

## A BOY IN TROUBLE (Young Carey 2)

By P F Chisholm (Patricia Finney)

A few days into August, Robin rode out from Hunsdon Manor with his father, on his own pony, wearing a good black suit trimmed with velvet that had been Edmund's before. His old woollen doublet and hose, four shirts, two pairs of nether hose, two handkerchiefs and a warm almost-new cloak had been packed on one of the ponies by a weeping Goody Biltock.

Robin was shining with happiness and pride. There were thirty likely-looking lads from the villages round about, most expert bowmen and younger sons, on foot; the Sergeant at Arms and Mr Bunscombe with his arm out of its sling, who would be Lord Hunsdon's deputy secretary, were mounted. Mr Knollys would replace him as the under-steward at Hunsdon. There were other servants and recruits from Lord Hunsdon's other land holdings who had been sent directly north to Carlisle where they would meet.

And so they struck north along the remains of the Roman road for Cheshire and Carlisle where they would stay a few nights. Then they would take the Giant's Road north-east to Berwick.

Hunsdon enjoyed talking to his youngest son on the long slow journey. Admittedly Robin was the kind of child who asked awkward questions all the time and pursued unanswered ones with a tenacity that boded well for his future prowess at hunting. What was metal made of? - Earth and Fire were its Elements; why was there a Milky Way and what was it made of? - it seemed to be made of stars, if you had very good eyesight, and presumably it was there because God wanted it there; how did frogspawn turn into tadpoles and then frogs? - no idea; if you went down deep enough would you get to Hell? - Yes; how high should you go to find Heaven? - it didn't matter because if you were a good boy and a good man, you would go there when you died, after Judgement; what held the sun up in the sky and the moon for that matter and why...

Hunsdon finally threatened Robin with a new tutor of philosophy who could better answer his questions.

They came into Berwick in cavalcade on the afternoon of a late August day with Robin somewhat saddlesore. Hunsdon saw to it that those with horses settled their horses first, and then sent them all to the hall to find a late dinner or an early supper. The outgoing governor, Francis Russell, 2nd Earl Bedford, had met them at the town-gate with an escort of fifty men from the garrison and invited Hunsdon to supper at his lodgings. Hunsdon presented his son

to the earl and watched with pride as Robin made a graceful bow and answered with skill and tact Bedford's fatuous enquiries about his tutor and what he would be when he grew up, if he was spared.

They dined on a huge salmon baked in a crust of salt and dillweed, soused herring, a green bean pottage, a sallet of herbs and as a soteltie, a large tart with four kinds of jam in it and Hunsdon's crest made in marchpane. Robin served his father and then sat down at the far end of the table and wolfed a huge amount of salmon. Hunsdon only had to jog his memory a couple of times, first to put a napkin on his shoulder while he was serving somebody and second to go back to the kitchen and find some beer since the warm weather had turned most of the ale sour.

Hunsdon listened carefully to Bedford's update, which he did not like the sound of at all. The adulterous murderess, Mary Stewart, Queen of Scots, was now at Bolton castle which was in Yorkshire and only 120 miles or so away. That was closer to the Border than he liked. Why the devil hadn't the silly bitch gone to France? He supposed that that might have been yet more dangerous for Queen Elizabeth and England in the long run, but he could not comprehend why she had chosen to throw herself on Elizabeth's mercy. What on earth was in it for her? She was a Catholic and a Guise, did she think that would get her kindly treatment?

Robin and another bigger boy cleared the trenchers and took the empty serving dishes back to the castle kitchens and Robin then disappeared until evening when he arrived at Hunsdon's chamber with a black eye and a freshly bust lip.

Hunsdon had brought his London valet, Sanders, as well who was helping him to undress. He looked at the damage with interest. "Hmphmn," he said. "What happened?"

"I bumped into a door," said Robin blandly.

"Ah," said Hunsdon. "Vicious things, doors. So why did a door attack you, hey?"

Robin grinned. "The door was making comments about how I speak so southron and he couldn't understand and was I Welsh or even French and so I offered to help him clean out his dirty ears and poured the rest of the beer over his head and he hit me when I wasn't expecting it and so I hit him... the door back. He was bigger than me."

"The door?"

"Yes, my lord, the door."

"So you lost?"

"I'd say it was a draw because the cook came and grabbed... the door and kicked me out and so we didn't finish."

"Hmf," Hunsdon contemplated his son. "A tip for you, Robin. If you're swapping insults with a... door who's bigger than you, make sure you hit him first."

Robin nodded. "Yes, thank you, sir. I thought that was my mistake."

Hunsdon glanced approvingly at his knuckles, both of which were skinned. "Now, Robin, I have decided to place you in the garrison stables so you can learn good horsemanship from some of the finest horsemen in Europe and the management of horses as well. You'll sleep in my room again tonight, but from tomorrow you will sleep where the Head Groom tells you."

"Yes, my lord," said Robin, standing very straight, his eyes shining.

"You can help me as well. Once you get used to the northern way of speaking, I am hoping you'll tell me any good stories you hear."

"Yes, my lord," said Robin.

"Especially about the Queen of Scots."

"Yes, my lord!"

"I'll be getting monthly reports on your behaviour from the Head Groom and the Berwick Master of Horses and I want to hear that you are willing and diligent, that you do more than is asked of you and that you can ride anything with four legs. And that you hardly ever get into fights."

Robin's brow wrinkled. "I'm not sure I can do that, my lord."

"What? The riding?"

Robin made a dismissive gesture. "Of course I can do the riding. It's the not-fighting I'm not sure of."

"Ah. Well, I would expect there to be... hey... a settling in period and I wouldn't want you to ignore deliberate provocation."

"I understand, sir. I can fight if they provoke me?"

"Or keep it quiet, Robin. There is such a thing as discretion. Do you know what that word means?"

Robin frowned. "I think so, my lord. That would be fighting behind the jakes instead of in the courtyard?"

"Precisely. The Master of Horses will be in nominal charge of you, but as in all big stables, it's the Head Groom you will answer to and Mr Heron is famously a very hard man to please."

Robin nodded. "But sir, must I have a tutor as well?"

"Robin, why would I offer up another poor scholar for you to torment? There may come a time when you tire of your own ignorance and ask me to find you a tutor, but until then we'll concentrate on horses, eh?"

From his expression it was obvious that Robin thought the idea of him asking for a tutor was main madness. "So I really don't have to have a tutor?"

"No, Robin, not for the moment. However I reserve the right to reappoint a tutor any time you sufficiently annoy the Head Groom, the Master of Horses or me."

Robin's face was an interesting mixture of caution and sheer joy.

"I understand, my lord."

Hunsdon gestured for Robin to help himself to the bread, cheese, early plums and apples on the table while my lord's valet, Sanders, came to help him undress. Robin shucked his good suit quickly and even folded it - although Sanders refolded it and put it in a different chest - and then knelt with Hunsdon and the valet while Hunsdon said the Our Father and then a prayer for Almighty God's help in discerning the tricks and wiles of the Scots and their wicked Queen Mary.

The bed was a good four-poster with a solid tester and warm scarlet woollen curtains. Sanders took the truckle bed from under it for himself. Hunsdon beckoned to his son to get in the larger bed and warm it up for him. Robin naturally took the more interesting route of climbing up the bed-end like a monkey. Hunsdon sat in his fur-lined dressing gown and read some letters and dispatches that Bedford had passed to him, by the light of a couple of economical tallow dips, and then outed them and climbed into bed the easy way. The small linen-clad monkey rolled over and cuddled up as he had when he was much younger and Hunsdon was on one of his rare visits home, and on the road to Berwick too.

"Father, who is Queen Mary? I thought that was Her Majesty's elder sister?"

"No, for the English Queen Mary is dead. The Scottish Queen... well, ah... so far forgot her dignity that her Godly subjects revolted against her for murdering her husband, and very unusually God prospered the rebellion. She was just this year defeated in battle at Langside and for reasons best known to herself escaped into England and was lodged at a tower in Carlisle castle until last month when Her Majesty ordered her sent to Bolton Castle which is further south in Yorkshire and well away from the sea as well."

"Where else could she have gone?"

"France. She was married to a French king for a short time, until he died. And while her father was James V of Scotland, her mother was French and a Guise."

"Did she murder the Frenchy, too?"

"Probably not."

"So is she wicked?"

Hunsdon paused. "If she isn't wicked, she is the stupidest woman in the world. And certainly she doesn't have a tenth of the wit and judgement of Her Majesty."

"Of course not," said Robin stoutly, who had last met the Queen when she was his godmother at his christening. "No one does."

"Indeed. However by all accounts she is pretty, charming and brave which along with her Guise blood makes her dangerous to England and to Her Majesty."

"Oh."

"Also the Scots are deeply divided about her," said Hunsdon, speaking more to himself than to his son. "It's a mess. Some are for Mary but yet Protestant, others against her but yet Catholic, others are Papist and support her and others still are Protestant and against her. And they change sides all the time. Her Majesty is worried that the Scots civil war will spread to England and infect some of the northern nobles, who should know better."

"Do you think the war will spread?"

"I hope not."

"Yes, but..."

"In any case, you will be sent south if war comes too close. I promised your mother I would send you home to her."

"Why?"

"You're too young for war..."

"Yes, but..."

"Robin, you may argue the point with your mother. As it happens I agree with her."

"But..."

Hunsdon sighed. He thought of trying to explain to Robin that Ares was a god who seemed fair and glorious from a distance but from close up was ugly and deadly and without justice. Phobos, Fear, was the true god of the battlefield. He had learned that when he was 22 and had managed to escape from the holy suffocation of young Edward VI's court to go to war against Scotland in 1547 with the Duke of Somerset.

Also there was always a chance that Robin might be killed or, more likely, die of a fever in camp. Certainly he had other sons, Robin was indeed a spare son, but... He and Annie had made sixteen children, out of which nine remained. Even the mere babies, dying as babies so often did, had wounded his heart. He reminded himself that we have no freehold on our

children nor ourselves, for that matter. We are tenants-at-will in our bodies and God can require us to vacate at any time.

"So Robin, I will be very busy, inspecting the fortifications, consulting with the Lords Warden of the Marches, possibly I will need to interview Queen Mary herself. I will be training the Berwick garrison in gunnery as well as archery..."

"Can I learn gunnery, sir?"

"Of course you will, but not yet. Until you get your manly growth you would be knocked down by the recoil of an arquebus and probably break your shoulder."

"Oh." Robin yawned promisingly.

Still talking mainly to himself, Hunsdon went on. "We have to be ready to fight the Scots if they decide to come over the Border in force. I don't think that Moray will want to, and he has possession of the little King James, but there are plenty of nobles in Scotland who might raid south to get their Queen back."

"Who is Moray?" asked Robin, fighting to keep his eyes open.

"Queen Mary's bastard half-brother, James Stewart, Earl of Moray who leads the Godly party in Scotland..."

Hunsdon explained at masterly length about the ins and outs of Scottish politics until Robin's eyes were tight shut and he was breathing deeply.

For a while he lay and thanked God heartily from the bottom of his soul for his nine children who had survived to carry Henry VIII's Blood Royal into the future. He also prayed for his youngest, who would tomorrow be cast into the fish tank of the Berwick garrison stables, to sink or swim as he could manage. If he had been able to think of anything else less drastic that might have reformed the boy, he would have tried it.

The next morning at dawn, they went down to the castle stables which were large with about one hundred and fifty horses eating their heads off and more at pasture in the town meadows. There waiting for them was Sir John Selby, the Berwick Master of Horses who notionally organised the horses and Mr James Heron, the Head Groom, who actually did. Sir John was smiling, Mr Heron was not and had a sour blank look to his face which Hunsdon had seen many times before in the north.

"Sir John, Mr Heron," he said as they made their bows, "may I present to you my youngest son, Master Robert Carey."

Robin made a neat bow to both of them and smiled.

"A pleasure to meet you, Master Carey," said Sir John who was a kindly soul and famously about as useful in a fight as a knife made of sweet butter.

"Hmf," said Mr Heron. "I'll mek no favourites, my lord. Where will the lad sleep?"

"Where you tell him to, Mr Heron."

"He's to learn horsemanship?"

"Yes, and everything to do with horses, without exception."

"Including mucking out?"

"Including mucking out."

Robin was looking at Mr Heron in puzzlement. Luckily he kept his mouth shut. Of course, living at Hunsdon Manor all his life, Robin had never before met anyone who disapproved of him simply because he existed and had the father he did.

"Ay," said Mr Heron, in a voice which meant the opposite. "Well lad, whit d'ye ken of horses?"

Robin blinked and said hesitantly, "Mr Heron, I own I know very little of horses other than that you find the tail and feed the other end, and I hope you will see fit to teach me whatever I ought to know, and do not."

