

A PEST OF A BOY (Young Carey 1)

By P F Chisholm (Patricia Finney)

"Sir, sir, my lord!" It sounded like the man was on the verge of tears. "May I speak to you please, sir. Now?"

Henry Carey, Lord Baron Hunsdon turned to see his family tutor running towards him, limping, his soft scholar's cap lost, his hair on end and covered with something brown, sticky and smelly even at that distance, more stains on his gown and hose and a certain look of crazed outrage on his face which tipped Hunsdon off as to what this was about. He sighed deeply.

He had come home to Hunsdon manor after weeks at court where his cousin and half-sister was being even more difficult than usual. He had hoped to get in some hawking, see his wife and take his leave of her before he went north to Berwick-upon-Tweed and his new governorship.

"All right, Mr Knollys," he said, "What has Robin done now?"

It took a while to find the boy. He wasn't in the stables as he usually was when he escaped from his tutor. He wasn't playing football, he wasn't raiding the kitchens or up in the attics trying to decapitate some stray wooden saint statues with an old bastard sword from the last century that was taller than him, far too heavy but still sharp.

Eventually they tracked Robin down to the river, where a pack of boys ranging in age from seven to eleven and in rank from stableboy to lord, were playing some violent game in the river with a bag of rags. Hunsdon stood and watched for a while, trying to work out what the rules were, if there were any. It seemed that if a boy got the bag of rags he tried to swim to the other side of the river while all the other boys attacked him and tried to drown him. Hunsdon couldn't see any weapons so he assumed that the usual rule in football had been adopted.

Robin had climbed the back of a tall skinny boy who had the bag, got him to drop it by kicking him in the ribs, dived under for it, was grappled on his way up, fended the boys off, swam splashily to the other side of the river where he swarmed up a leaning tree, mother-naked as the day he was born, and did a dance of triumph on a branch, waving the bag and making obscene gestures at his friends who threw mud at him.

Hunsdon turned so that Mr Knollys couldn't see his fond smile. That looked like a good game and he rather wished he could try it himself. He had no doubt who had come up with the idea for it.

"That's my book bag he's got there," came Mr Knollys voice, choked with emotion.

Ah. Yes, it did look like a sodden version of Mr Knollys' proud blue velvet bag in which he carried his texts, Caesar and Virgil and whatnot...

Hunsdon folded his arms.

"Go down and pick up my son's clothes, Mr Knollys," he said.

Knollys scrambled down the bank. He dunked his head in the water to get rid of the stuff on his hair and then picked up Robin's woollen doublet, hose, boots, stockings, hat and shirt, all flung down on the grass amongst the jerkins and breeches and statute caps of the other boys. "Leave the shirt, Mr Knollys," said Hunsdon. A cut-down velvet suit was there as well, Hunsdon noticed and squinted until he could make out a tall skinny boy with sallow skin and a shock of black hair.

Some of the boys had finally noticed Lord Hunsdon and Mr Knollys watching the game. A few crept out of the water, grabbed their clothes and ran, Others stood in the water uncertainly. Young George Clifford, heir to the Earl of Cumberland, waded out and started dressing, despite the way the water ran off him.

Finally Robin stopped dancing and giving figs and flicking v-signs for long enough to notice that his father was watching and Mr Knollys was now actually weeping at what had happened to his bookbag. Robin's expression was a very funny combination of guilt and defiance, but Hunsdon managed to keep scowling.

He stood on the upper bank of the river with his legs apart and his arms crossed while Robin dog-paddled towards him.

"Bring me Mr Knollys' bookbag," ordered his father in awful tones. Robin obediently paddled back, grabbed the bag from the branch and swam back with it, puffing a little. He waded out, found his shirt, dried himself a bit on it and then put it on. He looked around for his other clothes but didn't see Knollys who was now standing behind my lord.

Robin looked up at his father and grinned, and as usual Lord Hunsdon had terrible trouble to keep from smiling back. But no matter how charmingly penitent he would certainly be, Hunsdon could not allow this kind of treatment of their family tutor.

"On your knees, boy!" he roared and Robin dropped resignedly to his knees, probably trying to calculate how many strokes of the birch he would get.

"My lord father," he began, then he saw Mr Knollys and his face became a pantomime of surprise. "Mr Knollys, what brings you here?" His tone was a masterpiece of fake innocence and a fair amount of insolence.

"You know very well, Robin! You... you caused me to fall in a pit half-filled with dung..." began Knollys.

Hunsdon rolled his eyes. "Enough," he said. Then to the saturnine boy, "Lord George, are you staying with us?"

"No, my lord," he said, "I'm staying with some of my mother's cousins in Ross-on-Wye." He squeezed water out of his breeches. "I brought Bucephalos," The black pony and two less pretty companions were peacefully eating their way through a hedge. Clifford's two grooms were now on their feet, chewing bread and cheese; one let Bucephalos's stirrups down while the other saw to the other two horses.

