
Opening Extract from...

Hue & Cry

A Hew Cullan Mystery

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Hew

From the deck of the Dutch flieboat *Zeedraak* a young man looked out to shore. As the land unfurled before him like a map he began to feel less sick. For it was not the motion of the ship but the length of his absence that caused his soft belly to flutter and fall. The sight of the town reassured him. It looked as it had always done, fronted by the ramparts of its castle, etched on the horizon by the starkness of its rock. Perhaps it was a trick of the light, but the strip of land between the castle and the shore appeared to have diminished as it weathered the encroaching of the tide. And the cathedral, by the square-built tower and chapel of St Rule, had crumbled further into stone, allowing the sunlight to stream through its frame and illuminate the town that had grown up in its shade. Beyond, from east to west, were ranked the four main thoroughfares: the fair and leafy south street, with its colleges and kirk; the broad and bustling Mercatgait; the north street, with its college halls and chapel braced against the winds; the Swallowgait that opened on the Castlegait and cliffs, falling sheer into the water, sweeping west towards the links and eastwards to the harbour, where the shallow basin washed into the sea. These four streets converged on the cathedral, and with their rigs and gardens set the pattern of the town. Criss-crossed between them, from north to south, vennels, wynds and closes narrowed and made deep its inner life.

True to its name the flieboat had crossed the North Sea from Holland fiercely and swiftly and soon disgorged its contents in the sunlit bay. The young man, Hew Cullan, found little to detain him. Since he was no merchant he had nothing to declare. In fact he had nothing at all. He had travelled from France through Flanders to Campvere, where he was shown to one boat and his

belongings inexplicably were thrown upon another bound for Leith. He had only a purse of French coin and the fine suit of French clothes he stood up in, which now seemed unfit for the drab Scottish soil. He felt a pleasing lightness as he scrambled from the boat, coming back as a stranger to find his old faith with the town.

St Andrews was constructed on parallel streets within and between which its business took place. He climbed from the harbour through the sea gate to the pends that opened out upon the south street. Behind him stood the old cathedral and the priory vaults and cloisters where the merchants thronged on fair days, to the right the grand houses, some in mid-construction, where they pawned their wealth. On his left – and here he paused – were the college and the chapel of St Leonard. This was where, as a boy of fourteen, he had first entered the university to begin the education that had taken him to France. For four years he had worked and dreamt behind these quiet walls. Since it was September now, the gates were closed. The term would not begin for several weeks, and the present crop of students had not yet arrived to straggle obediently from college to kirk, from lecture to links, snaking through the town.

A little further up the street he passed the Kirk of Holy Trinity, turning sharply at its corner to the Mercatgait. Here stood the tolbooth, house of law and commerce, the marketplace with its rows of shops and luckenbooths, the ancient well, the mercat cross and tron. The cross and the tron, where butter was weighed, hid a more sinister side. Hew shivered as he passed. It was a short step from the tolbooth to this place of persecution, to the pillories and whipping posts where the sins of the people were exposed to public shame. It was in part his horror of such things that had deflected his purpose in the study of the law. The closer he came to its practice the more acutely he considered its effects. Today he was relieved to find there were no jeering crowds, no victims to be vilified and branded in the street. The marketplace was empty. It was now past six o'clock and there was little passing trade.

Somewhere above him he heard a door close. A thin man

dressed in scholar's black hurried down a forestair and brushed past him, absently clutching his gown. Hew gave a wry smile. Once, and not so long ago, he had himself been so immersed, so preoccupied in study, he had failed to see the world. The stairway belonged to a shop, grander than most of those that flanked it and no doubt more recently built. Perhaps the scholar lodged above. Below was some sort of a workshop, at this late hour still open to the street. Intrigued, he looked inside.

