

Sample Short Story
"Encore for a Neck Verse"
from
Murders and Other Confusions
The Chronicles of Susanna, Lady Appleton
Sixteenth-Century Gentlewoman, Herbalist, and Sleuth
by
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Encore for a Neck Verse

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Alarmed by her companion's sudden stillness, Susanna, Lady Appleton, widowed gentlewoman of Leigh Abbey, Kent, looked up from a display of smallwares in front of a Dover haberdasher's shop. To her relief, the strongest emotion showing on Nick Baldwin's beloved face was bewilderment. Whatever had startled him did not present an immediate danger.

"Odd," Nick murmured. "The fellow coming out of that cookshop is the image of Stephen Bourne."

Susanna glanced in the direction of his gaze, although half her attention had already returned to the quill pens she was thinking of buying. A scarecrow-thin man all in gray, even to the feather in his bonnet, stopped to rotate his left shoulder, as if easing some old injury.

"Ho, there!" Nick shouted, advancing toward him.

"Do you address me, sir?" Spoken with a slight stammer, the words carried a suggestion of panic and Susanna thought she saw a flash of recognition in the fellow's wide-spaced brown eyes before he blanked his features.

Mayhap Nick did know him.

"Bourne?"

"Julius Woodward, at your service." Now stone-faced as a gargoyle, his stance almost defiant, Woodward held his ground as Nick approached him.

"I crave your forgiveness. I mistook you for an Oundle man."

"Mappen the fellow looks like me, but Oundle means nowt, nor Bourne, neither. Good day to you, sir. And madam." With an abrupt nod, he continued on his way along Priory Road.

An expression of deep suspicion etched Nick's features as he watched Woodward pass the cemetery attached to the Maison Dieu, a hospital founded centuries earlier for the benefit of pilgrims passing through Dover, and disappear into the cross street by the little chapel dedicated to St. Edmund. "I warrant you will think me mad," he said to Susanna, "but I believe I have just seen a ghost."

"Passing solid for a spirit." She continued to contemplate the items set out on the haberdasher's pentice. Goodman Kelling offered a wide assortment of merchandise for sale, everything from pins and needles to mousetraps. The larger items—curtains, sheets, tablecloths, even shifts and shirts and other bits of clothing—were displayed inside the shop.

"Aye." Nick did not sound convinced.

"It *is* possible for a man to have a double. Or a twin."

"One who denies he's ever heard of the market town of Oundle yet betrays with every word he speaks that he hails from Northamptonshire? Moreover, this Julius Woodward not only resembles Bourne in physical appearance, he favors the same colors. And he has, as Bourne did, what good Northamptonshire men call a maffle."

"The stammer?" She replaced the ornate little dagger she'd discovered between a lantern and a stack of almanacs and chapbooks and gave Nick her full attention.

"Aye. You're quick, as ever."

Nick's admiring smile warmed Susanna. They had been neighbors here in Kent for a long time, and friends, and sometimes more. She knew she was the only woman he had ever asked to marry him. She had turned him down, rejecting not his offer of love but the legal alliance that gave a husband complete control over both the person and the property of his wife. It was not that Susanna did not trust Nick. She simply saw no need to remarry. There were too many advantages to widowhood.

At times her adamant refusal to reconsider resulted in a certain strain between them, but she knew he had no doubt that she cared about him and she did not question his devotion to her. All in all, they muddled along well enough. She was not surprised when Nick escorted her into the cookshop Woodward had just left.

The proprietor sold meat pies and stews, evidently of some succulence, for there were several people waiting to buy. The air was redolent with garlic and onion.

"What reason would your Master Bourne have to hide his identity?" Susanna asked in a quiet voice.

"Bourne, alive, would have much to answer for, if the tale I heard at second hand from my housekeeper is true."

"Goodwife Billings?"

"Goodwife Chappell," Nick corrected her.

Susanna smiled. Through their combined efforts, she and Nick had made it possible for Mary Billings to remarry. Her second husband, Edward Chappell, served as steward at Nick's Northamptonshire estate.

"Time passes far too quickly," she murmured, performing rapid calculations.

How long had it been since they'd found proof Goodman Billings was dead and, as an unexpected result of that investigation, sent a young woman and her newborn

daughter to live at Candlethorpe? More than four and a half years! Although Susanna had meant to check on Jane Johnson and her child long before this, she had yet to visit Candlethorpe. Indeed, Nick himself did not spend much time there, preferring his lodgings in London and Whitethorn Manor in Kent, which adjoined Susanna's land.

"Two of your best meat pies," Nick told the cookshop owner, proffering a rose noble, "and information."

The woman's eyes goggled at the value of the coin, but a moment later it vanished beneath a none-too-clean apron.

Nick described Woodward to her, from his long, fitted rat's-color fustian doublet with its close-set buttons, to his scuffed leather boots, to the way he combed his hair forward at the front to form a short fringe over the forehead. "And he has a tuft of hair on the point of his chin," he finished. "Do you remember him?"