"My respects and compliments to your lady mother," said Hunsdon in an iron voice. Robin was squeezing out his hair and climbing barefoot up the bank to be nearer to his father.

"Thank you, my lord, and the same to your lady wife." Clifford, who was two years older than Robin, mounted his horse with a reasonably accomplished steed-leap, clapped his heels in immediately and galloped away, followed by his grooms at a canter.

Hunsdon looked around. There weren't any other horses or attendants and the sound of muted sniggering and soprano challenges filtered through to him as the other boys trotted home through the copse.

Robin wisely went to his knees again once his father's eye fell on him once more. Hunsdon resisted the impulse to give him a thick ear and be done with it. He really had to take sterner measures. It wasn't fair to Mr Knollys that his life should be made such a misery by his young pupil.

Robin trotted ahead of his father over the stubbled field and along the little path to the orchard, trying not to wince when he stubbed his bare toes on a stone.

Hunsdon looked across at the small mews longingly as they passed through the stableyard and went up to the house through the rose garden. His lady wife was out visiting, and in any case was far too experienced a mother of boys to interfere. Besides Robin had been breeched the year before and was officially out of his mother's tutelage.

He sighed and headed for the small room he used as a study when he was home, although it was really the steward's office and full of tallysticks recording the rents, and a worn abacus. Hunsdon went in, pushing Robin by his shoulder, Mr Knollys limping behind.

Hunsdon sat behind the desk, moved a pile of receipts for horsefeed. Robin went to his knees again, peeking up at his father from behind the desk, with a grin hiding under the serious expression. Hunsdon sighed again and then got down to business. "Hmphm! Stand up so I can see you, Robin."

Robin stood up and stood there nonchalantly in his lamentably muddy shirt. How had it got so dirty? "I didn't..." he began.

"Shut up!" said Hunsdon, thinking longingly of his lovely Fatima, fresh out of moult and his favourite falcon. Maybe he could fly her at the lure once he got finished with this. "Mr Knollys, please would you tell me again exactly what Robin has done this time."

It was a long sad tale, involving spectacular cheekiness from Robin, the theft of the bookbag, Mr Knollys' pride and joy, a long chase around the garden, through the orchard, round the kitchen garden where Robin had run directly across what looked like a normal flowerbed but when Mr Knollys followed, he found it was in fact a new-dug sparrowgrass bed, half a yard deep and newly dunged and covered with a light thatch of thin branches by... someone. The branches had broken, Mr Knollys had fallen in and twisted his ankle. And now his bookbag was ruined, the books inside sodden and at least several pounds worth of classical knowledge destroyed.

Hunsdon let the silence hang, which didn't worry Robin at all. His face looked penitent which his father knew was a lie. Robin had never been truly penitent in his life. The whole operation - complete with sparrowgrass bed - or as some pretentious people called it, asparagus - showed excellent foresight, planning and nigh-perfect execution. What could he do with the boy? Beating had never had any effect on him as Knollys had proven. Sending him to bed now with nothing to eat until the morrow hardly seemed serious enough and in any case would only produce another cunning raid on the kitchens where the cook liked him and the scullery boys worshipped him.

"So how did the sparrowgrass bed come to be covered over with thin branches, Robin?" Hunsdon asked.

"I have no idea, my lord," Robin answered, radiating total innocence.

Hunsdon supposed he could beat a truthful answer out of the boy, but truth to tell, he didn't want to, despite Robin's outrageous behaviour. He sometimes felt guilty at how bad a father he was, being so unwilling to beat the sin out of the boy, but frankly he simply couldn't do it.

"Go to your room, Robin," he said. "No, wait, I'll come with you."

"Why, my lord?"

"To be sure you bloody-well go there. Mr Knollys, I can only apologise for my youngest son's treatment of you. Please indent Mr Bunscombe for the cost of replacing the books and the bag and of course any clothes you can't clean properly."

"My lord, it might come to as much as five pounds?"

Hunsdon winced inwardly. "Yes, Mr Knollys, I expect it will."

"I'll order them from Oxford," said Mr Knollys sounding much happier. "Perhaps I can get a special deal from the University Press..."

Carey was staring into space and paying no attention to any of this.

"Perhaps little Philadelphia will be an easier pupil without her elder brother to lead her astray," mused Lord Hunsdon.

"Er... perhaps, my lord."

"Hmphm," said Hunsdon.

He gripped Robin's shoulder and they went upstairs to the small chamber that Robin shared with his elder brother Edmund. Hunsdon checked the window and found no rope, checked under the bed and found the rope, which he confiscated.

"My lord, do you mean me to stay here?" Robin asked in a voice thick with horror.

"Yes."

