castle. The meal was of five removes, regardless of the king's requirement that two removes be the limit. If Edward should learn of Lord Gilbert's violation I suspect he will permit the transgression to pass.

The announcement of my forthcoming journey did not harm my appetite. Very little does. I stuffed myself with parsley bread and honeyed butter, fruit-and-salmon pie, sole in cyve, aloes of lamb, and pomme dorryse. So when I departed the castle I was well sated. Kate knows that upon occasions when I am called to the castle my return to Galen House is uncertain, so

had fed herself and our daughters rather than await my return.

Rain had continued, so I shook my cotehardie free of such water as possible, stamped mud from my shoes, and thereby soiled Kate's clean floor. Here was no way to begin an account of the morning's tidings which would likely trouble my spouse. But I thought of this too late. 'Tis impossible to unstamp a foot and replace mud upon a shoe.

"What news, husband?" Kate said from the kitchen, then appeared in the doorway. She looked from my sodden cap to the muddied flags and frowned. My announcement did not improve her expression.

"Lord Gilbert is called to France," I began, "and bids me accompany him. He will have you occupy a chamber in the castle to oversee his son and the lad's nurse."

"And leave Galen House? What of Bessie and Sybil?"

"You and they will have Lady Petronilla's chamber in the castle. It has remained empty since she died. Lord Gilbert promised to have it put right before you move to the castle. The walls of Lady Petronilla's chamber are hung with many fine tapestries," I added by way of persuasion.

"When? How long till this is to happen?"

"Not long. A week perhaps. We are to be in Dover to take ship for France by St. Thomas the Martyr's Day. I think Lord Gilbert will require at least a fortnight for the journey to Dover, or near so."

Next morn I was busy with my instruments, sharpening blades with an oiled stone I keep for the purpose, when Arthur again thumped my door with his meaty fist.

"Lord Gilbert says we will leave Bampton Tuesday morn," he said. "I am to help you move Mistress Kate to the castle. I'll bring a cart an' runcie Monday at the ninth hour, that bein' acceptable."

"The ninth hour will serve. We will make ready."

We did. Kate packed our largest chest with clothing for herself and our daughters, and I filled a smaller chest with my own garments, and bags of crushed hemp and lettuce seeds,

and betony. I also placed a jar of St. John's Wort ointment in the chest, for I was likely to see wounds aplenty before I returned to Bampton. My instruments chest I keep ready for use so nothing of preparation was necessary but for the sharpening of blades.

On Sunday, after mass, as this was to be our last meal together in Galen House for many months, Kate used her supply of eggs to prepare an egg leech for our dinner. That night, after dark, when the fowl would be roosting, I intended to send pages from the castle to collect Kate's hens and cockerel from the coop and add them to the castle poultry, till those of us off to restore King Edward's privileges could return.

Arthur was prompt, and we soon had the cart loaded. I lifted Kate and Bessie and Sybil to the cart, watched as Arthur led the runcie down Church View Street, then turned to Galen House to affix a lock to the door. The rear door I had already barred from within.

This was the second house on the site to bear the name of the great physician of antiquity. My first house, a gift from Lord Gilbert, had been burned to ashes by Sir Simon Trillowe, he being furious that I, a slender surgeon with an equally slender purse and a large nose, had won Kate Caxton for my bride. His father had been, at the time, sheriff of Oxford, and he a handsome young knight who had little experience of failure or denial. When Kate chose my suit over his he was enraged. Fortunately a new sheriff took office, a friend to Lord Gilbert, and when 'twas proven that Sir Simon set my house ablaze he required of the knight ten pounds to rebuild Galen House.

Last week Sir Martyn was to call Sir John, Sir Simon's father, to join the force summoned to aid Prince Edward in France. The son would surely accompany his father on this expedition.

Sir Simon was no longer so handsome as he had once been. His left ear protruded from the side of his skull in a most unbecoming fashion. A brawl upon the streets of Oxford had left the fellow battered and bleeding and with an ear hanging from his head by but a wisp of flesh. I was in Oxford and nearby at the time and was summoned to stitch the dangling ear back to Sir

Simon's bruised skull. I did so, but such a repair is difficult, an ear being all gristle and nearly impenetrable by even the sharpest needle. And I had no experience at such a reconstruction.

Sir Simon did not lose his ear. My surgery was successful, mostly. When the injured appendage healed it extended from the side of his head. For this asymmetry he blamed me, not understanding how difficult it is to remodel an ear, nor realizing that without my effort he might now have no ear at all. Ungrateful wretch.

To this disfigurement add his choler at losing Kate to me, and his arson is understandable, if wrongheaded.

As I followed the cart down Church View Street to Bridge Street I resolved that for the next few months I would avoid turning my back to Sir Simon Trillowe. As it happened, 'twas Sir Simon who should not have turned his back to another.