The whitewashed walls were clean and the floor freshly swept. A row of new candles lit up the counter on which lay bolts of woollen cloth in varied natural shades of russet, ash and clay; blue-green and stiff grey Sunday plaids, lengths of woven leine flax and saffron-coloured shirtcloth. Behind lay rare imported wares on wooden shelves: slubbed silks and velvets, mohair, milk-white linens and Flanders lace in violet, primrose, straw and plunkett blue. And in the gloom beyond these riches were looms strung with yellow threads, skeins of dyed and undyed wool, a brace of spinsters' stools, spindles, shuttles, fleeces, reels and pins. A solitary black-haired boy swept up the fallen threads.

'Leave that the noo, Tom, and help load the cart!' A squat, bearded man in scarlet hose bustled in from the back of the shop. His cloak was a soft tawny brown, napped like velvet, brooched and belted in mulberry silk. A gold-tasselled purse clinked from his sleeve. 'We've an early start to market . . . ah, beg pardon, sir; I did not see you there.'

Hungrily, he gazed at Hew, who was trying to make a strategic retreat.

'In point of fact we're closed.' He took in Hew's clothes, the peascod coat and full round hose. 'But if there's something in the shop you care to see?'

'No, not at all. Some other time.'

'Oh, you *are* a Scot!' Clearly this had proved a disappointment. But the merchant was quick to recover. 'Though you're evidently used to more outlandish fashions. French, I would hazard? You're not from round here.'

'Aye, I was once.' Hew gave nothing away. He edged towards the door. 'Since you're closed, I will not keep you.'

The shopkeeper seemed torn between the wish to tempt his prey and his earlier concerns. The boy with the sweeping brush stood waiting patiently.

'Well,' he conceded, as Hew stepped outside, 'you may call again on Monday. Or, sir, if you care to go to Crail, we are there all day tomorrow for the Sunday market. You see, we have very fine cloths.'

'Thank you, I'll think on it,' Hew said politely.

'I am not, you see,' disconcertingly, the man had followed him into the street, 'your common cottage woolman. In addition to the house and shop I have a sizeable flock on the outskirts of the town. My wife and daughter spin the wool for my looms and the looms themselves are seldom still. And my brother is a merchant, sir, a most ambitious man.'

At this point a young girl appeared, barefoot on the forestair, calling 'Dadda! Mammie says she's finished with the wools.'

She was prettily dressed in a pale greenish-grey, like rivulets of water from the burn. She tossed her curls appraisingly at Hew while her father adjusted the scope of his pride.

'Ah, Isabel! My Tibbie! Bonny, is she not?'

But the woolman put his question to the wind, as Hew took the chance to escape. He hurried past the tron and out of sight. Moments later he was standing in the cookshop on the corner of the Fishergait and Castlegait, just as he remembered it.

'It's Saturday, so no hot meat. Will you leave your name?'

Hew found an old Scots merk at the bottom of his purse. 'No, I'll pay for it.'

His name still remained on the wall by the bar. He was reassured to find the system was unchanged: the same yellowed debts on thin scraps of paper, the same smell of onions and old gravy stains. Yet he preferred to stay a stranger for a while, allowing old sensations to come upon him slowly. He was not ready to go home. He ordered herrings fried in oatmeal and a stoup of ale, taking his cup out to sit in the courtyard, where half an empty

barrel had been set out as a stool. Presently the girl came with a plate of buttered oatcakes. 'We're full tonight with sailors. Did you want a room?'

Hew shook his head. He had recognised some of the crew from the *Zeedraak*, whose raucous shanties spilled into the street.

'And yet you're not from here?' the lass persisted.

'I lived here once. I have been gone a while.'

'You'll see some changes, then.'

Behind her he could see the castle and the cliffs sweeping to the sands, the gulls dipping out of the last of the sunlight. Reluctantly he answered: 'One or two.'

She sighed and gave him up. 'I'll fill your cup. We close at nine.'