"All day?"

"Yes,"

"But what will I do?"

"You could read the Bible and repent you of your sins,"

"But... but what will I *do*?"

That was promising. Was Robin more afraid of boredom than a beating?

"I've told you."

"But... but..."

"If I get any more nonsense from you, Robin, you can stay in your room for a week. Meanwhile, I will make enquiries and consider what is best to be done."

And Lord Hunsdon marched out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

He went down to the kitchen garden to talk to the gardener, a Welshman called ap Pugh, about the mysterious disappearance of three rabbits from the warren. One could be regarded as a natural accident, but three was getting suspicious. Had a fox managed to find his way into the rabbit run or was it perhaps some stray dogs or even owls?

Ap Pugh had three sons, one of whom was about Robin's age. He stood next to his father and looked guilty and still had damp hair. From the boy's avoidance of Hunsdon's eye, it was

easy to tell who had provided intelligence of the new asparagus bed and probably who had thatched it as well. He broached the subject; the lad confessed and the father promised to beat his youngest boy well. As he left, Hunsdon said that his young devil of a son was undoubtedly the originator and mover of the mischief and to go easy on the lad.

Hunsdon went back to the main house and saw a white rope of sheets hanging out of Robin's window, with Robin halfway down. Hunsdon went and stood at the bottom of the rope and roared, "Robin, get back into your goddamned room and stay there by God or I'll lock you in the wet larder."

Robin looked over his shoulder and started climbing back up. Lord Hunsdon stood at the bottom until he had heaved himself back into his room, in case the sheets came untied and he fell.

"Untie it at the top," he shouted.

"But..."

"God's teeth, do as I say, you pest of a boy!" Hunsdon bellowed, wondering when he would get to his darling Fatima. The sheets fell in a heap at his feet, he picked them up, carried them in and left them in a bundle at the foot of the stairs.

Then at last he went to the mews and found Fatima, sitting on her perch in her elegant purple hood with Hunsdon's shield stamped in the leather, three roses of the field on a bar sinister, sable. The assistant falconer was there and Hunsdon found his gauntlet and took Fatima off her perch, the bells on her jesses making a musical sound. He picked up the lure but there were no meat scraps so he took Fatima with him and poked his head into the kitchen, looking for some meat trimmings for her.

He saw Goodwife Biltock who had been Robin's wetnurse and had stayed on to look after Philadelphia as well. She was arguing with the cook about the right way to preserve quinces.

"I want a word with you, my lord," she said, "if I may."

Thoroughly trapped, Hunsdon stroked Fatima's breast and asked, "What about, Goody?"

"That young devil, Robin."

"Ah," said Hunsdon and sighed and waited for another tale of evil.

"I had to give him a thick ear yesterday evening for running around in his shirt with a sheet over his head and frightening poor Young Jemmy."

Poor Jemmy was a little wanting in wits but was a good and conscientious poulterer, leading the ducks, chickens and geese from their very solid and foxproof chicken house to the moat and back every day, and keeping off ambitious cats and dogs. Hunsdon sighed again.

"Another foul bill," he said, "Is Young Jemmy all right?"

"Ay," said Goodwife Biltock, "but this morning your son and my darling little Philly were up early and up to something. Philly came back with her kirtle dirty on the inside and her shift was disgusting. I've got it in soak but her little kirtle will have to have a new lining at the least. As for her shift... well, my lord, come and smell it..."

"Er..."

"There's reason in my asking, my lord."

"Oh, very well."

Goody Biltock led the way through the scullery, across the back courtyard where some of the linen was hung up to dry on hurdles and into the small wash house behind, smelling of soap and damp. There was a wooden bucket with a mixture of water and lye in it and Goody Biltock used a pair of wooden tongs to fish Philly's little shift out of it.

The stains were brown, but the smell... Fatima turned her hooded head to it and bated.

"Jesus Christ!" said my lord. "Is that pig shit?"

"Yes, my lord, 'tis and 'tis all over the inside of her kirtle too. I've got a woman unpicking the lining now but I think she'll need a new woollen kirtle regardless. But that's not the worst of it."

"What is?"

"How did she get covered in pig shit, answer me that, eh, my lord?"

Lord Hunsdon's imagination started to work and he paled. "Were they..."

"Playing in the pig styes, ay, my lord. Robin was in his shirt and had her take her kirtle off and then they were daring each other to jump down from the fence in their shirts and run across the pen and back."

"Where were the pigs?"

"Thank God, the boar's penned in the upper orchard now. But there were two sows and half a dozen half-grown pigs and that was the dare. Philly told me what fun it was and how all the little pigs grunted and the older sow came out and stared at them and then Philly fell over while she was running across again and landed in the mud and the sow charged her and it was only because Robin jumped in front of the beast and stamped his feet and punched the sow on the nose that she could get up again and they climbed over the fence again and fell about laughing. Her words, my lord."