"Hmf."

"Ah, by the way Mr Heron, here is thirty shillings to find him his livery, his prentice fee and his first month's keep until he knows what he's doing."

Mr Heron took the bag full of silver and looked marginally less sour.

"Come along then, Master Carey..." he said.

Robin frowned and looked at his father then said, "Sir, I would rather not bear my title here. Could you call me plain *Rob*?"

Mr Heron looked consideringly at him. "Very well, Rob. Come with me."

Robin trotted after him without a backward glance at his father, whose heart bled a little for the boy. He was very proud of him: he had seen the trap in Heron's invitation to tell what he knew of horses and had ducked it well and graciously. Being plain Rob was also a good idea.

A while later Mr Heron came back and gave Hunsdon a bundle of clothes in a bag. Hunsdon peered into the stable yard and saw a boy about the right height trotting past in a hemp shirt, jerkin, breeches and his own boots which were plain, serviceable and quite old having first belonged to his brother John. The chestnut hair gave him away too. Another lad was with him, who loomed over him worryingly. Hunsdon hoped the other boys wouldn't bully Robin too badly and that he would grow quickly. He asked Almighty God to take care of Robin and see him right and be a good lord to him, and got the feeling that someone had spoken in his

ear. "Always," was the word. He put it down to feeling tired from the journey north and went to meet the Earl of Bedford and the Captain of the Berwick garrison.

The next day, Robin was in a loose box with three post horses before dawn, mucking them out while the horses blew and munched on their hay. Robin's stomach was rumbling. He had been last into the hall for dinner at eleven o'clock the day before because he hadn't known that dinner was announced by trumpet. Then he had found that he didn't have his own bowl which was crucial and had to ask one of the hall servants for a bowl. This meant he got the last scrapings of the bean pottage with no lumps of meat in it at all and the heel of a loaf covered in cinders. Asking one of the other boys politely for the butter didn't get him any butter and a lot of jeering and so he must make do with a cracked lump of cheese. All the boys pretended they couldn't understand a word he said, which had to be wrong because he could understand at least some of what they said to him. He decided two things. Firstly, that he had better keep quiet until he could speak northern and secondly, that the boy he had poured beer over the day before held grudges, even though Robin hadn't given him anything like as impressive a shiner as the one he had.

He had turned up to supper early and been laughed at for not knowing that the stable boys got their bread, cheese and ale from the Buttery, and ate at the stables so they could be present for Evening Stables when the Master of Horses and possibly the Governor himself inspected the horses. So by the time he got back all the cheese had gone and he was stuck with dry bread, which was stale so he had to dip it in the ale, and he didn't have time to eat all of it anyway.

Sir John had gone around all the horses, asking what they had eaten, which had been exercised, how they had gone, were any lame or sick? One horse was suspected of sickening for something and had been put in a separate box by himself. That was interesting but then he had been put onto helping to tidy the dungheap with rakes which was harder work than he had ever done in his life. It was full dark by the time he fell into a nest of blankets and a hard pillow by the wall of the hayloft and went to sleep instantly.

His belly was growling a long time before dawn and he had woken to a thin mizzle and his hemp shirt was making him itch, unless that was fleas. By the time he was at the mucking out, his belly had quite rightfully concluded that his throat had been cut and was calling for help with loud groaning and burbling noises. He was clumsy with the shovel too. The other boy, called Danny, who was supposed to help and show him how to do it, jeered at him

continuously from the manger about how cack-handed he was with a shovel, which was hardly his fault because he had never so much as held one before.

The three horses, two large hobbies and one hobby cross, were being unco-operative and kept getting in his way and shoving him with their heads and at this rate he'd miss breakfast as well, wherever and whenever that was, and his eyes were prickling and he wanted to hit someone, preferably Danny.

He scraped up another clot of shit off the floor and dumped it in the wheelbarrow, and then he scraped up another clot of shit, dumped it in the wheelbarrow and then another clump of shit tangled with straw and horse hair...

Something had changed. Oh yes, Danny had suddenly stopped jeering at him.

Robin looked around and saw a man in a jack and morion had come into the loose box and was standing with his arms crossed, glowering at Danny. Robin moved sideways behind one of the horses, and leaned on his shovel to get his breath back and to watch. Danny was staring at the man as if he were the devil himself.

Suddenly Danny broke for the door, but the man was too quick for him, grabbed him by the hair and threw him across the loose box into the straw by the wall. Danny rolled to his feet and tried for the door again. There was a lot of dodging and then the man tripped over Robin's wheelbarrow which fell over and most of the shit fell out.

That tore it for Robin. He had spent ages picking up all that shit and now it was all to do again? He unhitched the ponies and waved his arms at them and they started to mill about and get in the man's way so he was slowed down. Robin dodged under the horse's belly and grabbed Danny, hauled him backwards under the other pony's nose and into the stableyard where the other stableboys were gathered ready for the trumpet announcing breakfast.

Blessedly they heard the blaring and sprinted with the other boys for the hall where there were big pots of porridge made with whey and salt and summer herbs and plenty of bread and even some butter.

Robin still had the wooden bowl he had picked up the previous day at dinner, and elbowed another boy in the face to get the ladle and filled his bowl up. He got out his spoon from his belt pouch and started shovelling porridge into his face until his belly shut up. Danny was next to him, eating fast as well.

Just as he finished, he felt someone loom over him. It was a big boy, maybe eleven or twelve years old, and he was annoyed to see it was the one he had originally had the fight with.

"Good morning," said the boy, "What hae we here?"

"Ay, Francis," said Danny anxiously, "Whit d'ye want?"

"I don't want ye, bastard boy. I want him."

Robin stopped eating and looked up at him. So Francis was his name. "Good morning, Francis," he said politely. "Can I help you?"

"Eh what? Ah canna understand ye?"

Robin shrugged and concentrated on polished out the last bits of porridge. Suddenly Francis grabbed for his spoon but Robin snatched it back. "What's that, eh?" sneered Francis. "A silver spoon?"

"No," said Robin, thinking that he could put his elbow in Francis's stomach from where he was. "My brother got the silver spoon. That one's just pewter and it's..." He suddenly fell silent. It was etched with the Hunsdon crest in fact, but why should he warn Francis about that?

"I want it," said Francis.

"Are you sure?" said Robin meekly. "It's..."

"Shut up or I'll give you another fat lip. Give it to me."

Just for a second, Robin thought of fighting the other boy again, but he didn't think he would win. On the other hand...

He sighed heavily and tried to look sad as he handed the pewter spoon to Francis who went off still jeering at him. Robin finished his porridge by scraping the last scraps out with his fingers.

"Here, ye can have a lend of mine," said Danny, handing over a cracked horn spoon.

"Thank you," said Robin, quite surprised. When his bowl was completely clean, he gave back the spoon and put some lumps of bread inside his jerkin and swung his legs over the bench.

"Where are ye going?"

"Back to the stables to finish the job," said Robin, "I've got to pick up all the shit that man knocked over."

"Ah'll come wi' ye," said Danny, grabbing a lump of cheese off a platter.

They went into the loosebox carefully although the man wasn't there any more. There was a dent in the wall where somebody angry had kicked it and the shit had been kicked all over the stall. Danny took the shovel which he wielded deftly and Robin followed him with the wheelbarrow. They finished before anybody else got back from breakfast and Robin trundled the barrow out to the backyard where the dungheap was and dumped it in the pile. Then he sat on the barrow and shared his lumps of bread with Danny.

"Well?" he asked.

"He's ma stepfather," said Danny lugubriously. "Ah hate him. Why me mam married him, I dinna ken."

"Why was he so angry with you?"

"Oh. He belted me yesterday for summat, so Ah put turds in his boots."

Robin choked on the bread he was munching and grinned. "I shouldn't have helped you, he'll think I was in on it."

"Eh?"

"Ehm... Ah shouldnae have helped ye..."

"No, ye shouldnae. Why did ye?"

"He annoyed me."

"Mithered ye..."

"Yes. Mithered me. I didn't want... I didnae want to pick up all the shit again."

"Ma name's Daniel Swanders," said the boy holding out his hand.

"Robin Carey," said Robin and shook. Danny looked surprised.

"So is it true yer father's me lord Hunsdon?"

"Yes... ay."

For some reason Danny started laughing. "Why's he pit ye in the stable wi' us?"

Robin explained about Mr Knollys and the Poulterer and the pigs and Mr Bunscombe's arm and Danny laughed long and loud.

"And also so I can learn horsemanship from the best horsemen in Christendom," Robin added.

"Ay, ay, well, that's gey funny is that," said Danny still hiccupping, "I'll tell ye why one day. No wonder Mr Heron pit us together."

"Is your stepfather in the garrison?"

"Ay, Wat's a good fighter, mind, but he hates me and calls me the base whelp and the mongrel and such which is why me mam 'prenticed me to Mr Heron to get me out o' his way."

"Oh," said Robin, dying to ask but deciding not to.

"Why did ye let Francis take yer spoon?"

"It's only pewter."

"Ay, it's worth a bit though, at least sixpence."

"You'd.. ye'd have to melt it down. It's got my... me father's crest engraved on it."

Danny started laughing again until he almost choked. "Och, Francis will be fit to be tied when he works it out." Robin shrugged. "Do ye not care?"

"No... nay. I tried to warn him and he wouldn't... wouldna listen. It's no' my fault."

"Tha's better, ye're sounding quite Christian now."

Robin elbowed him lightly in the ribs. The other stable boys were coming back now, and Mr Heron could be seen marching across the castle yard to the stables with a cold look on his face.

Mr Heron paced into the yard and started shouting out which boys would exercise which horses. Robin and Danny got four called Bluebell, Teazle, Nettle and Sorrel. Danny knew which ones they were and they tacked them up as quick as they could, with Robin, who had always had a groom, fumbling with the unfamiliar straps. Still they managed not to be last to mount. Mr Heron was on a quite beautiful black creature and the Head Lad a pretty mare and everyone sorted themselves into pairs. When Mr Heron gestured forward with his hand, everyone trotted out of the main stable yard two by two, the shod hooves ringing on the cobbles, the unshod hooves thudding.

Robin could ride of course, but he soon saw he was one of the worst riders there. Even Danny was better than him and he felt very embarrassed and hot. He narrowed his eyes and tried to imitate everyone else's long straight back and the way they barely used their heels at all but did everything seemingly by magic. It wasn't magic though, Robin thought, eyes narrowed, staring hard, it was weight and legs.

They circled the whole town through the town meadows - no suburbs were allowed on the Frontier with Scotland, although there were some disreputable tumbledown turf bothies near the southern gate. They trotted and cantered and walked to order and at last, at the top of the biggest field, they galloped up and down in twos while Mr Heron watched critically, both boys and horses, and called out sarcastic comments. When it was his and Danny's turn, Robin nearly fell off and was humiliated by having to grab the saddle pommel, which he knew Mr Heron had seen. At least he didn't say anything. Still blushing furiously, Robin lined up again with his spare horse and went sedately back into Berwick. Dinner was early and they had good messes of soused meat and pottage and boiled pot herbs and a sallet and soft cheese with herbs in it as a treat and red-wheat bread to eat with it, which tasted wonderful.

After dinner the boys went back to the stables in a herd, tidied the dungheap, swept the yards, refilled the water troughs. Then they whisped down and groomed all of the ponies and horses. They went out to the town field and saw to all the horses there at pasture. Some of the

other boys got up on the ponies' bareback with only rope halters and galloped up and down while hanging onto one side or the other, dropping their feet down to the ground and leaping up again. Robin watched them with envy: he didn't know how to do any of those tricks.

They ran into the castle again and some took the horses out for exercise again while the less favoured stayed behind to scour out some of the looseboxes with buckets of water and scrubbing brushes. Robin was resentfully under the command of Francis, who took great joy in ordering him around and making him scrub things twice. Then they ran to get their evening bread, cheese and ale from the buttery, ran back for Evening Stables.

My Lord Hunsdon came as well as Sir John and Mr Heron, inspected some horses' feet, looked at the horse who was sickening and decided to call a horse-leech since he thought it might be glanders. Robin was half-shocked to see him there, as if he had burst in from another world.

At the end, my lord called him over and he made his bow to his father, Sir John and Mr Heron. He could hear Francis making loud comments about his pretty bowing, ignored him.

"Well?" said his father to Mr Heron.

"Ay, so far, so good," said Mr Heron, looking as if he was chewing a wasp. "His riding could be better though. But he's willing."

Robin bowed to him again in thanks.

"Robin, will you show me Beauregard?" Beauregard was the magnificent black half-gelding that Mr Heron had ridden to exercise.