"Pencil beard and him all in dull gray? Aye, I know him. Woodward, his name is. He and his wife have a room at Molly Greene's victualing house." The woman grinned, showing a profusion of gaps where teeth had once been. "That's why he's been buying food from me. Molly's the worst cook in all of Kent."

"What does Woodward's wife look like?" Nick leaned a little forward as his interest quickened.

"Slender. Dark-hair. Big eyes."

"Doe-like," Nick murmured.

Susanna sent a sharp look in his direction at the description but refrained from asking questions until they'd left the cookshop. They took with them two savory meat pies and directions to the victualing house where Woodward and his wife had lodgings.

"This Bourne," Susanna said as they walked, munching. "I take it he is supposed to be dead?" The meat pie was very good indeed, tiny bits of shin of beef mixed with herbs and spices and generous chunks of carrot, white cabbage, celery, leeks, and parsnips.

"Murdered, according to Goodwife Chappell."

Susanna felt her eyebrows climb.

"In the same letter, which I received some months past, she also informed me that his killer had been caught. The Assizes are over for the year, Susanna. Those condemned for felonies have long since been hanged for their crimes. If Woodward *is* Bourne, an innocent man was executed."

"Might the man accused of killing Master Bourne have been allowed benefit of clergy?" Susanna was well aware that some convicted felons had escaped hanging by reciting the so-called "neck verse."

"A man who steals may be branded on the hand and discharged if he has his books, as they say, but murder is a crime excluded from the statutory qualifications for grants of clergy." Nick, a justice of the peace in Kent, had made a study of the current laws concerning such things.

Susanna, too, had reason to be familiar with the statutes on murder. But in her experience, bribes could sometimes subvert justice . . . or secure it, depending upon one's point of view. "There are exceptions," she reminded Nick. "And pardons." The latter were the only recourse for women convicted of a felony, since women were specifically denied benefit of clergy.

But he shook his head. "I know the two crown judges who ride the Midland Circuit. It is rare they agree on anything. I cannot imagine either, let alone both, acting *ultra vires* to grant freedom to a convicted murderer."

"Then if Goodman Woodward *is* Goodman Bourne, there has been a great miscarriage of justice. A man died for a crime he could not have committed."

"Aye. And it seems to me all too possible that Bourne is alive, for there was never any body found."

Susanna missed her footing on the cobblestones and stumbled. "How can that be? What other proof of murder would a jury accept?"

"Remains." Nick caught her elbow to steady her. "They were discovered in Rockingham Forest. Some animal had been at them, leaving only a few bones and some scraps of clothing, but those bits were deemed sufficient to identify Stephen Bourne."

A passerby, overhearing, gave them a startled look before hurrying on.

Nick ignored him. "Having seen Julius Woodward, I must wonder if that judgment was warranted."

Susanna considered for a moment as she polished off the last of her meat pie, then asked, "Did Bourne have a wife?"

"Not his own. Stephen Bourne was a merchant in Oundle, the market town nearest Candlethorpe. A haberdasher, as it happens. He dealt in the same sort of smallwares Goodman Kelling stocks. As is not uncommon in rural towns, where the great livery companies that regulate such things in London are not so strong, a merchant may offer goods not strictly within his province. Bourne had long been in competition with one Barnaby Morrison, a mercer by trade, selling shifts and shirts, cloth and clothing, and cheap bone lace. And Morrison, although he styled himself a clothier and sneered at Bourne as naught but a petty chapman, himself sold smallwares in addition to woolen clothing and Italian silks and velvets."

Susanna wiped her mouth with a handkerchief and made a futile effort to remove all the grease from her hands. Nick was engaged in a similar exercise, also fruitless. "So the wife you spoke of was Morrison's?"

"Aye. They both courted her, or so I am told. Morrison married her. When Bourne vanished, so did Clementine Morrison. At first everyone assumed they'd run off together. Then a hogherd made his grisly discovery. Of the missing wife there was no trace. Her husband, to no one's surprise, was arrested and accused of killing them both."

They had reached Goodwife Greene's victualing house, one of more than two dozen such establishments in Dover. Like Dover's inns, they offered beds for travelers at a modest fee.

Goodwife Greene was in her garden, busy hauling wet sheets out of a wicker basket and draping them on bushes to dry. The color of Nick's money persuaded her to tell them all she knew about Julius Woodward and his wife. To Susanna's disappointment, it was very little.

"Pretty little thing, she is," Goodwife Greene said as Susanna helped her spread the last of the laundry over a clump of privet, "but sharp-tongued. Be dunked for a scold, she will, if she be not careful."

"And her husband?" Susanna asked.

"Dour, as the Scots say. They stayed at the Angel when they first arrived. That was late in April, as I recall. A few weeks later, they came to me."

Further questions elicited that Woodward had no visible means of support but no lack of ready money and that, at the moment, both husband and wife were abroad in the town. Another coin overcame any scruples Goodwife Greene might have about letting Nick and Susanna into her lodgers' chamber. Pocketing it, she led the way up a winding stair, smiling all the way.