Hunsdon shut his eyes and just stood there for a minute. Pigs were very dangerous, especially to children they didn't know well. Toddlers who range into a pigpen might get eaten.

"Whose idea was it?" he rumbled.

Goody Biltock shrugged. "Philly says she don't remember and it's true 'twas her idea to walk across the wash-house roof-ridge like a tumbler last week, but..."

"It was probably Robin's."

"If you ask me, my lord, he'll go to the bad, that boy, you mark my words!"

"I don't doubt it," said Hunsdon and explained the Knollys situation. Goodwife Biltock sucked her teeth for a while and then pronounced,

"My lord, all that's really wrong with him is he's bored. He gets his way all the time with his lovely smile and quick tongue and it's not good for him."

"Very true."

"If he was my son, I'd prentice him to the hardest master I could find," said Goodwife Biltock. "And keep him too busy to play his damned tricks, saving your presence, sir."

"Hm," said Hunsdon.

"His mother does her best when she's here, but he can wrap her round his little finger."

"Me too," said Hunsdon ruefully, "I'm afraid I haven't even beaten him yet for today's exploit, just sent him to his room."

"There's no point beating him, he's not afeared of it."

"That's what I thought. Mr Knollys has done his best with his birch and got nowhere."

"So find a way to keep him busy."

"Thank you, Goody, that's sound advice."

He frowned as he went back through the kitchen, just remembering the meat scraps he was after for Fatima. How could he keep Robin busy? He was already busy. The boy spent the morning doing knightly exercises as well as being tutored, and in the afternoon he exercised his pony, did more lessons and more knightly exercises. None of it seemed to tire him out, especially not the lessons.

He worried about it until he had crossed the moat and gone down through the lower orchard, promisingly full of baby apples, pears and quinces for Annie's delicious quince cheese later in the year. As always, Hunsdon manor smoothed down the edges that London and the court had abraded on him, and resettled his stomach as he looked around with satisfaction at some handsome new-planted hedges on the old common land. By the time he was in the lower meadow, he was whistling. There Fatima's eagerness and grace as she flew at the lure soothed his soul until his wife came back from her visiting, cantering sidesaddle across the fields on her beautiful jennet with her groom and one of her women riding behind her like a comet's tail.

Over a late supper of chicken blankmanger, the remains of a large game pie and a sallet of herbs, my lord Hunsdon sat back and cradled his wine goblet. His wife, Ann Lady Hunsdon, dipped a biscuit into her sweet wine.

"Now then," she said combatively, "What's all this I hear about young Robin in trouble again?"

Hunsdon told the Knollys tale and Ann laughed. "Poor Mr Knollys," she said, "I'll bet all Smithfield to an old boot that Robin will make a fine soldier one day - if he lives that long. No, it was what I heard from Goody Biltock that worries me, my lord, about frightening Young Jemmy. That's unkind and I won't have it."

Hunsdon wondered if Goody Biltock would have told his wife about the pig incident and decided she couldn't have, because otherwise Annie would have come straight to him and insisted that he discipline Robin for leading little Philly into danger. At least. In fact he was prepared to lie to keep his wife from learning the full story of the pig incident.

Hunsdon told her of Goody Biltock's suggestion about keeping him busy. Robin's mother laughed scornfully, adding. "I don't know about that, the Sergeant at Arms is doing his level best and Mr Knollys... well, it's not for want of trying."

"I know."

"We could send him to one of your cousin's households as a page? Or perhaps even to my lord earl of Leicester."

Ann had served at court but really didn't understand it. Hunsdon blanched at the thought.

"Not until he's a little tamed I think, my lady."

"No, I suppose Robert Dudley wouldn't find Robin's antics funny. Perhaps not to the court either."

Hunsdon briefly closed his eyes at the thought of the damage Robin might do to his relationship with his royal half-sister.

"I'm sure that in a few year's time he'll do very well as one of the Gentlemen Pensioners of the Guard, just like John. But not now."

They were silent a moment.

"He really can't stay here and keep terrorising the servants," said Annie musingly. "We'll have none left by Christmas."

The germ of an idea came to Hunsdon, but he dismissed it as being ridiculous. Besides Mr Heron was a busy man with the management of the entire Berwick garrison stables and horse herd in his hands. He shook his head and tried a more sensible notion.

"Perhaps you could take him to Cornwall with you when you go to visit your sister at Caerhays in the autumn?"

By her face, Annie didn't like that idea one bit. "Oh now, that would never do. It's a long way and I'll be making some of the journey by ship," she said.

"Well, Robin would probably enjoy it..."

"If he didn't sink the entire damned ship playing his damned tricks."

"Well... er..."

"And besides, I'd probably end up murdering him."