At nine o'clock he crossed the street by the castle towards the east sands. It was too late to return to Kenly Green. Was this how he had planned it? The sky began to darken. He felt the first drops of rain. On the shore below he saw two huddled figures: a young man in a ragged gown hunched against the wind, a young lass dressed in green clutching at his arm. Some things did not change. He smiled. Turning into Swallowgait he hurried through the rain to St Salvator's College.

St Salvator's, oldest and grandest of the three university colleges, had already closed its doors upon the night. Hew found the north and west gates in darkness. At the main entrance beneath the bell tower of the old collegiate chapel someone had hung out a lantern, casting a grey light upon the wet cobblestones. Hew hammered on the great oak door until he heard the bolts shot back, a consummate grumbling and jangling of keys. He stepped back a little to allow the sullen lamplight to illuminate his face.

'What do you want there? The college is closed.'

'I've come to see your principal, Professor Giles Locke.'

'Wha's that then? The quacksalve?' the man enquired rudely.

In recent years the privy council had imposed, or tried to impose, a series of reforms upon the university, the latest of which was the appointment of a professor of medicine as principal of St Salvator's College. Clearly this had not been welcomed.

'I know him as your provost,' Hew persisted, frowning, 'and a friend.'

The porter remained unimpressed. 'What business ye have then is not with the college. I have not been told it, sir, nor warned I should admit a stranger. The man that you mention – I don't say he's here, mind – but if he *were* here then no doubt he'd have gone to his bed.'

'It's true, he's not expecting me, but he will wish to see me. If you would send up my name . . .'

The porter faced him squarely, with an ominous retraction of the keys. 'Aye for sure, in the morning. I'll tell him you called.'

Behind him a door in the courtyard had opened and closed. A serving man approached them, balancing a tall jug in the one hand and a wide shallow basin draped in a cloth in the other. The porter blocked his path. 'I hope you paid for that.'

'Tis accounted for.' The man winked cryptically at Hew. As he passed through the archway he shifted the bowl to the crook of his arm and tugged discreetly at his sleeve.

'Did I hear you ask for the doctor?' he murmured. 'Pray, sir, are you sick?'

The porter took advantage of the diversion to slam shut the door and make fast the bolts, muttering as he withdrew. Hew groaned. It occurred to him, fleetingly, that perhaps he *was* sick. For certain he was out of sorts, a sinking in his stomach that no bleeding, probe or purging could restore. He would never have confessed it. As robustly as he could he shook his head.

'No, not sick. I am an old friend of the doctor's, lately come from France. We shared rooms there.' To give credence he added, 'in the Rue des Fosses.'

The servant looked him up and down as if he weighed the probabilities. At length he seemed convinced, for he shifted the basin back into his hand and nodded.

'Aye, well, ye may follow me. His rooms are in the turret of the house across the wynd.'

West of the chapel, across Butt's Wynd, stood the provost's

lodging house. It seemed fitting that the college did not house him in its cloisters but kept him at arm's length. On the south side the chapel was flanked by two stone houses, each with a round turret tower. In the turret to the left Professor Locke was stationed. The servant led him to the door. 'Ye'd best wait here.'

Hew waited a moment and then slipped up behind him, climbing the narrow staircase to the tower. He heard his friend's familiar voice before he saw him, resonant and deep.

'What have you found, Paul?'

'A quart of new milk and a dish of green plums.'

Hew smiled to himself. His friend's stomach sat close to his heart.

Then came a muffled exclamation and the servant's voice rose sulkily. 'The first fruit of the season from the priory garden. They're ripe enough now, I'm sure of it, sir.'

There was no mistaking now the note of gloom. 'Aye, roasted, perhaps, and baked into custards, or bottled, or jellied, or candied, or dried. Eaten raw and green, they're sure to lead to colic, if not worse. I once did know a child . . . no matter, though,' the doctor broke off kindly, 'no doubt you did your best. I suppose there's nothing else? No fish or cheese?'

'Nothing,' said the servant shortly. 'Though there's *him*!'