When Susanna saw how small and bare the room was, she felt a reluctant twinge of sympathy for lovers forced to flee their homes in order to be together. She knew firsthand the difficulties of living in an unhappy marriage, as well as the painful joy of falling in love with someone she could not wed. On the other hand, she'd been faithful to her husband as long as he'd lived. Susanna Appleton believed in keeping vows. If the two living here were Stephen Bourne and Clementine Morrison, they did not.

Nick had not said so, but the determined way he set about searching these lodgings made Susanna certain he believed Bourne had intended that Morrison be blamed for his death and executed. She doubted he'd find proof of his theory here, but she helped him look. If they were right, what Bourne had done amounted to cold-blooded murder.

A chest contained changes of linen and a few other items of clothing, supporting the idea that these people had fled their former lives in haste. Lifting each layer with great care, so that the disturbance would not be obvious, Nick came, at the very bottom, to a packet wrapped in cloth and fastened with a ribbon. When he untied it, a chapbook tumbled out. Nick examined it, then passed it to Susanna.

"*A Warning to Wise Men*," she read aloud from the title page, "*being an account of unlucky days and what to avoid on them*." Well-thumbed pages indicated someone regularly consulted the cheaply-bound volume.

Goodwife Greene gave a derisive snort. "I am not surprised he'd have such a thing. Always gloom and doom with that one. Why only last week, when I broke a fingernail and he saw me clipping off the jagged edge, he told me I should have left it be. Bad luck to cut nails on a Friday, he said."

Susanna sent a questioning glance Nick's way, but he shook his head. "I did not know him well enough to say if Bourne was superstitious."

"Every almanac I've ever seen lists unlucky days, and always different ones. A man who believes in all of them would have difficulty finding a safe time to begin a new venture." Had Bourne consulted an astrologer, she wondered, to help him choose the best date on which to disappear?

They replaced the contents of the chest, careful to leave everything just as it had been. The rest of the room yielded nothing of interest.

They went next to the Angel, distinguished from other Dover inns by the fact that it lacked stabling for traveler's horses. No one there remembered anyone named Woodward, nor did a description of the couple spark recollections. Since Dover was the main stopping point for travelers to and from the Continent, hundreds of people had broken their journey at the Angel since April.

By the time Susanna and Nick left the inn, the afternoon was well advanced. They would have to leave Dover soon if they hoped to reach Susanna's home at Leigh Abbey and Nick's house, Whitethorn Manor, before dark. The distance was not great, only seven miles, but an uncommon wet summer and autumn had made a quagmire of the road and now more water dogs filled the sky. The small floating clouds were sure forerunners of rain.

"What now?" Susanna asked. "We've found no proof that Woodward and Bourne are the same man. Would you recognize Morrison's wife?"

Nick shook his head. "All I know of her appearance comes from hearsay. It was Mary Chappell's husband, Edward, who told me she had doe's eyes. He said she was the best looking woman in Oundle, but as far as I know I've never met either Goodwife Morrison or her husband."

"Will you stay in Dover and confront them with your suspicions?"

"To what purpose? Even if I am right, it is far too late to save Morrison's life."

Nick gave a bitter laugh. "Indeed, just think what the probable outcome will be if I tell Bourne that Morrison was charged with his murder, convicted, and executed. He will thank me, for I will have done him good service. He can express surprise and horror at the news, abandon his false identity, marry his mistress, and return to Oundle to lay claim to her first husband's estate."

They had reached the inn where they'd stabled their horses. Susanna waited until Nick sent the ostler to saddle them before she asked him what he did plan to do.

"I cannot ignore the possibility that the two of them, Stephen Bourne and Clementine Morrison, are guilty of murder, that they plotted to have her husband blamed for a crime he did not commit. It may be a futile effort on my part, but I intend to go to Northamptonshire and learn all I can about the case. At the least, I may be able to prevent them from profiting from Morrison's death."

"I believe," Susanna said after a long, thoughtful pause, "that I will go with you. I should like to visit Jane and her baby. I am, after all, the child's godmother."

Nick, who was her godfather, seemed amused by this sudden and uncharacteristic interest in little Susanna Johnson but he accepted her decision. During the ride home, they made their plans. If all went well, they could leave Kent in two day's time.

* * *

A week later, at Stilton, accompanied by a few servants and a packhorse, Susanna and Nick abandoned the main road from London to Stamford and the safe numbers of a larger party for the less well-traveled track to Oundle. It was too late in the day to stop there. Susanna gleaned little more than an impression of houses, church, and market cross before they entered woodland thick with oak and beech.

"This is the Forest of Cliffe," Nick said as they passed a herd of pigs fattening on acorns and beechmast, "part of the Royal Forest of Rockingham. The queen came here once to hunt deer."

"Fallow deer could not reduce a man to a few bones and bits of cloth."

"There are also badgers and foxes and wild boar."