"Oh, I'm sure you wouldn't..."

"I know, my lord," said Annie nastily. "Why don't you take him to Berwick with you?"

"Out of the question!" said Lord Hunsdon instantly and marched away from the table. Annie tutted and dipped another biscuit in the sweet muscatel.

The next morning, Lord Hunsdon went out with the under-steward to inspect the nearer of his demesnes and listen to his tenants' complaints. It was really quite a pleasant journey with Mr Bunscombe prompting him any time he forgot a man's name and explaining some of the gossip and also calling his attention to matters that required his decision. Mostly he agreed with Mr Bunscombe, ordered fencing and hazel saplings for more enclosures, approved a different kind of wheat to be sown in the damper parts of the great field next year since the current type got mouldy, agreed that two families that had never been known to pay their rent on time to have one more chance and after to be evicted, approved new stronger fencing for the coppices and looked at a great many ewes' hindquarters.

He came back feeling quite happy and relaxed and found Hunsdon manor in an uproar and Annie standing in the main courtyard yelling at everybody as they ran around. Hunsdon stood and stared at her for a moment, heard the word "pigs" and "Robin" and marched forward, picked her up - more effort for him now since he had got older and she had got dumpy - and carried her into the steward's office, where he sat her on the chair and poured some of his own brandy for her.

"My dear..." he began.

"They were playing in the pig's pen!" she shouted at him, gulping her brandy and wiping her mouth like a sailor. "And the sow attacked little Philly!"

"As I understand it, Robin jumped between her and the pig and punched it..."

"It's Robin's bloody fault they were there in the first place. Jesus Christ!"

"And by the way, where is he?"

"When I heard what they were doing yesterday morning, I came running upstairs to give him a piece of my mind..."

Give him the beating of his life, amended Hunsdon.

"... and he was just climbing down the ivy as I got into his room and by the time I got downstairs again he had disappeared and nobody could find him."

He saw that Annie's hand was shaking as she held the empty silver cup, bent down and clasped her to him. "My dear... Philly is perfectly all right. They were laughing about it afterwards..."

"You don't understand," she said, with tears suddenly rolling down her face, "you don't understand what it's like to bear little girl after little girl and each one to sicken and die before she's more than six months old. Philly is... she's my baby, my own little girl, now Katherine is grown..."

"But you have six sons living."

"I have and I'm right proud of them, my lord. But... but I wanted a little girl after all they rough boys, to... to be a sweetmeat, a treasure to me and... and..." she shook her head and took a deep breath. Then she took another one and another and took her hanky out of her sleeve pocket and wiped her face. "God damn it," she said, "and now little Robin's disappeared and no one can find 'im either."

"How did you find out about the pigs?"

"I asked why Philly was wearing her old kirtle from last year and Goody Biltock tried to avoid telling me but I got it out of her anyway."

"Poor Goody Biltock," sympathised Lord Hunsdon and got a glint of a smile from her.

Annie took another swig, found her cup was empty and although Hunsdon offered her more of his French brandy, she sniffed and called for a servingman. Young Jemmy appeared, staring in terror at her and she told him to go to the kitchen, find the second brown bottle in the lock up cupboard by the carving board and bring it to her. She gave him the key off the large bunch she wore on her belt when she was at Hunsdon and Young Jemmy ran off, his large feet clattering.

When Jemmy came back, holding the brown bottle and the key which he gave carefully to Annie first, she smiled at him. "Now then Young Jemmy," she said to him. "I'm sorry I frightened you, are you all right now?"

Jemmy blushed and pulled at his statute cap. "Yes ma'am, my lady," he said, "I counted all the other bottles up and down and side to side and there's seven and forty-nine and two

thousand four hundred and one and there was eleven pans and so one hundred and twenty-one and fourteen thousand six hundred and forty one... "

"And you feel better thanks to all they big numbers?"

"Oh yuss, my lady, you can trust them and chickens too. I'd best go see they're all right." He pulled at his statute cap and ran off and Annie came to Lord Hunsdon and poured from the brown bottle into another silver cup and more for herself. She gave him the cup and as soon as he picked it up he knew it was one of Annie's incomparable flower waters, elderflower or honeysuckle or perhaps quince blossom, which she distilled herself every summer. He inhaled deeply, decided elderflower, and sipped and the flower water burnt a fragrant passage down his throat.

"Well," said my lord, "I suppose we had better find our youngest son."

They turned the manor house and outhouses upside down and Lord Hunsdon had the three hunting dogs sniff for Robin which didn't work because there seemed to be something on the trail that made them sneeze. He bent down and picked some black specks off the grass and sniffed them. He smelled pepper and laughed, then looked around a little guiltily.

Goody Biltock turned over every tub and bucket in the dairy and wash house and found no Robin, and came to Lord Hunsdon, frowning.