They went into the bigger loosebox that Beauregard shared with another gelding and a goat called Fosby who kept all the higher-strung horses calm. Everything was clean and Beauregard's mane had been plaited tightly to make it wavy for Sunday best, so he tossed his head up and down. Lord Hunsdon petted him and fed him an apple.

"How are you liking your work, Robin?"

Robin thought of telling him about Danny and Francis and the other boys who still teased him for the way he spoke, but he decided not to. His father wouldn't be impressed by him whining, now would he?

"I like it, my lord."

"Everyone treating you right?"

Robin smiled widely. "Yes, my lord!"

"I'm going to Carlisle in the morning to talk to Sir John Forster and my Lord Scrope, so I won't be seeing you for a week or so."

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Very good. Is your bed comfortable?"

"Er... yes, my lord." Robin had slept with the other boys in the hayloft where any candle or fire was utterly forbidden on pain of a serious whipping, with a hard pillow full of matted straw and a horse-smelling blanket over his shoulder. He had slept well despite his empty belly thanks to pure physical exhaustion.

Hunsdon put his hand on Robin's shoulder and gripped for a moment, as if he understood that Robin was lying, then led the way out of the loosebox while the goat nehhed at both of them.

Robin watched his father walk away with a strange hollow feeling inside him, wanting to run after him and jump into his arms, as he had when he was little. But it would be unmanly to do that now he was 'prenticed, and so he went outside and sought out Danny who was polishing a bridle and looked at him in wonder.

"So he is yer dad."

"Yes."

"Are ye base-born like me or whit?"

For a second Robin was angry at the slur on his mother, but then saw Danny was only curious and he had said "like me".

"No. My parents are married. I'm the seventh son," he said coldly. Danny didn't notice.

"But ye're southron so yer dad's lands willna be split, it'll all go to the eldest brother and ye'll get nothing."

"That's right."

"Ay, I see. Though I'd ha' thought he'd ha' 'prenticed ye to a doctor or a lawyer or a merchant?"

"He says I need to know about horses because I'll likely be a soldier."

Danny nodded thoughtfully. "Ay, that makes sense."

The hollow feeling was still in Robin's stomach so he said, "Come on, race you to the hayloft."

"Eh? Ah canna understand ye?"

Robin grabbed Danny's statute cap off his head and raced away with it. Danny caught up, tripped him and they wrestled for it. The Head Lad shouted at them and they parted like puppies. Five minutes later they were both asleep in the hay as the night came down.

In the dark of the night, two days later, a man climbed the ladder to the hayloft and crept amongst the sleeping boys rolled in their blankets. He stopped by Robin and put his horny hand over Danny's mouth and Danny's eyes flipped open and stared.

"Shut up," growled Wat Sadler, "Come wi' me."

Danny sleepily rolled over and got up, picked up his shoes and followed Wat to the ladder, yawning cavernously.

As Danny's head disappeared, Robin also rolled and got up, crept hunched over and went down the ladder facing forwards. He crept stealthily after the two of them. They walked over to one of the empty stalls and Robin crept ten feet behind them, ducked into the next stall, crept round the horses snoring and puffing peacefully on the straw and put his ear to the partition.

"Have ye asked him?" came Wat's voice. "Aboot where she is?"

"I dinna think he kens..." There was the sound of a casual clout around the ear.

"Ow! Whit did ye want tae do that..." Another slap.

"Ask him, he's bound tae know. His dad's the governor."

"Ay but..." Another clout.

"Ye've got another week to dae it, then I'll take him and make him tell me direct, d'ye understand?"

"Ay but what if he don't know? He canna ask his dad, the Governor's awa' tae Carlisle."

"I'll gi' ye two weeks. But mark my words, I'll ken where she is by then."

"And then what?"

Another clout. "None o' yer business, get back to yer bed."

"But..." Danny sounded like he was close to tears.

There was the sound of cloth and linen being grabbed and twisted, Danny making choking noises. Robin drew his eating knife and prepared to go to the rescue when he heard another dull thud, a man's stifled "Aargh," and then "Ye little bastard!", the sound of a punch and a small body falling to the floor.

Wat Sadler marched out of the stall rubbing his stomach, looked casually sideways at the two hobbies that were now on their feet and banging about, grunted and stalked out of the stables.

Robin ran round to the empty stall and found Danny curled up, holding his chin and crying and trying to puke. He went out again to the water trough, soaked some straw and brought it to Danny who was starting to sit up by then.

"Och," said Danny. "So ye heard him."

"Who's she? The woman he wants to know about?"

Danny put the wet straw to his chin where there was a mark coming up. "Queen Mary, the Scottish Queen."

Robin felt a thrill in his stomach - was it fear, was it excitement? He didn't know. He had thought this was about the wicked Scottish Queen, but hadn't been sure.

"But ye haven't even asked me about her."

Danny shrugged. "Why should I dae his dirty work for him? D'ye ken anyway?"

Robin shook his head although he did. Danny saw the hesitation.

"Ye do ken," he said, "Oh shit."

"We should tell Mr Heron."

"What and me lose my place because me stepfather's a March traitor?"

"Ye won't..."

"Ah will," Danny was moving his jaw carefully. "Ye dinna ken what the Heron's like. He'll say Ah'm a papist and I willna get another place anywhere in Berwick. He's like that if he takes agin ye. Ah hate Mr Heron, so I do."

Robin didn't agree but Danny knew more than he did about the stableyard. "Can you get up?"

"Ay, he's done a lot worse to me."

"Why did your mother... yer mam... marry him?"

"No idea." Danny sighed. "I think she thought she wis wi' child again and he wis willing, but then she wisnae and by that time it was too late and she wis married to him already."

"Oh. What's yer mam like?"

Danny smiled halfway and winced. "She's lovely, she's got yellow hair and she's allus so trusting and pretty. I wish..." He shook his head and didn't say what he wished. They crept up the ladder and rolled in their blankets again. Danny turned over a couple of times and then slept. Robin stayed awake for a while.

Why did Wat want to know where the Queen of Scots was? Did he mean to help her escape? Or more likely, was he working for people who wanted her free? Robin didn't think that Wat could manage something like that on his own.

His stomach felt like it was itching, like it had turned into a small animal and was wriggling and twitching. He should make sure his father knew about Wat's plan, but how could he do it? Maybe he could find a pigeon and send it with a letter, but how would the pigeon know where to find his father?

My Lord Hunsdon would be back soon. He could tell him then.

By the end of the week, Robin was riding hobbies bareback with a rope halter when he went out to the meadows to feed the horses. He felt thoroughly jolted each time and fell off regularly. Francis hated him even more because he had come across Francis teasing a dog with only three legs that had a castle collar and so Robin sprinted in, grabbed the dog, and sprinted away carrying it. Francis chased him for a while throwing stones but gave up quickly and Robin took the dog to the kennels to see if they knew where he came from. The dogboys were very happy to see him, because he was theirs since he couldn't hunt very well. One boy was called Archy and the other Andy and they lived with the dogs and slept with them too. They were just like stableboys except they smelled pungently of dogs, not horses, but inexplicably the stableboys looked down on them. Archy and Andy introduced him to all the dogs and he gave them some stale bread and was carefully sniffed and licked.

Robin had made another friend, an older boy called Thomas Fenwick who got teased because he had a stutter, and so with Danny the three of them made a gang which could defend itself a little from Francis and his friends.

Robin hadn't seen his father come back yet and finally dared to climb up to the Governor's lodgings at the top of the keep. There he found his father's Chief Secretary, Mr Purvis, who was a Berwick man. He took off his cap and asked if his father was back.

"Who's yer father, boy?"

"My Lord Hunsdon, sir, I'm Robert Carey."

"Oh. Ah. He did say. Nay, Master Carey, yer father's not expected back for at least ten days as he's taking a tour of the Border country wi' the Wardens."

"Oh. I wanted to write a letter to him, can I do that?"

"Certainly, ye can dictate it to me and I'll put it in the despatch bag that goes tonight, if ye like?"

"Oh. Could I not write it myself - to show I haven't forgotten my penmanship?" asked Robin with a charming smile.

"No," said Mr Purvis coldly, "I pen all the letters that go in the bag, it's ma office."

"Oh."

"So do ye want to dictate it now?"

"I need tae think what to write. How often does the bag go?"

"Every day or sometimes if all's quiet, every other day."

"Ay, let me think on what tae write."

Robin went and sat on the stairs and thoughtfully chewed on a thick grass root that tasted like hazelnut. He could dictate his message to Purvis, of course - but what if he was one of the people who wanted to let the Queen of Scots loose? Lord Hunsdon had also told him that it was a rare servant who wasn't being paid by at least one of his father's enemies and the Earl of Leicester, of course. Maybe the Earl of Leicester was in on the plot too? Hadn't he wanted to marry the Queen of Scots too, back when Robin was little; he remembered his father erupting about it.

So maybe he could get a letter into the despatch bag after it had gone? But where could he get pen, ink and paper? He hadn't solved that one either. There was a stationer's in town, he thought, but he didn't know where it was. More seriously, he didn't have any money - he didn't need money in the stable yard. So there was no help for it, he would just have to find a way to steal the paper, pens and ink.

He went back and watched as Mr Purvis carefully stitched the bag together with special thick thread coloured red. "Och," he said, carefully northern, "why do ye do that?"

"You still there, young master? I do it so no one can open the despatch bag after it's left this office without your father knowing."

"Oh."

"The inner bags are sealed shut and sewn with a different coloured thread. Red means Her Majesty's business. And ye canna buy this kind of thread anywhere. Ye have tae buy in from the Court Stationer who has a patent on the thread and it's very expensive."

"Oh."

There was a sound of hobnailed boots on the stairs, running up them two at a time. A young man ran in and skidded to a halt. He was big and strong and he had light brown hair and a patchy beard and a round face and he was wearing a buff coat. He laughed as Robin turned to stare at him.

"Here Ah am, Mr Purvis, and ready to gae." Mr Purvis leaned forward and smelled his breath and he laughed again. "Ah'm no' drunk, I just like despatch riding."

"Hmf, Solomon. Nobody else does. I've nearly finished wi' this."

To Robin's increasing dismay, Mr Purvis was doing more than just stitching it shut, he was using fancy embroidery stitches too, very neat.

"Why d'ye like despatch riding," Robin asked the young man. "Sir?"

"Who are ye?"

"Eh... I'm in the stables, sir, and I'm wondering if despatch riding might be a good trade when Ah'm growed."

Please, Mr Purvis, don't tell him... prayed Robin silently.

"D'ye like riding then, fast as ye can, as long as ye can?"

"Ay, I do! I'm not so good at it yet but give me time..."

"There's more tae it than that, but ay, that's the core of it. And finding your way and watching out for men looking to stop ye and rob ye and sneaking past 'em cos you're cleverer nor they are..."

Robin's eyes shone. "Ay," he said carefully, "that sounds wonderful."

Mr Purvis knotted and bit off the threads and carefully dropped sealing wax onto the knots and then stamped the wax with the Berwick castle crest and Lord Hunsdon's crest as well. It went into a leather bag and Solomon trotted down the stairs with it bouncing on his hip. Robin trotted with him.

"I'll be back in a few days when I bring the despatches back from Carlisle. I'll look ye out in the stable and tell ye death-defyin' tales of a despatch rider's life, would ye like that?"

"Ah would so," Robin said, proud of his northerness, and went with him to the stables where a horse was standing ready for him and one of the older boys holding its bridle.

"Is she warmed up, Cuddy?"

"Ay master, I rode her round the town meadow."

"Thanks, lad," Solomon made the lightest steed leap Robin had ever seen, set his heels in and found his stirrups as he trotted out of the yard and across the drawbridge, the horse snorting eagerly. Robin looked at her: that was Nelly. She wasn't the fastest galloper by a long chalk but she was one of the strongest and fastest horses there over distance and according to gossip could keep going for hours and hours because she loved to run.

"Hey Cuddy," he said to the older boy who had brought Nelly. "Isn't she beautiful?"

The older lad flushed and looked happy. "Ay, she is. I gave her an extra currying with some oil to make her shine, she likes that." Robin looked curiously at him - did horses have things they liked, like people did? Maybe they did. He saw Danny and Tom and ran over to them. They were playing knuckle bones while they waited for the trumpet to sound.

Suddenly Mr Heron stalked into the yard. He was holding another of the older boys by the ear. The boy was middling sized but already broad across the shoulders. Robin hadn't got his name straight yet. He was bright red and his face was screwed up, probably from the pain in his ear.

They all straightened up and looked at each other. The trumpeter was standing behind Mr Heron, waiting.

"Listen to me!" shouted Mr Heron, who was clearly in a cold rage. "Recently there have been thefts from the stableyard, of bridle ornaments, cloaks, spoons. This afternoon we found most of the missing items under the bedding of this boy, Hugh Collingwood..."