Susanna shuddered. A Wild boar, like its domestic cousin the pig, would eat anything.

"If we are correct in our suppositions," Nick reminded her, "the bones discovered in Rockingham Forest did not belong to Stephen Bourne."

"Do you know where the remains were found?"

"Somewhere between Oundle and Southwick. That is Glapthorne." Nick indicated a tiny stone-built forest village surrounded by small patches of arable land. "Southwick lies yonaway, as they say in these parts. Yonder, at a distance, with Bulwick and Candlethorpe beyond."

Susanna studied the terrain. "Bones might have lain unnoticed for months."

"If the hogherd had not stumbled across them, a verderer might have. They are the judicial officers of the Royal Forests. The court that upholds Forest Law is called the swanimote, to which each village sends officers. It meets at King's Cliffe, five miles from here in the valley of the Willow Brook."

"Did justices or foresters investigate? Or neither?"

"By tradition criminal or civil pleas are heard in common law courts even if they originate in the forest," Nick said, "and even if the trial were to be heard in the forest eyre, it would still be the coroner who'd make the indictment. And the accused would still have the right to a trial by jury."

"Who is the local justice of the peace?" Susanna asked.

"I imagine George Lynne of Southwick and Edmund Brudenell of Deene Park, a mile or so on the other side of Candlethorpe, presided over the inquest."

Nick and Susanna reached Nick's manor in late afternoon and received an effusive welcome from Mary Chappell. Jane Johnson's greeting was quieter and her child's shy, but Susanna was delighted with the progress they had made under Mary's care. Jane, who had the mind of a child herself, had learned to use a loom and had woven several beautiful pieces, which she insisted upon showing her benefactor within moments of Susanna's arrival. Jane's daughter, when she was finally persuaded to come out from behind her mother's skirts, proved to be sweet-tempered and very bright. Susanna made a mental note to provide her with tutors as soon as she was old enough for schooling.

"A dimpsy lass and mild as a moon beam, but a handful all the same," Mary Chappell said of the girl when she'd shooed the others away and taken sole possession of Susanna to escort her to the well-appointed guest chamber where she would sleep. The windows overlooked grazing sheep. Hundreds of them. "You'll be wanting to refresh yourself while the master talks with my Yed'ard."

It took Susanna a moment to translate Yed'ard into Edward, Mary's husband and Nick's steward. Meanwhile, Mary bustled about, checking to be certain there was wash water, expressing her delight that the master would be at Candlethorpe for Pack Rag Day.

"Pack Rag Day?" Susanna echoed in a dubious voice.

"Michaelmas, you'd call it. Four days hence. When the year's service ends and those servants who mean to move on do pack up all their belongings to take away."

A great racket broke out in the courtyard below. Mary rushed to the window and threw the shutters wide. "Stop that wouking!" she shouted. "Waffling cur! Belike he's after one of the cats." When the barking subsided into what Mary called a yaffle, she turned again to Susanna. "I'd fain have you ask if there be summat you're needing."

"I need answers to questions," Susanna confided. "You see, a visit with Jane and her child was not the only reason we came here at this time."

"Twa'n't? Well, you may speak plain to me." Expectation writ large on her friendly countenance, she plunked herself down on the window seat. A moment later a sleek gray cat joined her there and settled in her lap.

"We have come about the murder of Stephen Bourne. What can you tell me of Bourne and the Morrisons?"

Although startled—belatedly, Susanna realized the housekeeper had expected an inquiry of the sort a future mistress might conduct—Mary was willing to recount all she'd heard about Bourne's disappearance and that of Goodwife Morrison. "Fig Sunday, it

were. Palm Sunday, you'd say, but it is so called in these parts because it is the custom here to eat figs on that day."

The more she talked, all the while stroking the cat, the easier it became for Susanna to translate Mary's Northamptonshire speech. The cat closed bright topaz eyes and purred accompaniment.

"When the bones were found in the wood," Mary explained, "Goodman Morrison swore his wife killed Bourne and fled in panic, but all the world and Little Billing knows he did it. Morrison was a great gulshing fellow with a blob lip who always looked as if the black ox had trod on his toe."

The world and Little Billing, which Susanna presumed was a local village, also thought Morrison had killed his wife. Enraged by his discovery that she'd run off with Stephen Bourne, he was popularly supposed to have followed, caught, and slain them.

"They do say Bourne were her sprunny when they were young," Mary went on. "He courted her when he was yet an unlicked cub, but they quarreled over summat and when they'd burnt their writings, she married Barnaby Morrison. Belike for spite. She were ever twea faced. Or mappen 'twas for money. He came here from away to take over a cousin's business, but he brought wealth with him."

"Did Morrison beat his wife? Mistreat her in some other way?"

Mary shook her head. Gently she extracted the cat's claws from her apron. "Mind your manners, Greymalkin," she murmured.

"Then I am surprised no one took Morrison's suggestion seriously," Susanna said. "Why not believe the woman capable of murder?"