"You know, my lord," she said, "I'm thinking he's gone down to the village and is taking shelter with one of his friends and he'll come back later."

Annie was upstairs turning out the linen closets and the clothes chests, but Hunsdon was prepared to bet Robin wouldn't choose to hide somewhere he couldn't escape from.

"How d'ye make that out, Goody?" he asked.

"He ran away before dinner," she said. "He'll be back for food."

Mr Bunscombe arrived and said he had already been to the village making enquiries and there was a suspicious absence of boys Robin's age there, while one of the grannies had said that they were all in the Greater Wood playing at Robin Hood and his Merry Men.

Hunsdon rolled his eyes and Goody Biltock snorted in amusement. "I'm guessing I know which one's Robin Hood."

"Indeed!"

"With you as Sherriff of Nottingham and your lady wife as Guy of Guisbourne."

Lord Hunsdon had to laugh and once they had made sure there was no small body in the moat, they relaxed and Mr Bunscombe went back to his paperwork and Lord and Lady Hunsdon went to the mews to fetch hawks and afterwards rode out near the Greater Wood to see what they could see.

They saw nothing although they heard plenty of suspicious rustles and something that sounded a lot like a suppressed snigger. There wasn't much in the way of game there either, as it had probably all been scared into hiding.

They came back and Lord Hunsdon went into his steward's office to fetch the large packet of letters and documents that had arrived while he was out that morning, direct from Mr Secretary Cecil. He went and sat in the orchard where the light was good and read the cramped secretary script that explained in careful detail, with supporting copy documents, what was going on in Scotland, so far as Sir William or anybody knew, and what was going on in the north of England too. For instance, the Earl of Northumberland was suing the Crown over the rights to the minerals in his hills to the west of Penrith that some foreign miners had started mining under the Queen's and Cecil's protection. It was an expensive case and Northumberland had no chance whatever of winning since there was gold involved, which no doubt would offend the Percy.

As the sun wested in copper glory, Hunsdon's mind returned to his unorthodox solution to his youngest son's terrible behaviour, but he dismissed it again as impossible. Besides, did he want the responsibility of Robin with him in the wild north? He did not.

Lord Hunsdon and his lady ate their supper privately in the parlour and there were more dishes than usual because nobody had been concentrating on dinner earlier. The meal was rather silent, since Robin had still not returned and Ann, Lady Hunsdon was looking worried and pretending that she wasn't. Hunsdon was also pretending that he wasn't surprised and concerned that Robin still had not turned up, which burdened the whole meal and meant neither of them ate much.

Then there was a shout and loud swearing from outside, followed by the sound of a chase and a scuffle and a soprano voice objecting.

My lord and his lady looked at each other and then rose as one from their meal and very nearly ran out to the garden where Mr Bunscombe, a younger and fitter and more cunning man than Mr Knollys, was holding a writhing boy wearing an old jerkin and breeches and a lot of mud on his face. He was holding him by one ear and in the other hand he held a small but serviceable crossbow, discharged. The bolt seemed to be sticking out of Mr Bunscombe's upper arm.

"I've got you, you little bastard poacher, and I'll birch you 'til you bleed..."

Hunsdon sighed. Lady Hunsdon paced forwards and whacked Robin a good buffet across the face so he fell over.

"Get up!" shouted Annie, and lifted her skirts to kick her youngest son. He rolled out of the way and scrambled to his feet. "Did you let Philly play at dares in the pigpen?"

"No, I never..." said Robin unconvincingly, "Well, it was her idea..."

His lady mother knocked him down again. "And did you wound Mr Bunscombe?"

Robin sat up on his elbows and seemed to notice the crossbow bolt in Mr Bunscombe's arm for the first time. His face fell.

"I'm truly sorry, Mr Bunscombe," he said as he climbed to his feet again, and did sound as if he meant it, "I didn't mean to shoot you, I was aiming at a fat buck rabbit... at a fox."

"Mr Bunscombe, come up to my stillroom at once," said Annie, "I'll get the bolt out for you."

Mr Bunscombe was looking at the bolt as if he too had just noticed it. There wasn't very much blood and the sleeve was well-padded. "I don't think it's in deep," he said, "and forgive me, I didn't realise that the young scoundrel was Robin, my lord."

"No reason why you should, considering the amount of mud on his face."

"Come along, Mr Bunscombe," said Annie briskly, and the under-steward went meekly off with her.

Hunsdon examined Robin, who looked very slightly penitent.

"Why aren't you still in your chamber, reading the Bible?" he asked pointedly.

Robin scraped the toe of his boot along the ground. "I climbed down the ivy when mother was angry and went to the village and we..."

"Played at Robin Hood in the Greater Wood. Yes, I know. Do you often do that?"

"Er... no?"