He jabbed with his finger back towards Hew, who stepped through the doorway, lapped like a ghost in the light from the fire.

Lying on the floor of Giles Locke's tower, Hew felt at home for the first time since leaving France. Giles had dragged a feather mattress into the centre of the room, on which his friend lay sprawling, gazing at the walls. The room was filled with objects from the Rue des Fosses, no less familiar because they were strange: discoloured substances floating in jars (he always had avoided those), compasses, astrolabes, globes and nocturnals, pigs' feet and goats' teeth, the beak of a gull. Curious though they were these things were not collectibles but used and loved. Several of the books were

marked with crumbs of toasted cheese. Most comforting of all was Giles himself, both broad and tall, perched upon his bedstead at the flat side of the wall, his warmth and generosity enough to fill a larger room than this. They had finished the milk. Hew, against all advice, had sampled the plums and Giles had unearthed a flagon of brandy, most of which had now been drunk.

'The truth is,' Hew said suddenly, 'I *could* have gone home. Tis only four miles.'

'*But*?' Giles prodded helpfully.

'*But* I did not want to face my father. That's the truth.'

'Is he such a tyrant, then?'

'Tyrant, no. If he were, it would not be a problem, for then I could thwart him and he could be damned. If he stormed and raged it would be easy to defy him. It's his disappointment that's so hard to bear.'

'Disappointment? Stuff and nonsense.' Giles felt a flood of affection, fuelled by the brandy, towards his young friend. 'Always been exemplary.'

'Oh, aye,' Hew laughed dryly. 'Four years at St Andrews, passed with distinction. Six years abroad with no indiscretions – apart from the cook at the Auberge du Coq.'

'Whose *lapin à la moutarde* was beyond compare,' Giles recalled fondly. 'That alone were enough to excuse it. So what's to disappoint him, then?'

'Only after ten years spent in study, I have learned one thing. I do not want to be the man my father was.'

'Ah. And is he set on that?'

'He was an advocate of some repute. At the height of his power he abandoned the courts and retired to the country. Then his ambitions were all turned towards me.'

'How singular. But why?'

'I was twelve years old and in the grammar school. I did not ask him, Giles. I have thought since it was perhaps to do with the queen, for he was of her camp and had hoped to be queen's advocate. He saw the tide turn and disliked the change.'

'And yet he sent you to St Leonard's?' Giles remarked. 'For a man of his leanings, St Salvator's would seem the more obvious choice.'

'Twas politic. In his heart, he would rather I had come here to the Auld College; in his heart, he would rather I kept the old faith. Yet he had me schooled against it. My schoolmaster was a friend of George Buchanan and they both had more influence on my early education than my father did. I cannot blame him for that, for they were good men and I learned well from them. But I felt he sold my soul for something he did not believe in, and I have long resented it.'

'Perhaps,' Giles consoled him, 'you misunderstood. You were just a boy. Why don't you talk to him?'

Hew sighed. 'I shall, of course, and of course I will not say these things. The truth is I still want to please him. But the deeper I go into it the less I like the law.'

His friend shook his head 'This is humour, I think, and will pass. It pleased you well enough in Paris.'

'I will admit I like to win, and I find myself ashamed of it. Because this game of wits is always at someone's expense. Too often it ends at the end of the rope.'

'If you lacked such scruples I'd be more concerned,' said Giles. 'You merely want detachment, which will come with age. Besides, from what I have seen of the law, most of it concerns itself with property and debt, and in capital offences there is little to be done for the defence.'

'Aye, and there *should* be,' Hew proclaimed fiercely. 'No, I'm done with argument, and sickened to the stomach with the law. Dispute for its own sake no longer interests me. I have fallen out of love with my profession. And when I tell my father, it will break his heart.'

'Well,' said Giles judiciously, 'you may put off the telling. I prescribe a drink.'

Hew refused another cup, and fell back upon the mattress looking at the ceiling. 'What of *your* profession? Have you never had your doubts?'