"Clementine Morrison nettles up, no doubt of that, but why should she kill her lover and leave his body for the animals? A man's a good thing to have along on a journey."

Susanna could not argue with that logic. "So Morrison was arrested and taken off to trial in Northampton."

"Aye."

"Did anyone from here go to the trial or to see him hanged?"

"I warrant Sir Edmund were there." Mary sniffed.

"The justice of the peace?"

"Aye. Married a rich heiress, he did, and was unfaithful to her from the start. Fine example that sets!"

"But he'd have taken an interest in Goodman Morrison?"

"Oh, aye. Morrison is some distant kin to the steward at Deene Park."

Most assuredly, then, Susanna thought, they must pay a visit to Sir Edmund Brudenell on the morrow. In the meantime, having changed her dusty traveling clothes for clean garments and washed her hands and face while Mary talked, Susanna was ready to rejoin Nick.

"Master admires to go awalking," Mary told her when she asked where he might be found. "No doubt he's gone out adooors."

With Greymalkin following in her wake, Susanna located Nick and Yed'ard by the eastern wall. The two men were staring at a distant glow and haze of smoke but Nick smiled when he saw her and bent to scratch the cat's head. He received a nuzzle in return.

"What is burning?" Susanna asked. Her first flash of alarm had already been quelled by Nick's calm composure. It was not a house or, worse, a whole village.

"Stubble in the Fens. It is set alight every year at about this time. It only looks as if the marshes themselves are on fire."

He dismissed Edward Chappell, with detailed instructions for some repairs he wanted made. "Hire a carpenter from Bulwick if you need to for the work on the stable," he said, "and see that there are day men enough to do the plashing."

Susanna studied those hedges she could see, recognizing whitethorn, hazel, crab-apple, and holly. Doubtless Nick meant to have them carefully thinned of their wood and the remaining branches bent double and intertwined so that in the spring the growth would be twice as thick. His extensive flocks of sheep had to be contained somehow.

Nick slung an arm around Susanna's waist as the sun dropped below the horizon. He pointed to the sky. "Watch just there and you'll soon see the shepherd's lamp."

As they waited for the first star to rise after sunset, Susanna summarized what Mary had told her.

"Edward predicted his wife would be splatherdabbing, as he put it. She's a long-tongue of the first order, he says, and would do better to confine herself to her duties as my potwabbler."

Susanna fought a smile and lost. "Was there any detail Mary missed?"

"The location of the bones. Edward says they were in a squeech—that's a wet, boggy place—just halfway between Oundle and Southwick and near the forest track. He also told me that Brudenell is at present away from Deene Park."

"So, we return to Oundle tomorrow?"

"Aye. And until then we can think of more pleasant things. Let us go in and sup. Edward tells me we are to have whispering pudding—that's plum pudding with many plums, as opposed to hooting pudding, in which plums are few and far between—and squab pie."

Susanna wrinkled her nose. "I am not fond of pigeons."

Nick laughed. "You will be pleased, then, to know that there are no birds in a Northamptonshire squab pie. It is made with apples, onions, and fat bacon."

* * *

On the way to Oundle the next day, Nick and Susanna stopped once, at the squeech Edward Chappell had described. There was nothing to see.

It was not yet noon when they crossed the north bridge over the Nene and entered the market town. Nick pointed out Morrison's house, now claimed by the Crown. It had been seized and its contents inventoried, but as yet no one had moved into the shop or the lodgings above. The windows were boarded up, the doors locked.

They located the constable, a glover named Josias Rutter, hard at work in his shop, for constables were chosen from the citizens of the town to serve for one year. He continued to cut a piece of cheveril, the soft and flexible kid-skin used to make fine gloves, as he answered Nick's questions. His replies added nothing to their knowledge except the fact that the remains had been identified as Bourne's by the bits of rat's-color cloth found with them.

"He did favor dull gray," Rutter said, shaking his head over Bourne's preference. And still did, Susanna thought, recalling the man they'd met in Dover.

"It is not an uncommon color," Nick protested. "There must have been more to tell you the remnants were Bourne's clothing."

"How else would they have got there?" Rutter asked. Before Susanna could give in to the temptation to tell him, he added, "There were a bit of a glove too, one of mine own making. No other glover in the county makes stitches in just the same way I do."

Faced with this unshakable conviction that the remains had therefore been Stephen Bourne, Nick offered Susanna his arm with the intention of escorting her out of Rutter's shop.

"Han ye no desire to see the bones?" the glover asked.

"You have them here? They were not sent to Northampton for the trial?"

"The cloth were ta'an, but they did leave the bones with me." Rutter set aside his knife to rub his hands together, an avaricious gleam in his rheumy eyes. "Accounted a wonder, they bist. 'Twill cost ye ha'penny a peep to look at them."

When they had left the glover's shop, Susanna and Nick exchanged an ironic look. The broken and discolored bones they'd been shown were not human. "Cow?" she asked.

"Or mayhap deer. Not Bourne. That much is certain."