"I never!" shouted the boy, Hugh, desperately. "I never stole nothing, I never..."

Mr Heron had his whip in his hand and he brought it down sharply on Hugh's back.

"Silence! Hugh Collingwood is a thief and a liar..."

"I'm not!" screamed Hugh and got hit by the whip across the face.

"You are dismissed from the stableyard, don't come back."

"But I niver stole nothing... I dinna ken how they came under my bedding, it wasna me..."

"Go."

"But... can I not fetch my things?"

Mr Heron stopped. "Fetch them."

Suddenly Robin caught sight of Francis. He had possibly the nastiest smile on his face that Robin had ever seen. A little shiver of gooseflesh went up Robin's back at it.

He wasn't expecting what happened next, but suddenly he found himself stepping forward.

"Sir, Mr Heron," he said. "Will I go with him to be a witness and be sure he disnae steal anything else?"

Mr Heron scowled at him but finally nodded. Robin ran after Hugh and trotted beside him as he went into the barn.

"Hugh," he whispered quickly. "I believe ye didn't steal those things. What happened?"

Hugh blinked at him through his scowl. "Naething, he just came and grabbed me a minute ago..."

"No, between you and Francis?"

"Och." Hugh stopped at the ladder. "Ye mean..." Robin nodded. "He tripped me when I was carrying my bowl of pottage and I'd had enough of him so I hit him and we had a fight later that I won cos I'm the best fighter here."

Robin nodded. "Anything else?"

"Well, he's allus after me with his mates, but I've got mates too and me elder brother is in the garrison... Ye think he'd do that?"

"Well bridle ornaments and spoons don't walk, do they?"

"Ay."

"We just need to find out who told Mr Heron to look under your bedding and then we'll know."

"Well Ah cannae stay, I've lost me job, I'll have to go to me brother and he willna like it..."

"Don't leave the castle for a bit, eh?"

"Ah canna, Ah've nowhere else to go."

They found Hugh's bedding which was all rucked up and scattered. There was a blanket and a pillow and an old cloak, cut down from a man's cloak, and a spare shirt and a wooden bowl and spoon and a little wooden necklace of beads with a cross at the end that Hugh grabbed up quickly.

"Have ye got any food?" Hugh shook his head.

"Come here after supper, I'll try and get you some."

"A'right. Why're ye doing this, Rob?"

"I don't like Francis either."

"Oh. I get it. Right."

They shook hands and slid down the ladder, went out into the yard where Mr Heron stood and all the other boys were waiting for the trumpet to blow.

"Here he is, sir," said Robin as helpfully as he could. "He just picked up his blanket and pillow, a cloak, a shirt and a bowl."

Mr Heron held out his hand. "The blanket and pillow belong to the stableyard."

Hugh silently piled the bedclothes into Mr Heron's arms. The whip mark across his face was flaring red. Robin went with Hugh to the gate and then came back, hoping he hadn't missed the trumpet.

He hadn't. Mr Heron was still there. "I'm surprised at you, Robin," he said. "Hugh Collingwood had something of yours too."

"Did he...? I mean, ay?"

Mr Heron handed him his pewter spoon etched with his father's crest. There's proof, thought Robin excitedly. He nearly blurted it out to Mr Heron, but then stopped himself. If he told Mr Heron that Francis and not Hugh had robbed him of it, it would be too easy for Francis simply to say he hadn't and then it would be Robin's word against his.

"Thank you, sir," he said, his heart beating slow and hard. He looked around and saw Francis laughing with his gang. The next minute the trumpet blared and Robin sprinted with the other boys for the hall, his belly making it's usual extraordinary rumbles and growls.

Once he had downed his pottage, he sat staring into space while Danny and Tom carried on with their game of knucklebones on the bench between them. At last Danny elbowed him.

"What's up, Rob, are ye sick?"

"I was just thinking about how to get paper and pens and ink so I can write to my father and tell him about your Wat wanting to know where the Queen of Scots is."

"Ay, D...Danny tellt me," said Tom excitedly. "I heard she was in the T...Tower of London."  
Robin shook his head firmly. "Nay, the Queen won't have her in London nor Westminster, that's far too close to the court. York castle, mebbe."

"Or Norham castle or Alnwick castle, there's a few castles around."

Robin shook his head again. "She'll be well away from the Border too..."

They spent some time arguing over whether the wicked Queen of Scots would eventually be put in the Tower of London or not and then Danny said, "Hey Rob, what are ye doing on yer half day off?"

"I don't... Ah dinna ken, when is it?"

"Day after tomorrow. Ye could come wi' me and meet my man and she'll gi' ye a good dinner what's more."

Robin was just going to turn him down when his stomach spoke up and said a dinner was not to be argued with. So he smiled and said thank you. He was abstracted as he went about his work and still thinking as he ate his dinner. Just in time he remembered his promise to Hugh and picked up some hunks of bread and cheese and someone's abandoned sausage, put them in the front of his jerkin. He drank his ale, refilled it and went down the outer stairs carefully with the cup full of ale. He found Hugh sheltering from the rain in the cubbyhole under the stairs where the pig who ate the hall leftovers lived until he got too big and bad-tempered. He was penned in the barnekin now and would meet his maker in November.

Hugh glugged his ale, took a bite of the half-sausage, smacked his lips and smiled. "Tha's better," he said, "Thank 'ee Rob, I'll not forget this."

"Hugh, could you ask yer brother if he knows... er... kens a man called Wat Sadler who's in the garrison and anything about him?"

"He an enemy o' yourn?"

"A friend is having trouble with him."

Hugh nodded. "I can but ask. And I've told my friends to watch out for Francis."

"I'll tell ye one thing," said Robin. "Francis took this spoon off me a few days ago. Guess where it turned up so Mr Heron could give it me?"

"In my bedding?"

"I know it's mine because of the crest, see." Robin pulled it out to show Hugh. "That's my Lord Hunsdon's crest."

"Och, the new governor?"

"Ay,"

Hugh's eyes narrowed a little. "So I heard ye're by way of being like Danny?"

For a moment Robin thought of defending his mother's honour and setting him straight on the subject, but thought better of it. "In a manner of speaking. So as I know Francis took it and it turned up under your bedding, so we know who's in back of it, see? That's not suspecting, we know it's him."

Hugh shrugged. "So what?"

"So I dinna like what he did to ye and I don't fancy him doing it to me either. Which he will because I keep butting heads wi' him."

Hugh nodded seriously. A lump of cheese was bulging his cheek. "A'right Rob, I'll see ye around. I'll go to my brother now and get a leatherin' from him too, shouldn't wonder."

Hugh gloomily felt the mark of Heron's whip on his face and wandered into the drizzle with his half of a man's cloak wrapped around his shoulders.

When Robin finally went to bed, he listened to the whisper of rain and mice in the thatch and thought of the problems of pens and ink and paper and despatch riders and Queens until it all whirled together in his head and he was galloping north on a good horse, riding post, galloping, galloping. He came to a post-inn, found the warmed-up horse at the post with a boy, slid down from his tired horse and mounted the other with a steed-leap as light as Solomon's. As he cantered off to start with, he was feeling tired for he had ridden a long way the day before, and a longer way the day before that one, and his heart was full of sadness and excitement. There was sadness because an old woman he greatly liked and respected had died; excitement because this was the most important news anybody had carried north for forty-five years and he was carrying it. In that strange mixture of things in dreams, he knew he was a grown man and yet he was also Robin and still a boy.

In the dream he saw a knot of horsemen in jacks with lances up ahead and tensed. He went off the road a little to give them a wide berth and saw them whip up their horses and come after him. He sent his horse to a full gallop and careened in among the bushes, briefly saw a branch and then nothing but blackness and the strange feeling of being as light as a feather, floating away.

He woke with strange feelings rolling up and down his legs like hot and cold water and looked into the darkness full of breathers and snorers and mutterers and wondered. Then he rolled and went back to sleep and forgot all about it for nearly thirty-five years.

The day it was his half-day off, the day he was supposed to go and meet Danny's mam, he had forgotten all about it and was sitting in the barn, tossing his knife up and trying to catch it by its hilt which he thought might impress someone. Danny came in and shoved him.

"Ye've forgotten!"

"What? Oh ay, I have. Sorry, Danny."

He got up and followed Danny down through the gate into the castle's barnekin, where Mr Heron was talking to some of the garrison captains.

"Where are ye going to?" he demanded.

Danny only blushed and stuttered, and Robin took his cap off and said, "I thought it was my half-day off. Is it not, sir?"

Mr Heron thought and his mouth went sour. "Ay, I suppose it is. So where are ye going?"

"To meet me mam, master," Danny managed to say, "She invited Rob."

Mr Heron gave a sudden "Hrmf" which sounded very like the noises Robin's father made sometimes and glared at them as if he would like to say a lot more, but then didn't. The two boys trotted out the main gate and through the town gate and into Berwick.

"What's up wi' Mr Heron?" Robin asked casually.

"Och, he's probably heard the rumours about me mam," said Danny, looking worried.

"There's allus rumours about her."

"Oh," said Robin, dying to ask what kind of rumours but not daring. Danny and he trotted on through the drizzle, kicking a bit of broken kitchen crockery between them, scoring sudden sweet goals between the heavy buttresses of the walls until the shard shattered.

They came to one of the poorest areas of the town, full of tumbledown houses slumping into each other, and Danny stopped in front of a small wattle and daub cottage.

"I'll check Wat isna there," said Danny, going in first and came out a minute later looking very relieved and with his mother behind him. At least Robin assumed that was who she was, for he was thunderstruck. He uncovered and gave her one of his best bows because... because she was pretty. Maybe even beautiful. She had curly golden hair that her polite goodwife's cap had trouble covering and pale grey eyes and pink lips and pink cheeks and she seemed strangely young and slender to be a mother.

She laughed amazingly, like silver bubbles and held her hand out to Robin. He was feeling very peculiar, sort of breathless and happy at the same time, and so he did something he had seen his father do, bent over her hand and kissed it.

She laughed again and dropped a neat curtsey. "Now then Rob, I know by your courtesy that you are my Lord Hunsdon's son, so we are well-met indeed."

Robin felt hot and found his heart was pounding but had no idea why. "Yes, I am, ma'am, thank you."

"Och, with such pretty manners you must come and have some dinner and then perhaps we can do each other a favour."

"Anything in the world, ma'am, that is not at odds with mine honour!" said Robin, who had heard an older brother say that to a woman and had been longing to use it.

She laughed and led them into the tiny cottage which had only two rooms, the one with the table in it and places set and a fire in a fireplace that had only a hole in the roof above it, no chimney, and cupboard beds in the wall. The other room was laid with straw and had some chickens clucking busily about there and going in and out to the garden through a small hole in the wall.

She swung a cauldron that was hanging over the fire to her and ladled chicken stew into their bowls, smoky and meaty and full of potherbs, and an elegant sallet in a pretty painted crock with a chip in it and new butter and fried sippets cooked on a griddle and ale that was much stronger than what they usually drank.

"It's beer, with hops in it so it won't go off in hot weather. Do you want more?"

Robin just nodded because his mouth was full, and held up his bowl. He couldn't take his eyes off her as she talked to Danny. The way she did it was different from any other grown up he had met, for she spoke to her son as if he was a big man, not just a boy. She talked to him the same way, so he felt important and grown up. And all the time his heart was beating fast and he felt as if bubbles were going up and down in his stomach. What on earth was wrong with him?

She asked what Danny thought of Mr Heron and he said he didn't like him, for he was cold and stiff and angry. She asked Robin the same question and he hesitated. "I don't know," he said. "He turned off Hugh the other day and beat him with his whip too. I thought he was a just man but what he did was unjust."

"You don't think Hugh stole those things?"

Robin shook his head vigorously. "I know he didn't and I know that someone else stole the things and put them under Hugh's bedding. I know who it was too. Francis took the spoon off me and didn't notice the crest on it, then planted it so Hugh would get in trouble.

The silver bells chimed down the scale. "My word, there's allus one person like Francis everywhere you look, isn't there?"

Danny nodded. "Ay, there is."

Then she started telling a tale about when she was a little girl and she had servants and one was like Francis but she didn't realise, and Robin frowned and tried to work it out, how she had once had servants and now she lived in a tiny cottage with chickens roosting in the

second room. She saw him, read him and laughed again, though perhaps there was something out of tune among the bells.

"I know you're puzzled Robin, but please don't ask. These things happen."

Robin blinked at her, mystified. Why not? Ask about what? And then he thought, she is beautiful and it doesn't matter and decided he would never ask her anything she didn't want to answer.