"Goodman ap Pugh has lost three rabbits from his warren and I'm thinking you're the poacher, not a fox."

Robin didn't answer, although his open mouth rather betrayed him.

"Come with me," said his father, led the way inside to the parlour where the candles were still burning. It was very late after a late sunset. Hunsdon sat down and tucked into the game pie he hadn't finished. He didn't offer any to Robin. He let the silence hang while he braced himself for what he was about to say. It took two throat clearings to get it out.

"Robert, I have been considering taking you to Berwick with me when I go north to take up my governorship, to act perhaps as my page and messenger boy..."

Robin lifted his head, his eyes shining. "Oh my lord father, thank you..."

"I said I was considering taking you, not that I had made the decision."

Robin subsided. "Oh," he said in a small voice.

"Mr Secretary Cecil is concerned about the security of the northern parts of the realm, what with the scandal of the Queen of Scots and the possible disloyalty of some of the northern earls, especially the Papists among them. There could be war which is why Her Majesty is sending me to Berwick in the first place."

"War with who?"

"The Scots. And it's 'whom'."

Robin was drinking it in. "Oh sir, I..."

"If there is war, I won't have time to nursemaid you, Robert, and I would have to be sure you would obey my orders." Robin opened his mouth to say something but Hunsdon carried on. "At the moment I am quite certain you wouldn't obey my orders."

"But..."

"It's clear I can't rely on you to do anything except the most stupid and contrary thing you can conceive of. What the devil possessed you to shoot Mr Bunscombe? What if his arm takes sick? - he might have to have his right arm cut off. He might die."

Robin went quite pale. "I didn't mean to..."

Hunsdon shook his head. "I think you did, Robert. You act on impulse, you never think of the consequences and it just won't do. So you see why I can't take you to Berwick with me, don't you?"

Robin went to both his knees. "G...good my lord," he stuttered, "p...p...please take me with you to Berwick, I'll be so good, I won't do anything bad, please...."

Hunsdon shook his head again. "I don't think you would stop playing your pranks," he said heavily. "War is a serious business and you're sillier than a maid. When I told you yesterday to stay in your room, strangely enough, I did not mean for you to climb down the ivy and go poaching."

"I wasn't poaching..."

"You were, since you have stolen three rabbits to feed your village friends but you are not me."

Robin opened his mouth and shut it a couple of times. To Hunsdon's great satisfaction he seemed close to tears. "But sir..."

"I will give you one more chance, Robert. I go north in a week. If you can behave yourself perfectly until I leave I might... I say, I *might* take you to Berwick with me. That starts with you going to your chamber and staying there until I come for you. Do you understand, Robert? If you leave your room for any reason short of a housefire, you will not come with me to Berwick, and I own I will be very disappointed in you. I am already disappointed in

you because of your general heedlessness but if you can show me some obedience, I may reconsider."

Robin nodded seriously, stood up, bowed gracefully to his father and went upstairs, rather in the manner of a man mounting the scaffold to his execution.

By the following afternoon, Robin was still in his chamber. One of the servants emptied a very full chamber pot and his brother Edmund brought him some bread, butter and ale to sustain him in his imprisonment. Hunsdon had given permission to continue his knightly exercises in the morning, since he wasn't being tutored, and told Sergeant at Arms Ewan to tire him out thoroughly with running, obstacle courses, sword practice, boxing and wrestling practice and some foot-running at the quintain in the main courtyard. The Sergeant reported that Robin was quite subdued and got up to no tricks. Robin went to his dinner sweaty and hungry, but he was not permitted horseback exercises and Edmund exercised his pony as well as his own. He went back to his bedchamber and after about half an hour of quiet there were crashings and bangings until sunset. The next day was the same except that Hunsdon grew tired of listening to crashes and bangs without knowing what was causing them and in mid-afternoon went up to Robin and Edmund's chamber. He found that the bed had been upended, the coverlets dangled from the windows except for one which was making a tent with the clothes chests.

Robin was in the middle of climbing up the coverlet with his dagger in his teeth. He clung to the window frame like a monkey, brandished his dagger and jumped off onto the mattress which was on the floor. Then he ducked under the tent shouting "You'll regret that, Frenchy!"

There was a pause and his head poked out from the coverlet.

"Sir?" he asked, looking worried. "Have I done wrong?"

Hunsdon did his best to stay severe. "I certainly never told you not to make make your chamber into an obstacle course, I only told you not to leave it."

He noticed there were apple cores lying on the window sill which meant Robin had been leaning dangerously out of the window to pluck them from the early apple tree.

"Robin, I have a job for you,"

"Yes, my lord, coming, my lord!" Five seconds later Robin was standing in front of Hunsdon, his shoes on, his hat found, his doublet buttoned awry.

"Has Mr Knollys taught you Arabic numbers?"

"Oh yes, sir, I prefer them to the Roman, they're easier I think."