"A clumsy attempt, all in all, to make Bourne appear dead."

But it had worked. On the journey back to Candlethorpe, Susanna and Nick discussed what to do next. That the trick had been Bourne's own doing seemed likely. How else would the easily identified cloth and bit of leather have gotten there?

"He wanted to be certain no one would search for him," Susanna concluded.

"Yes," Nick agreed, "but was there another, more sinister motive? Was the goal all along to have Morrison executed?"

"We will know soon," Susanna predicted. "If that was the plan, Clementine will reappear to claim Morrison's estate. She'll have to show that Bourne is alive to do so, since upon his conviction for murder, all Morrison owned was confiscated by the Crown. They will both come. Why not? As you suggested in Dover, they can claim that blame falling on Morrison was a tragic mistake. They were only two lovers, desperate to be together."

The church would have something to say about that aspect of the situation. They would be censured for adultery, made to do penance before all the congregation. But Morrison, it seemed, had been wealthy, and his wife was his only heir. Clementine and Bourne would likely consider public humiliation a small price to pay if at the end of it they got their hands a goodly inheritance.

"Shall we travel to Northampton tomorrow and see what we can learn of the trial?" Nick asked.

"Aye. If Sir Edmund Brudenell has not yet returned to Deene Park."

But with the dawn came news that brought them back to Oundle instead. Stephen Bourne had arrived in the market town just after Nick and Susanna rode out. Not only was he alive and well, but he'd brought his new bride with him.

"Married as soon as they heard, he said." While Nick and Susanna broke their fast, Mary repeated all she'd learned from the peddler who'd come from Oundle to mend the pots. "And he admitted to leaving cow bones in the forest to be found. The searchers were supposed to think wild animals had eaten them both. Then they took theirsels off to London and beyond."

"How did they hear Morrison was dead?"

Susanna had to repress a sigh when Mary told them it was being recognized in Dover that had prompted Bourne to contact one of Clementine's kinsmen in Oundle. He'd

been passing quick to sent back word of Morrison's fate, Susanna thought. Indeed, when she considered the matter, there had not been time enough for a letter to travel from Dover to Northamptonshire and a reply go back, let alone for Bourne and Clementine to receive that news and decide to make the journey here themselves. And when had they managed to secure a special license and marry? It would have been well nigh impossible to have the banns called three times in Dover if they'd waited to wed until someone here confirmed Morrison's death. To Susanna's mind, that meant they'd known all along that he'd been executed. Meeting Nick had done naught but push their plans ahead a bit.

"And so the new-made widow at once wed her lover," Nick muttered. "A happy ending for a tragedy."

"It werdn't called so here!" Mary declared. "By my life, here be much wickedness!"

"Back to Oundle?" Susanna asked when Mary had stalked away.

"Aye."

* * *

Morrison's house in Oundle was no longer boarded up, though the shop was still closed. Through an open door, Susanna studied Clementine Morrison, now Clementine Bourne, as she gave orders to two harried-looking servants. The woman had a striking appearance and was most forceful in her manner. The slaps she dispensed along with her commands did not appear to be necessary to hasten packing.

Bourne came out of the alley next to the shop just as Nick and Susanna were about to announce themselves. "You!" he cried, goggling at Nick.

"Are you Julius Woodward today?" Nick inquired in a polite voice, "or Stephen Bourne?"

Overhearing, Clementine dispensed with witnesses by sending the servants to the upper floor and drew Nick, Susanna, and Bourne into her hall. "Master Baldwin, I presume? And this, then, would be Lady Appleton, your lover. You are both well known in Dover. One might even say notorious."

Former lover, Susanna thought. *And I am here on a visit to my godchild*. Aloud she said nothing and caught Nick's arm to forestall his angry reaction. Clementine's challenge cut too close to the truth.

"Why did you come here?" Bourne stammered out the question.

"Curiosity," Susanna said before Nick could speak. There was no way these two could know they'd been asking questions. Let them think it coincidence that they'd all ended up in Northamptonshire at this time. "When we met in Dover, you did not appear to know it was safe to return."

"A letter arrived soon after," Bourne said. The stammer intensified along with his nervousness.

"Someone knew where to write to you? Knew you were alive?"

"Clementine's cousin. She'd written to ask him what happened after she left. She made no mention of me."

Another lie, Susanna thought, but they'd seen the hole in their story and attempted to fill it. "A cousin in Oundle?"

"Peterborough," Clementine said. "You might ask him yourself, but he's just left on a long voyage."

Convenient, Susanna thought, and difficult to disprove.

Clementine strode to the door and flung it wide. "If your curiosity is satisfied now, madam, I'd fain have you leave. We have much to do before we depart again on the morrow."

A voice spoke from the street beyond. "I fear that will be impossible, madam, until you have answered certain charges laid against you."

Bourne lost every bit of color in his face. Clementine whirled to face the speaker, her eyes narrowing. "You are not the constable. What is it you want, sirrah? What charges do you mean?"