After they were full, she fetched pens and ink and some cheap rough paper and set them out. "Robin, my Danny tells me ye want to send a letter to yer dad and I do too. I am in a worse case than you are because I can read but I can't write."

"Why d'ye want to write a letter to my Lord Hunsdon?"

"To tell him that I am in Berwick too, not London, that's all. We were friends nine years ago and I would like to be so again."

Robin frowned. "Oh," he said and wondered why such a pretty lady would want to be friends with his old father? He looked at Danny for a clue, but got no help there for Danny had a face as blank as an old angel in a church. "Yes, but I don't know how to get my letter to my father. There's a despatch bag that goes every day, but it's all sealed and sewn up."

"Well you only need to find someone who can ride and find him and pay him."

"I have no money, ma'am."

"Didn't your father leave a generous prentice fee for you?"

"He did but Mr Heron has it."

"I see. Well, I have no money either so we will just have to write our letter and then hope God will lead us to a good despatch rider."

Robin instantly thought of Solomon Musgrave, but of course he was probably riding into Carlisle right now which didn't really help.

"It's a pity neither of you is old enough to carry it yourself though I'm sure you'll be carrying messages on horseback soon enough."

"It's the older boys that do that, mam," said Danny, "the eleven and twelve year olds."

Robin was wondering about that - though of course, there was the problem of stealing a horse and the epic leathering he would get for going missing. But it was a thought, wasn't it? On the other hand he really didn't know which way to go or where he could find his father. He sighed.

"Yes ma'am," he said meekly. He picked up the pen which had been seasoned but not cut and cut the nib carefully with his knife, dipped it and tried it out. It wasn't at quite the right angle and scraped a bit, but still wrote.

Robin had suffered endless mornings of rows of 'm's and 'n's and 'e's and 'a's to teach him penmanship and he wanted to show Danny's pretty mother (and his father) how well he could write.

Not knowing that his tongue was sticking out and following the motions of the pen, he wrote the opening "To my Lord Hunsdon, Governor of Berwick town" and then looked at her questioningly.

"Say that I am writing to him with you as my kind and courteous secretary because he knows I cannot write, alas. Say that you and Danny are friends so he knows how it comes about that you know me. Say that I moved to Berwick a little while ago and that I recall his good lordship to me nine years ago and thank him for it."

"... for which I heartily... thank... you..." repeated Robin slowly and looked up.

"And now you should add whatever you wanted to say," finished Danny's mother, with a smile at him that caused bubbles in his stomach again.

"But who should I say it's from, ma'am?"

"Oh of course," and she laughed again. "I'll sign it myself. That I can do." She took Robin's pen, dipped and wrote Cicely Swanders, quite neatly though big.

Robin thought for a minute and then added, "Sir, I needed to write to you. A man in the garrison by name Wat Sadler wants to know urgently in which castle the Queen of Scots is staying. He knows I am your son and says he will take me and get me to tell him. I write this so you know I think they plan some kind of March Treason, sir, so I pray you will return or send a man to deal with the matter." Robin was proud of the last line - he really wanted his father to come back but wanted him to know he wasn't afraid of Wat if my lord was too busy.

The problem of the despatch bag remained, however. He signed it in his best writing, "I remain, sir, your most loving, humble and obedient son, Robert Carey." Then he folded it up nicely, the way he had been taught which marked the first occasion anything he had been taught by Mr Knollys had turned out to be useful. Then he sealed it with candlewax and put it inside his woollen doublet where it crackled, to keep it away from the rain.

Then Danny's mother brought out some soft cheese and raspberries for a treat. When neither he nor Danny could eat any more, they said their goodbyes to Danny's mother and Robin said a careful and elaborate thank you to her. She laughed and said he was not to call her ma'am when he visited again, but just Mrs Swanders, which made him blush for some reason. Then he and Danny went out into the rain and raced each other back to the castle, since it was too wet to explore the places where the walls of Berwick were being strengthened.

Since it was still their half day off and not dark yet, they went to the kennels and found Andy and Archie were taking all the dogs on long leads down to the town meadow for their exercise, so they went with the dog boys and helped. They ran up and down the newly mown meadow, shouting while the dogs all barked madly and the ones let off the lead ran around sniffing everything and rolling in it. The three-legged dog was there, running easily and balancing on his three legs and herding back any exciteable half-grown dog that went the wrong way.

"What's his name?" asked Danny, pulling his ears and patting him.

"Nitty," said Archie.

"Short for Trinity, which is something about God, not nits," said Andy, "The Dog Keeper said."

Robin laughed and tried to explain the joke which was impossible because, while everyone went to church on Sunday, nobody ever listened to a word of the sermon.

So he and Danny helped the dog boys give the dogs their evening meal which was stale bread soaked in blood from the Berwick shambles, which took about three seconds. And then they went back to the stables and found they were the first back which meant Danny could help to measure the fodder for the horses and Robin could have a go on the trumpet. He mostly made raspberry noises but eventually got a good note out of it.

"D'ye know how many horses we have here?" Mr Heron said to Robin when he had stopped blowing.

"I don't, sir," said Robin.

"Go and count them."

So Robin went round the whole place and came back. "There are a hundred and forty two in a hundred looseboxes all told, but the horses usually double up and there are seventy eight in the town meadows too..."

"So what's the final tally including the ones out in the infield?"

"Two hundred and twenty, sir. But I don't think they are all here. What about the post horses?"

"Very good, lad. Yes. Some are at the post inns, some in Newcastle or Carlisle, some on the way. Fifteen post horses. Some are at home with their owners who live near enough to turn out for us when reivers come over the Border. We have about 300 horses here and nearby all told, and in the meadows. Do you think this is a big stables?"

"Well yes sir, though I suppose..."

"What?"

"Three hundred horse sounds a lot but it isn't according to my father."

Mr Heron nodded. "We are understrength in fact. A King would have a much bigger establishment. Now tell me how much they eat every day." Robin blinked at him. How on earth was he supposed to guess that? "Ye can come back and tell me when ye've found out."

Robin went up to the loft to play dice with Danny, Tom and Hugh who had skulked in from the garrison. None of them had any idea how much food horses ate, although they agreed that it was a lot. Tom said he had found something good which he would show to them on their next half day.

Robin was a little bored by dice and his mind was still gnawing at the problem of his letter. For a while he thought seriously about stealing a horse and heading for Carlisle and just hoping for the best, but of course his father was touring the defences of the Western Border. He could be anywhere from Dumfries to Hexham. A despatch rider could just deliver to Carlisle castle and Hunsdon would have a man riding to and from there. So that was no good. He had heard that you could send letters by the common carter but he didn't think there was a regular cart going along the Border because of the certainty that someone would raid it, especially with the Scots in civil war, and it would take too long anyway.

Hugh Collingwood was telling a good tale of how he had got some meat from the castle kitchen by letting the spit dog out of his cage when the cat was sleeping by the fire and in the chaos he had picked up a whole boiled chicken for a blankmanger which had burned his fingers a bit but tasted wonderful, even though he had had to share it with his brother and his mates. And the poor spit dog got the blame.

And then he heard a shout from down the ladder and went to the hatch and saw Solomon waving up at him. He scrambled down, followed by Tom, Danny and Hugh and they listened for an hour to Solomon's tales of hiding in haystacks to avoid being caught and how he had ridden fifty miles with blood pouring from a wound on his head that he had gotten falling off a horse and how he had passed one of the Giant's Forts at dusk on a Midsummer's day and the faerie folk had appeared and invited him to come into the fort, but he knew better than to accept and had ridden away as fast as he could with his knife in his hand, not for the blade, but for the cold iron it was made of.

"What were you doing up in Mr Purvis's office anyway, Rob?" he asked.

"I wanted to send a letter to my father." he said.

"Ay? Why's that?"

Could he trust Solomon Musgrave? He didn't know and he didn't know what to say. He felt himself going red and then Hugh saved him by asking a technical question about how soon

you could go to a full gallop on a new horse when you were riding post and Solomon dealt with the matter very fully, although you could sum up what he said by saying, "It depends." At last Solomon laughed and stood up.

"I'd best be going. I want tae get to my bed before I have to be out of it."

They all chorused their thanks, calling him Master. Hugh went with him because he was going to the barracks for the single men and Robin could see he was talking intently to Solomon. Once Solomon looked back at him, but then they were through the gate and disappeared into the mizzle.

And that was when he had a brilliant idea about the despatch bag and told Danny and Tom and they both loved the idea and they thrashed it out between them until it was finally time for supper and they had to help feed the horses again before they went to sleep.

The next day, a little after breakfast, Robin went to see Mr Purvis again. He didn't go in at once, but hid round the curve of the spiral stairs, watching until Mr Purvis was at the exact right stage in sewing up the despatch bag. He signalled with his hand to Danny at the foot of the stairs who signalled to Tom waiting in the barnekin.

"Sir, could I trouble you to help me write to my good lord and father?"

Purvis looked up, sighed and then drew a new sheet of paper and picked up a pen. Robin had watched his father dictating letters, so he shut his eyes, put his thumbs in his belt and marched up and down while Purvis looked on with amusement.

"To my good lord and father," intoned Robin. "I hope this my letter finds you as well as it does me and I advertise you that there are 220 horses in the stableyard and meadows, not counting the post horses..."

There was a loud thump outside and then an enraged chucking and squawking.

"I am your lordship's most obedient and loving son, Robert Carey."

Mr Purvis smiled, folded the letter and was about to say something when the squawks redoubled and Danny and Tom started shouting. Mr Purvis finally went to the window and looked out. While his back was turned, Robin quickly stuffed his original letter into the despatch bag and shook it. Mr Purvis came back chuckling and saying that two boys seemed to be trying to catch a couple of hens and not succeeding. While Robin watched, Purvis put his second letter in the bag and nodded at Robin. "Off you go," he said.

"Won't you seal the bag?"

Purvis shrugged. "Of course I will, but there are more letters to go in it yet."

Robin sighed and as there was nothing he could do to speed anything up, he ran down the spiral staircase and into the barnkin where he found Tom and Danny sitting on the now caged hens and arguing about whether or not you could get hens to fight the way you could cocks.

"Did it work?" asked Danny.

"It did but I don't know when the bag goes."

"Well that's g...g... good enough, int it?" said Tom.

"I suppose."

On the way back they tried to get the hens to fight but one just pecked the other and that hen only squatted down, so they took them back to the kitchen garden and let the fluffed up and flustered hens out to continue hunting for slugs. The other hens came running and clucking and seemed very pleased to see them.

The next day was Sunday and Mr Heron announced that after church there would be two football matches. One for the men of the garrison and the men of the town, and one for the boys of the garrison and all the prentices of the town and if they wanted to, they could play. Robin was so excited at this, he could hardly stand still. He loved playing football. He had played it a lot with the other boys of the village but never had he had the chance to play with people watching in such a big game.

First they had to go down to the town meadow with shovels and pick up any recent shit though, which calmed him down a little. The biggest boys redug the goal-holes and trimmed them square. Then there was church, during which he jiggled his legs and hopped about and argued in a whisper with Danny and Tom over the best way of winning a football match, seeing that weapons weren't allowed.

Then they went out to the meadows again where everybody from the town had gathered behind the fences. Hugh came and joined them and told them to stick together as much as they could and pile in any time they saw a town boy.

To start with there was a lot of aimless running around and hardly any fights. Robin suddenly found himself running down the field to the town goal, the leather ball at his feet and everybody shouting and then he cannoned into another bigger boy who turned out to be Francis. Francis got a sneaky punch at Robin's stomach, took the ball away from him and kicked it into the town goal. And then everybody cheered him, not Robin.

Robin was winded and climbed slowly to his feet while Francis did a waltz. He had to sit down for a bit at the side where an old man said he'd seen what Francis did and dinna fash yerself ower it.

Robin ran back into the fray as soon as he could and Danny and Tom nearly got another goal and then they didn't get the ball again before the trumpet rang out to say it was done.

They were all served ale which they drank down thirstily and they got to watch the men of the town and the garrison battle it out. Robin couldn't enjoy it, he was still furious about Francis making him look like a wean, stealing his goal. He tried to plot vengeance but all his plans tended to bump into the fact that Francis was bigger than him and had more and bigger boys in his gang.

And then he wondered where Danny had got to? Tom and Hugh were cheering the garrison men on to a beautiful goal, but where was Danny?

He wandered among the boys and one of them said he'd seen Danny get a message from a soldier and go up to the keep, so Robin sighed at missing the football and trotted up through the town to the castle. He looked into the stables, saw nothing, it was empty, and then he heard a muffled squawk from the tackroom.

He looked in, saw nothing, turned to go - and there were three men standing in the courtyard, in his way. Two of them were Scots by the checkered pattern of quilting on their jacks, one of them was Wat Sadler who was holding Danny.

