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‘I have a diagram and amulet against evil death, another against being struck by lightning! Laminas guaranteeing good fortune – made by master monks! All illnesses cured, all worries removed!’

Osbert the pardoner had suffered a flat morning selling forgiveness for sins in the Leadenhall marketplace and so was turning to his second line of trade – that of magical cures, charms and writings. The trade was not strictly legal but the number of secrets the pardoner knew – a market constable asking for an indulgence for fornication here, a London city official wanting clemency for embezzlement there – meant he went about his business unmolested.

He’d chosen a position between a stall selling poultry – rows of neat white geese gazing blankly down from their hooks at him – and one selling mainly pork. A pig’s head stared out into the seething marketplace as if wondering what bad choices it had made that led it to the butcher’s table.

The pardoner felt a spark of pity. The pig had done nothing but be born to seal its fate. He, by contrast, had started life with many advantages but had thrown them away to finish where he was now, among the flies, the offal and the stink of the marketplace selling penny indulgences that were supposed to guarantee Heaven’s favour.

A merchant walked past in rich robes, his pretty daughter walking behind him. Osbert smiled at the girl but she turned her head away at the sight of a man so far beneath her. Had it not been for women, he himself might have walked along like that, maybe with a daughter of his own. His father, however, had insisted on the monastery to curb his lustful ways. It hadn’t worked out. At all.

‘Are these *effectif*?’ A goodwife in a loose fitting kirtle had approached him, looking down at the long roll of cloth where he displayed his wares. Osbert noted that her dress was not of the modern, tailored sort and, as everyone dressed up to come to market, this meant the woman was not worth much. Still, she’d dropped a French word into her conversation, *effectif*, so she clearly fancied herself above the common herd. He could use that. He’d hardly had a sale all morning, so he needed to get whatever he could from her.

‘I swear by them. I have worn them these ten years and have suffered neither an evil death nor a lightning strike. They work very well.’

‘Hmm, my son is going on a voyage and I would like to buy him some protection.’

‘These are a shilling, madam.’

‘That is too much.’

‘For a woman like you? Surely not. Is it the king’s business your son does?’

‘A penny, and no more for flattery.’ Clearly the woman’s pretensions ended at the point she had to put her hand into her purse.

‘To aid a noble voyager, why not? It has been a slack morning or I would not sell such powerful magic so cheap.’

He took the woman’s penny and passed her a scrap of vellum, on which was drawn a magic circle. ‘That contains the secret names of God,’ he said, ‘and now they are known to you.’

The woman went on her way and the pardoner went back to shouting out his pitch.

‘I am a master of tetragrammation, of the ananizapta cure for fits, of devices angelic, cosmologic and hermetic. Here sir, will you take an angelic cure? If you have a thickheaded son or apprentice, it’s just the thing. It is the seal of the archangel Samhil who takes away stupidity.’

‘Don’t sell too many of those, pardoner, or you’ll be out of business.’ A young man in a fashionable short tunic stood looking at him.

‘My business is the forgiveness of sin; while men sin I shall never go hungry.’

‘Likely why you’re so fat!’

‘Laugh your way to Hell if you will, boy. You’ll find the Devil a poor audience for your jokes!’

‘If I go to Hell, pardoner, you’ll be keeping me company!’ The young man laughed and passed on.

‘Do not be as the ass who lies all day in the barren field, be up and ready for the ...’ Osbert wasn’t entirely sure where he was going with that biblical quotation, or even if it was a biblical quotation. He crouched to rearrange his wares. He noticed he was running low on teeth of St Odo and reminded himself that he would need to visit his contact at the poor hospital to get a few more.

A skull landed in the middle of the pardoner’s roll of amulets and papers.

He looked up to see a big, red-faced farmer glaring down at him. Then another, smaller skull landed next to the first – this from a soldier, a Welsh bowman by his dark looks and muscular frame.

‘Careful friends, it is the names of the Lord and his angels that you crush.’

The farmer spoke. ‘Last week you sold me the skull of St Anthony, for protection against evil and for certain guarantee of a long and prosperous life.’

‘It was my blessing to come by such a thing and my charity to allow it to be sold to you for such a price.’

‘Three shillings,’ said the farmer.

‘So low? Does a vision of the saint instruct you to return and pay more?’

‘No, pardoner, it does not. I fell to drinking near to here and struck up conversation with this fine fellow of Wales.’

‘God bless our bowmen and the deliverance they brought us from the Scots.’

‘It seems he too has been sold the skull of St Anthony – for two shillings.’