Susanna repressed a sigh. Bourne had expected to be charged with murder. She was certain of it. But Clementine could not be so easily tricked. The two men at the door were churchwardens, come to inform the newly married couple that because, before their nuptials, they had committed the sin of adultery, they must now come before the church courts. They would be ordered to do penance.

Susanna should have felt sympathy for the other woman, having once been threatened with similar charges before a church court herself. But she had never betrayed a husband, not by making a cuckold of him, or by devising a plot that would take his life. And Clementine did not react with remorse or shame to the churchwardens' claims, only irritation that she would not be permitted to leave town as soon as she wished.

Bourne's whining voice followed Susanna and Nick as they slipped away. "You should not have insisted on beginning the packing this morning, Clementine. I told you this was one of the unlucky days."

* * *

With remarkable speed, Clementine and Bourne were taken before the archdeacon and sentenced to do penance in church. "A generous bribe could not reduce their sentence," Susanna remarked when she heard of it, "but it no doubt hastened their public humiliation. Once that is complete, they can be on their way."

"October seventh," Nick mused. "That is this coming Sunday."

"Penance is not enough, not when they've done murder. There must be a way to get them to confess to more than adultery."

"If there is, we must think of it quickly, before they leave Oundle."

"The seventh day of October," Susanna repeated. "I seem to recall something about that date. Have you an almanac?"

Nick produced one open to the list of unlucky days, but Susanna surprised him by thumbing through the little volume in search of something quite different. "As I thought," she murmured. "There is an eclipse of the moon that night. It should last from nine o'clock until just past one in the morning. I believe I know a way to trick Bourne into confessing what he and Clementine did to Morrison."

The sound of approaching riders interrupted her before she could share her idea with Nick.

"Sir Edmund Brudenell, accompanied by a liveried servant," he announced after a glance into the courtyard below. A few moments later, cloaked and gloved, the two men were shown into Nick's parlor.

"I hear you have been asking questions about Stephen Bourne and Barnaby Morrison," Brudenell said as soon as Nick had presented Susanna to him. He was a confident, prosperous looking fellow somewhat past his fiftieth year.

Nick summarized what they'd discovered and their conclusions. Then, before Brudenell could comment, Susanna detailed the plan she'd been about to outline for Nick.

At first Brudenell looked skeptical, but by the time she'd finished a faint smile curved the corners of his thin mouth. He swiveled his head to locate his servant. "Morrison, come here!" At their startled looks, the smile broadened. "You will have heard my steward was kin to the accused?"

Susanna studied the thin, unhealthy looking man with the Brudenell sea-horse crest on his sleeve. He shambled forward at his master's command. Although he kept his head tucked in like a turtle, she could make out a lower lip so full it seemed to hang down over his chin—the "blob lip" Mary Chappell had spoken of. Apparently, like the big ears that ran in some families and the prominent teeth that descended through others, this was a Morrison trait.

"You heard what they told me," Brudenell said to his man. "It seems only right that you should help them avenge the wrong done to Barnaby Morrison."

"To play on Bourne's superstitious nature," Susanna said, "all you need do is let him think you are your cousin come back from the dead."

"I am nowhere near the fine figure of a man her husband was when Clementine left him," Morrison objected.

A great gulshing fellow, Mary Chappell had called him. In other words, fat. "Well, then," Susanna said, "you must stuff your clothes with straw, for 'tis clear you are the best one here to impersonate Barnaby Morrison's ghost."

* * *

On Sunday, Susanna and Nick attended evening prayers at the church in Oundle. The penitents stood on two stools in the middle aisle near the pulpit, clad in white sheets, bareheaded, barefooted, and holding white rods. As they had twice already that day, at morning and afternoon services, Bourne and Clementine confessed to the sin of adultery.

Susanna watched Bourne's face as he stammered out the intimate details and asked God's forgiveness. To judge by the dark circles under his eyes, he had not slept well. Did he feel true remorse? Or simply regret being caught?

Clementine maintained a haughty demeanor throughout her penance. Unbeaten, unbowed, unrepentant, she voiced her confession by rote, looking neither left nor right. She might be forced to endure humiliation, but she saw no reason to be humble about it.

The decision of the archdeacon's court required that both of them remain on their stools for the remainder of the service and stay in the church after the rest of the congregation had gone home. Sir Edmund's influence had been instrumental in arranging that. They would not be permitted to leave until just before nine, and then only to be taken to what they'd been told was the unmarked grave of the man they had wronged.

Susanna, Nick, and Morrison were in place in the boneyard well before Bourne and Clementine came out of the church. In truth, there was no grave. Those executed in Northampton were buried there as well. But Bourne and Clementine did not know that.

Susanna's plan was simple. Just as the eclipse of the moon began, Morrison's "ghost" would appear in the churchyard, accusing Bourne from beyond the grave. If the haberdasher was as superstitious as everyone seemed to think, he should panic and blurt out the truth.