Danny was purple in the face because Wat's hand was over his mouth and nose, shutting him up.

Robin dodged the nearest Scot's grab for him, dodged the other man, dodged again and sprinted out of the stables, losing his statute cap, ran as fast as he could, shouting "Help! Murder! Fire!"

One of the Scots blocked the gate which should have been shut, and so he had to sprint up the steps to the wall, still shouting, up another flight of steps onto the battlement walkway where he dodged until Wat and a Scot caught him against the wall and Wat hit him across the face, making his nose bleed and his head sing.

Robin felt an odd sensation of something going "pop" inside him and a strange red mist came over his eyes. Somebody grabbed his arms, he tried to bite them, somebody else knocked him backwards and he didn't feel it. He managed to draw his eating knife and tried to stab with it, but had it knocked out of his hand where it rang on the cobbles and the Scot put his boot on it.

Wat had grabbed Robin round his middle. "Stay still, damn ye, ye're coming wi' us," he shouted and Robin reared his head back and tried to head butt him. The Scot grabbed his arm and twisted it and he was in such a rage he didn't feel that either though his eyes watered.

"Listen," hissed Wat, shoving his snarling face up to Robin's. "See Danny down there?" The Scot tilted him over the battlements to see more clearly. He gave a convulsive heave and nearly got away again but Wat grabbed his hair and hit him in the stomach so he puked up the ale in his stomach all over him, which made the Scot laugh because Wat got the worst of it.

"Jesu!" he snarled, wiping the puke off his buff coat, "Ye come wi' us and if I have any trouble wi' ye, I'll beat Danny to a pulp where ye can see, understand? Do ye understand?!"

Robin couldn't breathe properly and hated the taste of the returned ale but this got past the red rage blocking his sight and hearing and he stopped struggling. He was suddenly exhausted.

"Right," said Wat, roping Robin's wrists behind him and carrying him over his shoulder down the steps to the empty courtyard. "Ye and Danny is thick as thieves, ye're both coming."

Robin twisted and started shouting again but suddenly there was something woolly in his mouth - his muddy statute cap - and so he couldn't shout any more and he couldn't breathe properly either. Wat took both his and Danny's eating knives and shoved them in the breast pocket of his jack.

Then Wat went to the well and brought up a bucket of water, while there was loud cheering from everybody down in the town meadows. He scrubbed at his buff coat and the other Scot brought up three hobbies. Robin went up in front of Wat, Danny went in front of one of the Scots looking sick and scared and they galloped out of an open postern gate that should not have been open under any circumstances, heading for the ancient and rickety wooden bridge leading into the Merse.

As soon as they were over it they broke westwards and south as far as Robin could tell, because the sky was grey and no sun, and they were soon up among the reiver's paths that turned and twined confusingly. He had no idea where he was and although he was looking for good landmarks, they all looked the same as each other. Besides he had to spend all his time concentrating on staying on the horse with his hands tied behind him so he couldn't grab the pommel and his hands were going numb. At least he had managed to spit out his statute cap so he could breathe, there wasn't any point in shouting by then.

The red rage had completely gone and he was feeling as sick and scared as Danny looked. His hands were hurting, his face and head were hurting, his stomach was hurting a lot. He

considered just toppling off the pony and running but they would catch him easily and he didn't know which way to go.

So he looked at the Scots, trying to fix their faces in his mind so that when his father caught up with the men, he would be able to say which should hang.

One Scot was brown-haired, brown bearded, the other tending towards red and he had a funny looking left ear as if someone had found half an ear and stuck it on his head for a joke. Both were large, had well-worn swords and the Scottish quilting pattern made them look more frightening.

Wat was hard-faced and long-jawed and owned a morion, what was more.

When would they be missed? Maybe not until night time probably, since on a Sunday with a football match, most rules were relaxed. He didn't think anyone would notice - unless Hugh and Tom did because he and Danny wouldn't be able to meet them to see whatever Tom had found. But what could they do about it?

Robin was finding the jolting of the pony hard to bear. To take his mind off it he wondered why they had taken Danny as well - surely that was harder to do? He knew perfectly well why they had taken him. This was all about the wicked Queen of Scots so they could break her out of Bolton castle and bring her north to Scotland again.

When would his father get his letter? If it had gone yesterday, it would get to Carlisle today and then it would need to be carried to wherever his father was. So it might arrive on Monday at best.

Robin sighed and tried to sit more comfortably because the saddle pommel was digging into his stomach and it hurt. Wat swatted him across the head, Robin started to get angry again. How had such a nice and pretty lady as Cicely Swanders managed to marry such a horrible man? Maybe she had chosen him for herself. Everybody Robin knew, except his father, said that choosing for yourself was a certain sure recipe for misery. His father just twinkled his eyes and said sometimes people could choose well for themselves.

Suddenly he wanted his dad desperately. He fantasised about his dad calling out the garrison to come and find him, and fighting Wat and his Scots and beheading Wat and... He didn't dare think of Goody Biltock his old wetnurse who was Philadelphia's nurse now, or even his mother. He pushed the memory of her away - she would want to kill Wat too - because it made him feel so scared and lonely. So he concentrated on his dad and thought of all the ways he could kill Wat, hanging him, beheading him, spearing him... It was a pity only one of them could happen but it made him feel a little better.

It was a long summer's evening when they came to a pele tower that looked exactly the same as all the others they had passed and went into its wooden courtyard. He wondered which surname owned it. He knew some of the more famous English and Scottish surnames by now, like the Humes and the Widdringtons, but not many. Danny was looking quite green with fright which made Robin feel even more frightened.

They rode in and talked with the gate guard at the inner fence and then two men came to meet them, both Scots as well. These were different. They had men at their back, they were better dressed with cleaner jacks and morion helmets and one of them was wearing a cuirass. Were they headmen perhaps? One was a big thickset man with a bushy red beard, he had the cuirass and a deep booming voice, although Robin couldn't make out his broad Scotch. The other was slimmer and darkhaired and he too had a funny-looking ear and a darkly humourous expression on his face.

Robin was lifted down from the saddle and was so sore from everything that he almost fell over. He forced himself to stand straight though even his arse and back were hurting too. For a moment he thought about bowing to the better-dressed men but then decided to wait until he knew who they were. They didn't look like gentlemen anyway, and they were Scots.

"Quich o' thame is Hunsdon's lad?" He understood that from the slimmer man, though it still sounded like dogs snarling. "Tek th'ither wan upstairs."

Robin thought he heard Danny sob, so he caught his eye and winked. It didn't seem to work and Danny disappeared up a spiral staircase, leaving him alone.

Now the dark-haired man came up close to Robin and stared down at him. "D'ye ken who I am?" he asked. Slowly Robin shook his head because he was afraid his voice would tremble if he spoke. "Best ye dinna ken, eh?"

Robin kept looking up at the man, straight into his eyes, fighting the sickness in his belly and the enraging tears that kept creeping up on him.

"But I ken who ye are, you're ma lord Hunsdon's son and born in wedlock tae boot."

Robin said nothing. The man was big enough though not as big nor as wide as the other one. Suddenly he squatted down to Robin and smiled. "Do ye have any brothers, laddie?" Robin nodded. "Can't ye speak?" Robin coughed, he didn't want to annoy the reiver.

"Yes, I can. Sir."

"Ay well. So have ye any brothers?"

Robin nodded again. Why was the reiver asking about his family? "Yes," he said, "Five brothers living, all older than me."

There was an eruption of laughter from the fat reiver. "Whit a disappointment! He's a spare son richt enow."

"They're living?"

Robin nodded. "And three sisters. There were seven others that died. Sir." Goody Biltock said that politeness never did any harm and might do some good.

"So why did your father bring ye north tae Berwick then?"

"Because I... er... helped Mr Knollys to fall into the sparrowgrass bed when it was newly dunged, and I frightened the Poulterer and I shot a crossbow bolt into Mr Bunscombe."

Both of the men exploded into laughter. Robin felt hot in the face. "My lord father said I was bored and he would give me something to do."

"And so he 'prenticed ye to the stablemaster?" That was the slim one.

"Yes. I like it. And I'm learning to ride a lot better."

"Now, d'ye think yer dad would be sad if ye died?"

Robin was confused. "Yes, of course he would."

"Or got killed in an accident, say?"

Robin went still because his heart was hammering again. "Yes sir."

"Whit if somebody pit a knife in ye and twinned yer soul and yer body?" boomed the fat one, still chuckling.

Robin paused because he didn't want his voice to shake. "Sir, I make no doubt that my lord father would find the murderers and hang them."

A heavy hand clapped his shoulder. "Well said, lad," said the dark slim one. "The thing is, we want some infomation, a wee tidbit of gossip and ye know it. We want ye to tell it tae us."

Suddenly an idea struck Robin like a beam of sunlight. "Yes," he said seriously, "I'll gladly tell ye so long as ye gi' me yer word to keep it a secret."

"We havena tellt ye what it is yet."

"Yes sir, but it's easy to guess, int it? It's about where the Queen of Scots is being kept so ye can break her out of there."

The dark one cocked his head and the fat one sighed.

"That's very good, Rob," said the dark one. "How d'ye make that out?"

"We're in Scotland. You are Scottish lords or headmen. So you want to help your Queen."

"So ye'll tell us if we keep it a secret," said the dark one with a smile intended to be friendly.

"Yes... ay."

, "I'll keep the secret till ma dying day. Ye will too, won't ye, Big Jock?"

"Oh aye, Ah will."

"Yes, my father said I should keep my ears open for any tales of the Queen of Scots and then he told me where she was and said it was a secret. But since you are gentlemen, if ye promise not to tell anybody, I'm sure he won't mind."

"So where is she?"

"In Ponty... Pontefix?" said Robin making heavy weather of the name.

"Pontefract castle?" asked the fat reiver.

"I think so, sir."

The two exchanged significant looks. "Right," said the fat one, "Wat, take the lad back upstairs. Oh, by the way, Rob,..."

"Master Carey."

"Eh?"

"If I am your prisoner, by the laws of chivalry, you should call me by my title which is Master Carey."

The fat one took breath to speak but the dark one smiled an odd smile.

"Really?"

More inspiration came to Robin, from his sporadic reading of the easier bits of knightly romances on days when it was pouring with rain. "Yes, and if you want a knightly ransom for me, you should send to my Lord Hunsdon and tell him you have me."

"Up ye go, Master Carey," said the dark-haired one while the fat one sputtered in the background.

"Yes sir," said Robin and trotted up the stairs in front of Wat and was shown into a little room just beyond the main bedchamber, perhaps an arming room though empty now. But there was a door and Wat bolted it shut.

There was a straw pallet on the floor and a couple of blankets and a pillow that looked just as hard as the ones in Berwick. Robin found he was shaking all over and wondered why and he felt very tired and wondered about that too. He thought his idea had worked. And anyway it was a good idea to talk about ransom. He was sure his father would pay something for him, perhaps not as much as for his eldest brother George, but something.

He could hear the two reivers arguing down in the courtyard, shouting from the fat one, a flat murmur from the other one.

"D'ye think they'll kill us, Rob," asked Danny who was sitting on the pallet with his knees bent up and his arms wrapped around them.

"No... nay," said Robin more positively than he felt. "Not if they think they can get some money for us."

Danny looked even more worried. "But me mam doesn't have any money."

Robin sat down next to him on the pallet and patted him on the back. "Don't worry, my father has lots of money."

"Oh. I suppose he does."

"And I won't leave without you. You're like my squire in a story. It wouldn't be honourable to go without you."

"Yes, and anyway..." Danny began but the door opened and Wat came in carrying a tray with bread and cheese and ale on it. He seemed grumpy, grunted at them and left without a word, slamming the door and putting the bolt across.

They ate because they were very hungry. Some light came in through the arrowslit, but the room was bare except for a chamber pot. Danny wanted to scratch something called a draughts board on the floorboards. Robin gave him one of the metal aiglets on his hose to do it with. Then they played draughts with bits of bread and cheese. Robin had the cheese side and started off losing every time but then Danny started losing sometimes which made it much more fun.

They had neither candle nor fire and they played until it got too dark to see. Then they went to bed on the pallet and huddled up because despite it being summer it was cold in the stone room once the sun had gone.

Robin remembered something and got out of bed to gabble through the Our Father while Danny watched with interest.

"Don't you pray?" Robin asked as he got back under the blankets.

Danny shrugged. "Me mam prays sometimes though she says she doesn't think the Lord God will be interested in the likes of her. Wat says praying is for girls and his right hand is unblessed anyway, so there's no point."

"Unblessed?"

"Where they cover the baby's right hand with a cloth when he's being baptised so it will be strong and no sin in fighting."