‘Well,’ said the pardoner, noticing the farmer had a number of fit looking young men assembling behind him and the bowman a number more, ‘that one is smaller, if you’re worried about the difference in price.’

‘Two skulls of one saint?’

‘Friends, the explanation is simple.’

‘Yes?’

‘That larger one is from the saint as a grown man. That one is from when he was younger,’ said Osbert.

The men thought for a moment as the pardoner gathered his roll as best he could. Then the farmer erupted and lunged for the pardoner. One reason Osbert had been recommended by his former abbot to take up the role of a pardoner when he had been expelled from his monastery was that he was a nimble man who could run quickly for one of such belly. In fact, when Osbert reflected, it was probably his only talent.

The pardoner set off at a clip away from the market, down Lyme Street. He’d worked out his route well in advance. His aim was to run all the way down Lyme Street, ignoring all the churches until he got to St Margaret Pattens. Here he would dive inside and run for the back. He knew from long experience there was a door behind the altar that led out into the church gardens. The men pursuing him would be loath to apprehend him in a church – it was neither legal nor wise. Only the desperate, such as Osbert was, would risk offending the clergy – as they made very dangerous enemies. The pause won, he could get out from the back of the church, through the gardens behind it, hoping to avoid dogs – there was one particularly unpleasant alaunt, a sort of shaggy, enormous mastiff – he’d have to dodge, he knew from experience. Then he would be onto Mincing Lane, past the huge Clothworkers’ Hall and lost in the crowd.

The mob chased him, passers-by joining in the pursuit. A hue and cry went up, the distinctive ululating howl that was London’s alarm for a thief on the run. This was serious trouble. The fact that he was running from the hue and cry allowed him to be beheaded on the spot if any of the city watch got hold of him.

‘This isn’t robbery, it’s fraud, you fools,’ thought Osbert as he ran, ‘there is no hue and cry for fraud.’ In theory, the pursuers were in the wrong to raise the cry of ‘thief’ but there was no benefit in stopping to argue that with them, the satisfaction of putting them right on a point of law being rather outweighed by the inconvenience of being beaten to death.

Osbert made St Margaret’s no more than twenty yards ahead of the mob. The door of the church was open and he ran inside, his eyes swimming as they adjusted from the brightness of the day.

Quickly he slammed the door behind him, signalling that he was claiming sanctuary.

St Margaret's was a wealthy church and the floor was well flagstoned, the air heavy with the incense of the last mass and the windows a beautiful blue stained glass. Osbert didn't have time to admire the interior, he just ran for the back, past the altar, past the priest and a couple of prelates who greeted him with less surprise and alarm than might be expected – this having been about the fourth occasion he had made his escape this way. He tugged at the rear door. It was locked.

'Shit!' Osbert beat on the door with his hands.

'This is not an escape route for deceivers and frauds,' said the priest, coming towards him.

'Let me go, father – they mean to kill me.'

'Perhaps that's what you deserve.'

The church door opened and a bulky figure appeared in the entrance. The farmer, silhouetted against the bright autumn day.

'I'll claim sanctuary, then, and as a fellow cleric, alms, food and water. I may have to stay here for forty days, farting and belching through the services. And you'll have to feed me from your own pocket!'

'I wonder if you could confess your sin in the time it takes that fellow to get hold of you.'

'I have sold false charms and trinkets,' said Osbert, 'there you go. I am confessed, you must give me sanctuary.'

The farmer hovered in the doorway, uncertain before the priests.

'I'll let you go,' said the priest, 'but you use this way no more.'

'No more, right, definitely,' said Osbert.

The priest unlocked the door as the farmer stepped into the church.

'I'll have no bloodshed in my church!' shouted the priest, 'Nor any more running and shouting! He's coming out now. If you want to kill him, lead your mob around the side, not through here!'

Osbert was gone already, out into the gardens. He ran around a duck pond, past a hen house and quickly skirted the snarling alaunt on its long rope. Then he ran up an alley and into Mincing Lane. From there it was through more back alleys and gardens as far as St Olave's.

‘There he is, skin the bastard!’

Osbert ran around the church, his breath heaving with fear. There, by the church was the priest’s house – a two storey affair with a bedchamber supported on wooden pillars projecting out above the main bulk of the building.

He raced around the back – down an alley between the house’s uneven garden wall and another property. Panting like a flogged carthorse, he threw his roll over the garden wall, climbed up the rough brick and dropped down the other side. He found himself in an overgrown and seemingly untended garden. Osbert ran towards the back of the house. If there were servants there, he intended to offer them indulgences for their sins in return for hiding him.