'There have been moments, certainly. At times the puke can pall. But I flatter myself I may do some good in the world. The one thing I do regret is accepting this post, for I have not been welcomed here. The professors have been courteously lukewarm.'

'Perhaps it is your strange collections,' Hew observed ironically. 'Lights and livers sunk in pots.'

'The specimens? What piffle! There are worse things at the fleshmarkets.'

'Granted. But they don't like change.'

'That I can accept. But if the members of this college are suspicious, then the provost of St Leonard's has been downright rude. He makes allusions constantly to leeches, quacks and sawbones, though of course he will protest that he does not refer to *me*.'

'There has always been rivalry between the two colleges – who would win the golf, or the arrow at the butts – but I don't recall it ever was so personal,' reflected Hew. 'Perhaps things will improve when term begins. I have a friend who is regent at St Leonard's, a man called Nicholas Colp. We were students together. I should be sorry indeed if *he* were uncivil.'

Giles shook his head. 'I have not met the regents yet. But I have heard of Colp as a clever and devout man.'

'He is both. I cannot think he would subscribe to such rudeness. I must look him up and ask him how he goes on with the principal. Gilchrist, is it still? I do not know him well, for he came newly in my time. Nicholas and I were students under George Buchanan, who was a true friend. He left to take up post as tutor to the king.'

'Ah!' Giles interrupted, 'There's the real news! The king has had his thirteenth birthday and at last is to leave the confines of Stirling Castle and make his progress. Even now, as we speak, he comes into Edinburgh. And next year, in the spring, he is expected here.'

'The king left his castle? That's news indeed!'

'You cannot imagine the stir it has caused. And that, coupled with the anxiety over the new appointments – quacksalves and

the like – has helped to fuel the tension in the college. The town and the university both are in uproar. King James has not been seen since infancy.'

'He has had a strange childhood,' Hew observed.

'And most of it behind closed doors. I am interested to see how he appears. Some say he is a cripple, suckled by a drunk, and that he cannot walk without support.'

'Poor boy! Rumour has made him a monster.'

'For certain. And also a wit. The story goes that he was last in public at the opening of the parliament, when he was five years old. He found a hole there in the tablecloth and all the while his lords were making speeches he explored it with his fingers. Then at length he asked, "What place is this?" "Why, sire," said the lords, "this is the parliament." To which the king answered, "Then there is a hole in this parliament!" Which the crowds did take for proof of his great wisdom.'

Hew laughed. 'As well they might! You seem to know a good deal about him.'

'Alas, I confess it. I have been charged to write his horoscope, for which I make a study of his early life. It is to be the college's gift to him. St Leonard's for their part are to put on a play, written by Nicholas Colp.'

'Then you will have stiff competition.' Hew looked across at the charts on the table. 'Where is this horoscope? May I not see it?'

'By no means,' Giles winked at him. 'Tis confidential to the king.'

'A hint, then,' Hew persisted, smiling. 'Will he take the English crown?'

'As to that old prediction,' Giles said severely, 'I could not possibly say. Besides, you know a horoscope does not foretell the future. I am a physician, not a necromancer. I can tell you merely whether he is prone to windy gout, or must beware the phases of the moon, or is disposed to toothache, or to jaundice or despair. In reality, of course, it will predict none of those things, but a

long and healthy life, and go to great lengths in the proving that no illness shall befall him, because he is the king, you know, when all is said and done. The spheres themselves must shuffle to oblige him.'

'Then, Giles, you are nothing but a fraud!'

'Not at all,' his friend replied seriously. 'For hope is potent physic. An optimistic horoscope becomes its own effect.' He stifled a yawn. 'But no more of this now. I really must sleep. For if I don't appear at prayers first thing on Sunday morning it will confirm their worst suspicions: I'm the devil's man indeed. As for you, since no one knows you're here there's none to miss you. You may sleep the sleep of the righteous, and lie in as long as you please.'