That sounded odd to Robin. Why was there any sin to fighting, so it was in a just cause? He had also prayed for his father to come and rescue him, and for him and Danny to be back in Berwick as soon as may be. It was clear the Lord Jesus would be in full agreement with all of it, especially the bit about his father killing all the reivers. He thought of Lord Jesus as like a particularly powerful uncle with a good sword and the angels as His henchmen, so he asked for His help as well in case his father was too busy.

Despite it being a day off, Solomon Musgrave was in the saddle again well before dawn on the Saturday, and trotted out of Berwick gate on Nelly who had had a day to rest since being returned to Carlisle under another despatch rider on Thursday. He wasn't riding post though, so he took it easy as he went, waving at the men on the gate who let him through the postern without even asking his business, they were so used to him.

He was going to Carlisle with no despatch bag and no warrant and might lose a day's pay if he wasn't back by Monday, but he was going because of what young Hugh Collingwood had told him as they left the boys in the evening. Hugh had said that the bright-looking chestnut-haired lad who called himself Rob was Lord Hunsdon's son, legitimate and everything. Hugh had also told him about Wat Sadler and how he wanted to know where the Queen of Scots was and that the man was notorious for being in with some of the worst of the Scottish reiving surnames, especially the Scotts and the Kerrs, and untrustworthy to boot. Solomon had not liked the sound of any of it and had decided that he would take a trip to Carlisle and try to warn Lord Hunsdon that his son might be heading for trouble.

He couldn't cover the nearly seventy miles to Carlisle in one day on just one horse and didn't plan to try. He had given Nelly plenty of fodder before he left and he knew a place in Hexham where he could stay and get her fed again that night. The main problem was the usual one of being a lone horseman in the Middle or West March where everyone was a horsethief or married to one. The East March was upset and trouble starting there too, but he thought the Humes and the Widdringtons still had a good grip on it. He rode fast but not too fast, looking around him all the time for signs of trouble, herds being moved, groups of horsemen riding fast, taking detours through woods and copses when he knew them well enough.

There were a few pack horse lines plodding along the Giants' Road, but of course he passed them. Sometimes he walked alongside them for a while, to give Nelly a rest, and asked them if they had heard where Lord Hunsdon, the new Governor of Berwick might be, but they hadn't. A lot of them hadn't heard of him at all. Which of course was what you would expect, since they were often coming from Newcastle. And so he would sometimes talk to pack train drovers going the other way, but they didn't know Lord Hunsdon either. One of them told him a long tale of the much-feared Lord Scrope being out in his Wardenry of the West March, looking at the defences and Sir John Forster, the Middle March Warden, as well.

He got to Hexham late in the amber Saturday evening, remembered the football match planned for Sunday in Berwick and sighed because he liked playing football, stayed at the

post inn warrantless and went straight to bed since he would have to show his warrant if he wanted supper and if he had supper at full price, mine host would wonder why.

He was up and out before dawn again, breakfasting on a couple of apples and some stale bread, and decided to run beside Nelly for a while in case he needed her to run for her life after he was in the West March. Nelly snorted and seemed pleased at the game, shaking her head at him and leaving him behind a couple of times as if to show him what she could do if she chose. He let her beat him in the race, and caught up as she was cropping some nice rich grass on a riverbank once and some unharvested oats by a burnt out farm house the second time.

And then as he slipped his feet out of the stirrups and dropped to the ground the third time, she stopped so suddenly he nearly fell on his face, and she whinnied loud and long, snorting with her ears back as she glared at a nearby hillside.

"Ay?" he said to her, and was back in the saddle again, shortening his reins and jamming his statute cap as far down on his head as he could.

She didn't wait for his signal, but broke to a gallop immediately and he leaned forward and got his arse up and his shoulders down so she could run and run she did.

He heard shouts behind him and an arrow thrummed past him into the ground and he shouted at Nelly, "Ay, lass, ay! Come on!" He didn't use his whip, what need with such a willing beast?

He took one look behind him, three ugly-looking men, in jacks and helmets, but only two hobbies between them and the hobby that was carrying two was already struggling. That was where the arrow had come from, the man at the back was nocking another arrow to his short bow, not a longbow obviously, that was an infantry weapon. The double-ridden hobby suddenly balked and slowed and Solomon thought he had hurt his hindquarters, carrying two heavy lumps like that. Were they Grahams or Armstrongs or Elliots? He didn't know, although he was betting Grahams because they were the worst reivers and the ones he most didn't want to meet.

He jinked Nelly from side to side to make the shot harder, and gave her her head and she dived into the trees and bushes of a little burst of woodland, scrambling sharply downhill and into the water, out of it again and Solomon had an idea as he saw the softness of the mud and the lumpiness of the ground. He was off Nelly's back and he led her as deep as he could get into the gorse and brambles and made her lie down, then covered her with leaves and lay down next to her with his arm over her neck and his head close to hers. He had his dagger out

in case it all went wrong. She was breathing hard with running, but she soon slowed her breathing and they waited.

The men came trampling through the woodland cursing and arguing about the hobby and whether it was lame or just shamming. The man with the bow had an arrow nocked and stared about, the other two were shouting at each other.

Solomon watched. Where had they left the sound hobby then?

He listened to the shouting as it got more distant and came nearer. They came close enough to touch him where he and Nelly lay and Nelly never twitched, though her eyes were wide with fear and her ears right back.

"We'll gang back tae Bothwell then," said one, "tell him Forster's on the trod and we need more men tae do it."

"He wilna like it."

"I dinna like it..."

The men moved off through the bushes and Solomon spotted a patch of brown hide through the leaves. He came carefully to his feet, got Nelly up and led her forwards. There they were, one marked with sweat and holding his back leg up, both cropping the grass, but neither were hobbled. Solomon tipped into a run, reached the other hobby, leaped on and rode the rearing and crow-hopping, turned the nag's head and got him going at a canter in the right direction. Nelly followed and he grabbed her reins again and stuck his heels in.

"Hey, ye bastard!" came a shout from behind him and the sound of running feet, the whipchunk of an arrow in front of him and on a crazy whim, he leaned down to it and pulled it out of the soft earth with his other hand.

Solomon laughed and waved the arrow at them as he galloped off on the hobby with Nelly running along behind shaking her head and he got some serious speed out of the hobby while Nelly made it clear she was dawdling, being a hobby-thoroughbred cross and stronger and faster than anything but an actual Arab.

With two horses Solomon could gallop and swap horses as they tired. He came into Carlisle at around noon on the Sunday. The men at the gate knew him but he shouted at them that he needed to find the Warden at once and thanks be to God, one of them just pointed at the cathedral and let him gallop Nelly and the hobby he had named Brownie up to the cathedral.

There were a lot of horses tethered outside which was a good sign. Was it possible that Lord Hunsdon had come to Carlisle for Sunday worship? Solomon found a stable lad watching the horses and paid him a penny to walk Nelly and Brownie up and down so they could cool down.

He came into the cathedral to hear the final blessing being intoned so he grabbed off his cap and waited and then as the Bishop and his acolytes processed out, asked one of the men standing at the back if Lord Hunsdon was there.

"Ay, is there a message for him?"

"In a manner of speaking."

The man nodded and moved through the crowd to the front where the Lord Warden was standing with his henchmen, and another lord, with a long face and a short beard, in black velvet and a cuirass. The lord in black velvet turned at the man's whisper and came towards Solomon.

This was the first time Solomon had met Hunsdon face to face and he wondered if he should bend the knee or something to such a high lord, but in the end he just grabbed off his cap and ducked his head. He explained about Rob and Wat Sadler and then added in what the maybe-Grahams had said about Bothwell who was the Queen of Scot's husband.

There was a long silence and he instantly started worrying in case Lord Hunsdon would be angry with him for coming all the way from Berwick on such vague grounds. He shouldn't have done it and now he would lose at least a day's pay, which wasn't a disaster because he wasn't married, but meant he might have to eat castle rations for a time...

"What's your name, goodman?"

"Solomon Musgrave, my lord."

"Ah, you're a despatch rider."

"Ay my lord, but yesterday was me day off."

"And you spent it riding seventy odd miles because you were concerned about my son?"

"Er... I didna like the sound of..."

"No, nor do I." He turned to the Lord Warden, Henry Scrope, a beaky man with an iron mouth. "Can you lend me some men, my lord?"

An hour later Solomon was riding out of Carlisle gate on a very nice young hobby. Nelly and Brownie were in Carlisle stables eating their heads off. Nelly knew the stables well and was friends with several of the horses there. She would come back to Berwick in due course and Solomon had been promised a finders fee for the hobby who had an old and faded Ridley brand on him, which would save him from the castle rations for quite a while.

Around him were ten men of the Carlisle castle garrison, one of them in fact a nephew of his, and ahead my Lord Hunsdon and his Sergeant at Arms carrying his banner. They stayed in the Hexham post-inn again where Hunsdon's despatch bag caught up with him. He came to find Solomon where he was stuffing his face in the common room.

Hunsdon had a peculiar smile on his face and he was carrying a piece of cheap paper that had large uneven letters written on it and several blots, very different from the usual cramped Secretary hand. "Hey, Musgrave! My son was in agreement with you and took steps to warn me," he said. "He somehow smuggled this letter about Wat Sadler into Mr Purvis's despatch bag."

"Did he now?" said Solomon in wonder, "That's not easy to dae with no money."

"Indeed," said Hunsdon, looking down at the letter with the same peculiar smile. "You never can tell. And it turns out an old friend is in Berwick and helped him. Extraordinary!"

"He's a lad o' parts, right enough."

The proud smile got wider and then suddenly stopped. "I think we'll simply arrest this man Wat Sadler and put him to the question. That'll keep it all simple."

Hunsdon was in a hurry, so they arrived at Berwick on Monday to find the place buzzing like a kicked beehive with the entire garrison forming up and ready to leave. Mr Heron's face was like granite but Sir John's face was furrowed with worry and both men were in armour, Mr Heron in a jack with his family quilting and Sir John in an old cuirass. Both their jaws dropped when they saw Hunsdon riding up from the gate with his company and Sir John came forward at once.

"My lord, how did you know?"

"I have my sources," said Lord Hunsdon impenetrably with a glance at Solomon, "Now perhaps you could tell me exactly what happened, hey?"

Robin woke at the first cockcrow from the chickencoops down in the bailey, the sky was only lightening. He put another mark with his useful aiglet next to the two already there, which meant that today was Tuesday. He thought that he had never been so bored in his life. He would have welcomed Mr Knollys and his pens and incomprehensible Latin and he missed the Sergeant at Arms too. For the first time in his life he had slept badly and he still felt tired from the night being so short, as he yawned and scratched his head.

Out of sheer boredom, he said the Our Father quite slowly and realised it was about quite practical things like bread. There was a bit at the end he didn't quite understand, something about trespasses. That was when you went on some other lord's land without asking permission and apparently you were supposed to forgive people who did it on your land too, but he didn't see why forgiveness was so important. He wasn't sure what temptation was either but at least the bit about delivering him from evil was a good idea so he said that bit loudly and slowly before gabbling off the rest of it. Then he got up. They had moved the

pallet to the other side of the little room to be away from the draught from the arrowslit. There was only the chamberpot to stand on, so he stood carefully on it because it was full and it helped him get a leg up to the arrowslit's sill where he could sit and stare out at the countryside around.

The sun was coming up on his left so that arrowslit faced south and east, to the small chequerboard fields and the copses dotted about, and the larger meadows where a few horses and calves grazed. There weren't so many cattle or sheep which Danny had explained as if it was totally obvious. Apparently on the Border the men took many of the cattle and sheep up to higher pasture in the hills so the lower pastures could recover.

Was that something moving in the eaves of the woodland? He rubbed his eyes and looked again, couldn't see anything and so he thought it was a trick of the dawn light. He jumped down from the arrow slit.

He felt quite sick because this would be another day of nothing happening. Why hadn't the headmen let them go once he told them where the Queen of Scots was? Only he hadn't, he had lied about it. But did they mean to keep him and Danny in the little arming room until they had found out if she was at Pontefract or not? That was a bad thought, because she wasn't there of course - she was at Bolton. Maybe they wanted to use him and Danny as hostages too?

He paced up and down, jiggling and spinning, the boredom lying heavy in his stomach. He had never known such a long day as yesterday. Every time he had looked at the sun to see where it was, it had been in the same place, the shadows hardly changed, everything went dead slowly even when Danny and him were playing at being tumblers and trying to stand on their hands and doing somersaults. He had heard of people going mad because they were locked up and he thought it might happen to him if there were too many more days like Monday.

He had thought quite a lot about what to do when his father came. One thing he shouldn't do was let the two headmen get their hands on him and Danny because then they could threaten to hurt them and maybe get Lord Hunsdon to go away again, which would be a defeat and insupportable. Or perhaps make Lord Hunsdon pay a big ransom too. That would be an even worse defeat.