The penitents, still in their white sheets, arrived on schedule, accompanied by Sir Edmund Brudenell, the vicar, and two churchwardens. At first everything went according

to plan. Barnaby Morrison's kinsman appeared in the moonlight, convincingly rotund. Both Bourne and Clementine gasped when they caught sight of a face with a blob lip.

"Get you gone, Barnaby!" Clementine shrieked. "You are dead and must stay in the ground. Can you do nothing right?"

"You were never satisfied," Morrison shouted back, "not even when I tried my best to please you."

Susanna stiffened. That was not what he'd been told to say. But a moment later, he returned to the plan, accusing them of the crime, relating all the details Nick and Susanna had worked out.

Bourne broke down, haunted by his own guilt. "Yes. Yes," he sobbed. "It is as you say."

"Be silent, you fool!" Clementine's shrill voice nearly drowned out Bourne's words. "You did nothing."

The "ghost" turned on her, advancing with gloved hands outstretched. "Aye. It was you, Clementine. Your plan. Your hatred. And you are the one who must suffer for it. Prison is bad, Clementine. Hanging is worse. And a woman who plots her husband's death will be burnt for it."

He was too close! Afraid Clementine would be able to tell this was no ghost, Susanna started forward, but before she could intervene, Clementine attacked. She rushed at Morrison with a cry of rage, clawing at his face.

He dodged the raking nails, bringing one arm up to protect himself. Flailing, her fingers caught his glove. When Sir Edmund seized her from behind and pulled her away, the soft leather slipped off in her hand.

Stunned, Susanna stared at the scar picked out by the remaining moonlight. This man was not Morrison's cousin the steward. He was Barnaby Morrison. Alive. Freed because he could read the neck verse. Branded with the letter "M" on his thumb rather than hanged for murder.

For a moment movement ceased as understanding burst upon them all. In heavy silence broken only by the distant hooting of an owl, the eclipse continued, bringing with it the steady diminution of light. The brand dissolved into shadow.

Clementine found her voice first. "How did you escape the gallows?"

It was Sir Edmund Brudenell who answered. "Murder may be excluded from the statutory qualifications for grants of clergy, but without a body, how can there be murder? A jury thought those bones sufficient evidence. The judges were not convinced, and Crown judges do not always feel obligated to respect the distinction between clergyable and non-clergyable felonies."

"But why let everyone think he'd been executed?" Rattled by this unexpected twist, Susanna struggled to make sense of it. It was dark in the boneyard now. One of the churchwardens lit the lanterns he had brought.

"With my wife gone and my business forfeit to the Crown, there seemed little reason to return." Morrison glared at Clementine, still struggling in Sir Edmund's grip. "Then, too, I could guess how that evidence got into the wood. I suspected Clementine would return. I meant to avenge myself upon her when she did." His gaze flicked to Susanna. "I must thank you, Lady Appleton, for showing me the way."

"I knew he'd been freed," Brudenell admitted, "but I agreed not to tell anyone the outcome of the trial. And since he had lost so much weight in gaol awaiting trial and

would scarce be recognized by his own mother, we deemed it safe for him to stay at Deene Park. Few people there have much to do with Oundle in any case. The market town of Kettering, which has more to offer, lies in the opposite direction."

Nick, Susanna remembered, had never met Morrison either, even though he did frequent the market in Oundle.

Morrison continued to watch Clementine with an intensity Susanna found unnerving. "You failed, my love," he said in a chilling whisper, "and since Bourne plainly lives, I can prove I did not murder him and thus reclaim my property from the Crown. My suffering is over. Yours has just begun."

Some of her accustomed haughtiness returned. Standing straight in spite of Sir Edmund's restraining hands on her arms, she glared at her tormentor. "And yours will continue as long as you live. We are married, Barnaby. Tied together till death do us part. I swear to you now, before these witnesses, that I will make of your life a living hell."

"I think not." He spoke through gritted teeth. "You will be tried for the attempted murder of your husband. That is petty treason. You will burn."

Still defiant, she sneered at him. "I will go free by reading the neck verse, just as you did."

In that she was mistaken, Susanna thought. The only circumstance under which a woman could plead benefit of clergy was if she had formerly been a nun.

"No!" Morrison bellowed, believing his wife's claim. He charged her like a maddened bull.

Determined that the woman who had tried to kill him should not escape punishment, he seized her by the throat. Before anyone could react, let alone stop him, he had snapped her neck. He dropped the limp body and turned to confront the horrified spectators. "*That* for her neck verse!"

"Fool!" Brudenell muttered. "She could not have used it. Nor can you a second time."

Within moments, Brudenell and the constable led Morrison and Bourne away, both prisoners. They left the churchwardens to deal with the body. But when Stephen Bourne reached the lych gate, he turned to stare, dazed, at Clementine's lifeless form. "This is not how it was meant to end," he murmured.

"You are better off without her," Morrison said.

"Oh, I agree," Bourne said with no trace of a stammer, "but I meant to kill her myself as soon as we'd claimed her inheritance."