"Mr Bunscombe's arm is sore today, so you can act as his clerk."

"Oh." There was a pause. "Yes sir!"

Mr Bunscombe was waiting rather grimly in the steward's office, his right arm in a sling.

Robin bowed to him. "I'm sorry for shooting you, Mr Bunscombe, I thought you were a rabbit."

Mr Bunscombe grunted. "We'll see how you go."

The standing desk was far too high for Robin and so they found him a table and a stool, an ink pot and a few pens. Mr Bunscombe cut the pens for him since Robin wasn't as expert as he might have been if he hadn't wasted so much time on running Mr Knollys ragged. Mr Bunscombe showed him how to note the figures and items in the Hunsdon household books.

Hunsdon watched the chestnut head bent over the ledgers, ink already on his fingers, and then went out to go hawking again with his wife, her lovely new tiercel merlin and his own incomparable Fatima.

They came back happy with a hare and several partridges in their game bag which would make another very good game pie along with the remnants of a stag Lady Hunsdon had killed with her bow a month before. They passed the steward's office. Robin was still there, but he and Mr Bunscombe seemed to be talking.

"What's the use of it, Robin? Well, numbers don't have to have a use, but this is a very useful thing. Say you are a captain and you want to attack a tower 100 yards high. How long should your assault ladders be?"

"One hundred yards high?"

"No."

"But..."

"Look, this candle here is the tower. Measure with this piece of paper. That's right. Now say that the piece of paper is the ladder. Lean it against the tower."

"Oh! It's too short!"

"And so your men are defeated and thrown back by the French. Now here we have Pythagoras his theorem..."

Annie smiled at my lord Hunsdon and they went out to sit in the garden. Robin arrived a little later, his fingers covered in ink and a smudge on his nose. He made his bow to his parents and knelt to them. "My lord father, can I help Mr Bunscombe tomorrow as well?"

Hunsdon's eyebrows went up. "Good God! Do you like writing accounts?"

Robin looked confused. "No sir, it's what we talk about after the accounts are finished. I never knew numbers could do all that."

"Hmphmm. Yes, Robin, certainly you may if Mr Bunscombe is agreeable."

While Robin ran off to talk to Mr Bunscombe, Annie patted her husband on his leg. "All right then, Henry," she said, "How did you do it?"

"Simple bribery and corruption. I told him I would consider taking him to Berwick..."

"*What?*"

"I am following your own suggestion, my lady." Hunsdon rather enjoyed saying that.

Ann Lady Hunsdon's face was a picture. She got out, "I wasn't serious!"

"I know, but still I think it's a good idea." Hunsdon was as bland as he could be.

"But he's far too young, my lord, he's only eight!"

"There are pages at court that are as young although not as... er... enterprising."

"You're not taking him to court, you're taking him to a garrison town on the border with Scotland where there very well might be a war. After all, that's why you're going, ain't it?" As always Annie got more Cornish when she was upset.

"I'll send him home at once if things look like they're turning ugly with the Scots. Besides, do you think he would make a good priest?"

Annie laughed long and loud.

"Or a lawyer? Or a merchant?"

"Merchant perhaps, if he was prenticed to the right man."

"My love," said Hunsdon. "You know and I know that as my seventh son and with the character he has, Robin will likely be a soldier or possibly a courtier. The Borders in peacetime are better training for war than all the knightly exercises you can think of."

"That is not a recommendation as far as I am concerned, my lord."

"So perhaps you could take him with you when you go to Cornwall? Edmund is going to court in the autumn and it will be very boring for Robin here. Will you take him with you?"

Annie looked away and was clearly calculating. Hunsdon was enjoying himself. He had formed a plan without realising it and while, if Annie was genuinely willing to take Robin to Caerhays, he would accept the suggestion happily, he was now quite looking forward to getting to know his youngest son a little better.

Reluctantly Annie said, "I might. I could introduce him to the Killigrews."

Hunsdon didn't think the company of the foremost family of pirates and wreckers in Cornwall would be very suitable for Robin, although they were all friends of hers.

"My love, he would drive you mad. He'll drive the servants mad here at Hunsdon, that's certain."

"Why won't he drive you mad in Berwick?"

Hunsdon chose his words with care since he hadn't shared with his wife the whole of his radical plan for making sure Robin didn't get bored in Berwick. "He will be too busy and so will I. Little Philly will be very happy with Goody Biltock and without Robin to lead her into devilment she might even learn some huswifery."

He took her hand and kissed it, turned it over and kissed the palm. He looked at her sideways. The childbearing years had marked her body: once she had been a small, energetic and quite dangerous firecracker. Now she was becoming distinctly dumpy, but still her smile was magic. She tried to keep her scowl but couldn't, smiled at him and so he kissed her mouth.

The end.