The back door was no more than a few planks nailed together and not sturdy.

‘He went over the wall!’

‘Get round the front and the other side and make sure he doesn’t come out.’

Osbert glanced at the opposite wall to the one he’d climbed over, but it was so overgrown with brambles that he would have no chance of scaling it. Another house had been built directly against the rear wall, removing all chance of escape.

The door was locked but only on a latch. He took up a stick from the floor and lifted it. He went directly in to a big pantry, or what had once been a pantry. Whatever food had been in there was long rotted and gone, though rats still scuttled away as he entered the room. It was dark and dusty, sparsely furnished with just a stool and a bench among broken pots and cups. It smelled of damp and disuse.

Osbert moved inside and through another door. People were hammering at the front now and he could hear voices behind him. He had no idea what to do. To his left was another door. It was locked. That might help him. If the men chasing him were law abiding, they might balk at breaking a householder’s lock. He had enough experience of life on London’s streets to know how to deal with that. He took a pig’s bone he had been selling as the rib of St Mark and inserted it into the lock. A bit of wiggling and wagging and he pushed the internal lever aside. The older style lock was so crudely made it was hardly worth having. There was a narrow

set of stone steps going down. A cellar. Perhaps he could hide in there. It was a scant hope but he had no other ideas.

He went within and closed the door, fiddling with the bone and the lock again to secure it. It was flat dark with the door closed and he stretched out a foot to feel his way down the steps. People were moving through the house. Under his breath he said a Hail Mary.

‘Get me out of this, Lady, help me, help me.’

Suddenly it was light and Osbert gave a little cry.

‘Who is it that seeks the aid of the mother of God?’

The cellar was a large room and, in contrast to the rest of the house, was swept, the floor neatly flagstoned. There were desks and tables in there, all heaped with books, and strange things in neat piles on the floor or stored on rough shelves that leaned against the walls – dismembered cats, bottles, scribbled drawings, astrological charts.

At the far end was a figure Osbert would never have expected to see in his life, let alone in the cellar of a broken down house. It was a cardinal, in red robes and wide brimmed hat, standing with a lantern in his hand. The pardoner recognised his uniform from miniatures he had seen at his monastery.

‘Your, er, grace.’

Osbert kneeled.

The mob above were crying out.

‘Not upstairs!’

‘This door’s locked.’

‘Break it in.’

‘Hang on a minute, this is the priest’s house!’

‘It can’t be, look at the state of it!’

‘I tell you it is. You can’t go smashing up the priest’s house. You’ll hang!’

The door above rattled and Osbert fell to his knees.

‘Holy father, I am a sinner, but not guilty of the sin for which I am pursued. Please, use your word to protect me from this mob. Intercede for me here.’

‘I’m afraid I can’t.’

The door rattled again.

‘I can pick that lock, we’ve no need to break it.’

‘He’s not going to be in a locked room, is he?’

‘Well, we’ve looked everywhere else.’

Osbert put his hands together in prayer. ‘I will live a devout life henceforth, I swear it.’

‘I would like to help you but, as I say, I can’t. I’m stuck here.’

‘How stuck?’

‘The sorcerer who owns this house has enchanted me. I can’t move. He’s got me stuck in this circle. It’s dark magic that can hold a holy man like me.’

Osbert looked down at the man’s feet. Sure enough, there was a circle in chalk on the floor. It wasn’t too dissimilar to the sort of thing he sold every day, though more carefully drawn.

‘I’ve never seen such a thing,’ he said. It was a good idea to profess ignorance of charms in front of a cardinal.

‘No, well, neither had I.’

‘It’s open. The door’s open.’

‘It’s black as the devil’s sooty nutsack down there,’ said a voice.

‘Get a light!’

Men were thumping down the stairs, blundering about as if blind.

Osbert’s heart was pounding; he didn’t have time to think how strange it was that he could see the cardinal with the lantern as clear as day while the men above complained of darkness.

‘I will release you. If I do, will you swear to protect me?’

‘I swear.’

Osbert scuttled forward and rubbed out part of the chalk.

‘Thank you,’ said the cardinal, ‘now let me intercede for you.’

He stepped out of the circle. Osbert noticed the strangest thing. The cardinal’s skin didn’t meet all the way round at the back of his head and was laced tight there, as through the eyelets of a shoe. The cardinal opened the lantern and took out the lighted candle. Then he put it into his mouth, swallowing it whole. There was an enormous belch from the cardinal, a roar of fire from his mouth and a great billow of smoke, and Osbert, along with all his pursuers, fell to the floor.