Danny was awake, sitting and hugging his knees again. At least Robin wasn't on his own. That would have been awful, much much worse.

He climbed up to the arrow slit again, using the rough stones which was harder than using the chamber pot and a bit more interesting.

Downstairs they could hear the doors to the barnekin opening and then the doors in the thicker wooden fence around the pele tower and its bailey. Robin tried to see what was happening downstairs and if there was food coming, because there hadn't been a lot of it, and no pottage, just bread and occasionally cheese and small ale. He listened to his stomach's song of complaint, squinted against the light from the sun. Once again there was something strange going on far away - the edges of the wood were moving again.

What looked like ants suddenly broke from the wood and swarmed to the outer gates. The men inside tried to shut them, but the ants got nearer quickly, became horses and riders who galloped to the gate and exchanged blows, then pushed the outer gates open. The inner gates slammed, the shouting got louder, somebody came running up the spiral stairs shouting incomprehensibly in Scotch and Robin heard the voice of the fat one cursing next door and the creak as he got out of the big four poster and then he heard the slim reiver shouting too.

Robin's heart was thundering happily and he started to laugh.

"It's me dad!" he shouted. "A Carey! A Carey!"

"Are ye sure?" asked Danny hopping up and down, trying to see out of the arrow slit.

"Well somebody's attacking them, lots," said Robin. He crawled up the sill and squeezed his head and shoulders into the slit, looked out. There was a narrow ledge, much too narrow for a man. He laughed again. "Come on, we've got to get out."

"We canna, the door willna open."

"No, out of the arrowslit."

"Oh Jesus."

"There's a ledge here, look..."

"But we can't get down, we might fall..."

"No, we won't. Come on, we have to get out on it."

Danny looked down, swallowed hard. "You first."

Robin went up to the slit, turned sideways, put one leg on the ledge, squeezed sideways through and his other leg followed. He held on to the arrow slit and moved along the ledge a bit. Danny was skinnier than him and got through easier, then held on with both hands to the other side of the slit.

Seconds later they heard the slam of the door opening and the fat one thundering in.

"Qhat happened tae them? Qhair..."

"They're out the arrowslit," said the slim one, "So we cannae dicker for 'em."

Suddenly Robin could make out two flags. One was the City of Berwick, and the other one was flapping a bit, it was... it was... It was three roses of the field, on a bar sable...

"My lord!" he shrieked, "My lord father, I'M HERE!" He was clinging to the arrowslit with his right hand and jumping up and down waving his left. "Hoorah! Kill them all, my lord!"

Nobody heard him. There was utter confusion in the barnekin with some of the garrison men chopping the gate with axes, some were loading arquebuses, rather slowly, more were climbing the inner walls on ladders.

An arm and hand reached out of the arrowslit, feeling around for something to catch. That belonged to the dark headman. He caught Robin's sleeve and Robin nearly fell off the narrow ledge trying to break free, until Danny leaned over and bit the reiver's hand so he squawked and let go.

Then there was a loud boom downstairs as the garrison men attacked the door of the pele tower.

"My lords Cessford and Buccleuch," came a shout from outside. "Produce my lord Hunsdon's sons and let them go."

"God rot it!" said the dark one and they could hear their feet on the stair as they went to the parapet above. Robin and Danny stayed where they were, clinging to the little ledge, because the view was better and they weren't sure how they would get back in.

"Is the whole garrison out?" Danny asked, squinting at the confusion down below.

"Yes," said Robin and cheered. "Look, see the banner? And my father is there too, hooray! My lord, Sir John, Mr Heron, we're up here!"

This time somebody waved down in the bailey. Two men carried a long ladder and set it carefully in place under the arrowslit and it came to just short of it. One man climbed up slowly and it was Solomon Musgrave, the despatch rider, with Hugh's elder brother, Matty behind him with a spear. A couple of arrows zipped past but they ignored it.

"You first, Danny," said Robin chivalrously, really because he enjoyed looking out over everything laid out below him. Danny squatted, put his arms down to Solomon and was plucked off the ledge and put on Matty's back to climb down. Robin scrambled down to the ladder and went onto Solomon's back.

Sir John and Mr Heron were standing by the door which was now broken and men crowding in and shouting and a clattering and clanging inside. Sir John was wearing a cuirass and morion and still looked like your favourite uncle, whereas Mr Heron was in a jack and plain helmet and looked very angry and dangerous. Robin looked around for his father, didn't see him and wondered where he was? If his banner was there on the field of battle, then he was too but... Was he hurt? Was he killed?

It made Robin's stomach swoop and he felt so sick he nearly puked. It was possible that his father could be killed, he knew that, though he also knew that his father was a great man and the idea was impossible but...

He forced himself to listen to Sir John's question. "Why did they take you boys?" he asked.

Robin bowed to both of them. "Th... they wanted to know where the Queen of Scots was being kept," he said, the sudden worry about his father making it hard for him to talk. "I told them she was in Pontefract."

"But..." said Sir John and then shut his mouth and nodded. "Very good."

"And I said my father would probably ransom me so they should tell him where we were."

Sir John snorted and Mr Heron looked grim.

A big man in a cuirass and morion and black velvet came out of the tower's ground floor, carrying a bloody sword.

"God damn it to hell and perdition!" roared Lord Hunsdon, "Cessford and Buccleuch have run! Can we get some men after them..."

Sir John stepped forward. "My lord, we are in Scotland," he said. "Without any doubt there are a lot of Scots and Kerrs on their way here... And we have your sons."

Robin ran to his father and jumped into his arms, bumping his head on the hard cuirass but sticking there because Lord Hunsdon dropped his sword and grabbed him. Danny was standing a little back, staring up at Lord Hunsdon with his mouth open.

"Robin!" His father laughed. "Are you all right?"

"We climbed out of the arrowslit so they couldn't get us...."

"I know, I was trying to get up the tower to you before they found a spear to knock you off that little ledge with."

"I came down a ladder with Solomon Musgrave."

Lord Hunsdon laughed again. "Good, good, so they didn't hurt you?"

"No, my lord except that it was very very boring..."

For some reason everybody laughed at that, my lord Hunsdon, Sir John and Mr Heron. Somebody in a jack and helmet came for orders and Sir John turned to my lord.

"Ay," said Lord Hunsdon, "fire it and teach them a lesson."

He saw Danny then, backing off and looking frightened, and squatted down to him.

"You, I think, are Danny, Cicely Swanders' son?"

Danny nodded, not making a sound. My lord Hunsdon stripped off his gauntlet and held out his hand. "Delighted to make your acquaintance, young Daniel." Danny shook my lord's hand, his mouth hanging open.

Mr Heron was already ordering the men back on their horses, sorting them into troops. Robin went up in front of his father on Beauregard and Danny went in front of Mr Heron. All the garrison troops sorted themselves out to go home with their booty of the few calves and horses they had found and some insight of pots and pans, though not much. As the flames started licking the sides of the pele tower and the wooden huts and sheds in the barnekin, the garrison men formed into lines in a rough column, four abreast. Almost all the horses were there, Robin noticed, plus some strangers that must have come from farms near Berwick.

Robin was very happy to be at the front and Danny too. They grinned at each other. It wasn't scary any more, it was exciting: Robin felt as if he was already a captain with his cavalry behind him ready to charge into battle at any time...

"Hey," said my lord Hunsdon behind him, looking around with satisfaction at the burning pele tower and the men and women running away over the hills to the north. "Quite an adventure, what?"

Robin grinned up at him. "Just like in knightly tales."

After they had got back to Berwick, my lord wanted to hear exactly what had happened and so Robin and Danny told him in the Governor's lodging at Berwick, with Sir John and Mr Heron listening too. The Earl of Bedford had already gone home the week before.

"Nobody has found Wat Sadler, either as a casualty or a corpse, have they?"

"No, my lord," said Sir John, "but we'll put him at the horn in his absence for March treason."

Lord Hunsdon nodded.

"Good!" said Danny. "I hate him."

"Casualties?"

"We were very lucky. Only two men dead and three hurt," said Mr Heron.

"How did you find out which tower we were in so quickly?" asked Robin.

"Sir John knows all the towers hereabouts," said Mr Heron, "and we went to one of the Scotts' towers first, but then he minded him of a new one that was Cessford's that was near to Berwick and that was the one."

Lord Hunsdon was frowning. "Robin," rumbled his father, "I think it's too dangerous for you to stay here. I'll be sending you home next week to Hunsdon."

Robin's eyes were almost on stalks with horror. What? Go home and be bored at Hunsdon manor? It was a stupid idea.

"B...but my lord!" he stuttered. "B... but I like it here!"

"Do you really?"

"Yes, my lord." He looked around the table. Sir John was staring down and Mr Heron was glaring straight ahead, face blank, and yet something told Robin that his being in the stables was a step up for Mr Heron, and his going home, would be a set down. A brilliant idea almost knocked him sideways. "I mean, I miss Hugh Collingwood that told Solomon about Wat, but..."

"The boy's a thief," said Mr Heron.

"If it please you, sir, he isn't. It was wrong he lost his place because Francis hid the things in his bedding to get revenge because Hugh beat him in a fight."

"Really?" said Sir John.

"Yes. I know he did because Francis took my spoon, and you gave it back to me, Mr Heron, because it had my lord's crest on it and you said it had been in Hugh's bedding."

Sir John and Mr Heron exchanged looks again. Mr Heron spoke slowly. "I'm willing to give young Hugh a second chance," he said, "I may have been... er... overhasty."

"Thank you, sir," said Robin as he beamed up. "You won't regret it."

"What am I to tell your mother, then?" asked Lord Hunsdon thoughtfully. There was a short silence as Robin realised that he would have to keep his mouth shut to his mother about the splendid adventure he had just had, which was a pity.

"Tell her about what?" he asked artlessly and Lord Hunsdon barked with laughter while Sir John smiled.

"I must think on it, Robin," said Lord Hunsdon, serious again. "We simply can't have a repetition of these last few days."

"My lord, I have several ideas for making Berwick more secure," said Mr Heron. "We have just given the Scots a bloody nose for their pains. And I think, although it's early days yet, young Master Carey is shaping...er... adequately."

Robin bowed to him in thanks for this support and his father looked surprised.

"Well that's very good to hear."

The wasp-eating expression returned.

"That's as may be," said Mr Heron. "He'll need a new statute cap, since he's lost the old one."

They were told they could go and Danny and Robin ran down to the hall and found a supper laid out there for them, although the stableboys had already eaten. One of the servants brought them a whole serving dish of stew and they laid into it with a will, ignoring the sallet

one of the women had brought them for some reason. Solomon Musgrave turned up and they heard the tale of his ride to Carlisle and how clever Nelly had been and how Solomon had hidden from five Grahams in a swamp. When they couldn't eat any more they went out and found Hugh and Tom waiting for them on special licence and Tom showed them a magnificent den behind the sheds where there were nettles and gorse but once you got through them, the gorse had a hollow centre stinking strongly of fox with the traces of an old fire in the middle. They stayed there, being lords and headmen and giving each other orders and refighting the battle for the pele tower until the sun had gone down and then they ran back to the hayloft in the bright evening. Robin stopped Danny before he went up the ladder and they squatted down behind a haycart.

"I heard what Sir John shouted," he said. "When we were at the arrow slit. He said, 'produce my lord Hunsdon's sons and let them go.' And he said it again to my Lord Hunsdon. 'We have your sons.' Two of them... us."

Danny looked at the ground as if he was interested in the ants rushing around.

"Yes," he said, "me mam says..."

"She knew my father nine years ago?"

"Yes. In London."

"Like in the Bible, when Adam knew Eve?"

"Yes," whispered Danny.

Robin contemplated this for a while. "But she wasn't married to my father, was she?" he asked, just to make sure it was right that you could have a baby if you weren't married, just like a dog or a cat.

"Of course not," said Danny, "He's a great lord and cousin of the Queen."

"Half-brother," Robin corrected.

"What?"

"Really he's her half-brother," Robin explained. "My big brother George told me last Christmas when he was drunk. Everybody at court knows my father is really Good King Henry's son. That's why the Queen trusts him so much more than anyone else at court."

Danny started laughing. "So he's a bastard like me?"

"Shh, don't say that, it's rude. But yes."

Both of them were quiet for a while, watching the ants as they rushed around like men seen from an arrowslit.

"How old are you, Danny?"

"I was born around Christmas in 1560, me mam says."

"So I'm the eldest," said Robin with great satisfaction, "I'm a summer baby, but the same year. That's wonderful! I've always wanted a little brother."

Very solemnly, they shook hands.

The end.