

Heretic -
The Life of a Witch Hunter

by Clifford Beck

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For My Wife Sara

“The only thing we have to fear
on this planet is man.”

Carl Gustav Jung

Chapter 1

In the minds of the faithful, the plague had cleansed the world of evil and sin. But, there were many remained. They lay scattered across Europe as well as beyond the borderlands, in the darkness of largely unvisited places. But Satan, bearing many guises, had not done it with those now lying in festering open graves. He had simply changed costume and waited in the wings, rehearsing for the next act. The fear of pestilence would soon be replaced by an age-old adversary. Paranoia.

From the Isle of Wight to the Scottish border, England lay as a gem off the coast of northern

Europe. Birthed by war and blood, it stood out as a spectacle of history, going back far beyond the Roman Empire, its ancient heroes having risen up into the immortality of mythology. But England was also a place of magic and serenity, with rolling hills, green pastures, and stories of ghosts and all other manner of things unseen. A poet which England as always having been a place of myth and magic, its moors, graveyards, and castle ruins haunted by invisible woodland creatures and battle-scarred soldiers, their hearts pining with the memories of wives and children left behind. And although the land had been shaped by the brutality of history, England would someday see better days.

Chapter 2

Aiden Selwyn was born an only child to poor parents of Doncaster, sometime during the year of our Lord 1432. A deeply Christian family, his father was a merchant, while his mother did her best to raise him as someone who recognized the need for honor and charity. And if she couldn't shelter him from the world, she would ensure that he be prepared to fight them. Life was not so much about living but surviving. The very few lived in splendor on the backs of the many, while most existed in poverty and squalor, living

from hand to mouth.

At any other time before the great death, being a merchant could make a poor man king. But England, like the rest of Europe, was still reeling from the chaos of a depleted population. And with its numbers so drastically reduced, so too was opportunity and hence, money. Both kings and paupers were brought to their knees as people begged to God for respite. If He could produce a bounty of loaves and fishes for the needy, then why not them? Some believe that God's wrath still loomed over them as parents watched their children slowly succumb to starvation, only to consume them, that they

may sustain themselves. The only exception seemed to be the church. They had always taken care of their own, but men of the cloth had also felt the sting of depleted wealth as the people's obligation to tithing took a more than slight decline.

His father's trade was entirely dependent on travel. And the lands of England, consisting only of an island, necessitated a route by sea. But even after one hundred years since the great plague, shipbuilders were still rare. Without sea travel, England was cut off from the rest of the world and the merchant was no longer a merchant. His mother, never having had to work, found herself scrubbing floors

and waiting tables in the pubs of Doncaster. Money had become a rare commodity and both mother and father were paid, not in coin, but bread. And very little. The bottom had finally fallen out of their lives when Doncaster's businesses begin closing. English currency had become worthless and people took to the streets as crime peaked, while starvation took more each day. Finally, Aiden's parents were forced to make a difficult decision as they were no longer able to feed him. So, on one particularly chilly night, Aiden's mother and father sat in front of their small stone fire pit, a warming fire burning quietly. They had been reduced from the stately apartment of a merchant to a small,

sod-roofed hut. Believing Aiden to be asleep, they debated his immediate future.

"We can't just leave the boy to the wolves," his father said quietly.

"What about the monastery?" his mother asked. "If this needs to be done, we should leave him in God's hands." Aiden was only six, but he clearly understood that he would soon be given into the hands of strangers. The one thing he didn't understand was why. He drifted off to sleep that night with the profound sadness of shortly being abandoned. But, the decision had been made and at first light, Aiden's parents packed what few possessions they had and started the journey north. Their destination was the monastery of

the Holy Order of Uriel. Getting there would be, at least, three days walk. But monks are caring compassionate people, dedicating their lives to the idea of being in service to both God and man. Surely, they would take in a small boy.

Chapter 3

A merchant's life is spent mostly on the road and Aiden's father had more than a slight familiarity with the English countryside. They would first travel north, toward the River Aire. Once they arrived, they would either find its nearest crossing or barter for passage. Beyond

that lay at the Bramham Moors, a seemingly endless stretch of land that some of the local villagers believe to be haunted. Nothing would grow there and every morning before dawn, the moors would cover themselves with a heavy layer of fog. The emptiness of its ghostly appearance easily lead the mind into all manner of trickery and stories sprang up almost daily of silent horsemen drifting through the fog, of lights floating in the distant early morning air. But, it was thought by a few that these apparitions were merely a slight of hand performed by a weary morning mind. But then, these visions were of no concern, that something so dreamlike could not possibly be feared. The birthplace of their

fear lay beyond the moors, tucked into the wooded valley below.

The Urielin monks had taken residence in the valley centuries ago. They were, by nature of monastic law, quiet and solitary. From the eastern edge of the moor, their simple stone monastery lay as little more than a dot on the landscape. Even though they never made themselves visible, their presence was always felt. Some, driven by curiosity, ventured across the moor, thinking the monastery to be abandoned. They would never return. Some believed they had simply become lost, while others, being more superstitious, considered their absence to be the work of woodland

tricksters and spirits. Still, others suspected something darker. That they had been taken by means of malevolent intent, agents of the devil. But the monks, having never been seen, were immediately suspected. People, it seems, are always quick to judge what they don't understand.

However, on some nights, when the moon was dark and the air was clear, those living on the edge of the moor would come out from under their thatched roofs, stirred from sleep by a faint sound, echoing from the distance. As occasional as it was, it was always the same sound. Yet, no one could identify it with any certainty. Some heard it is howling, others,

screaming, but for the sake of soothing the fears of children, a strange, unnerving sound was simply a product of the wind, winding its way from the valley, and up across the moors. The children, in their innocence, believed the well-intentioned lie. But for those approaching adulthood, the thoughtfully worded transgression was a pale attempt to blanket a truth that could not be explained.

Chapter 4

Aidan was led from the edge of Doncaster as he and his already grieving parents traveled

north to the moors. Without horses, they were forced to move on foot. Many in the town had been forced to its outskirts by poverty and overcrowded conditions. Not being able to afford a roof to cover their heads, people made due with animal skins, rocks, and earth. Those who'd had everything, now had nothing, while those who'd had little now had the face of starvation staring them down on a daily basis. And although they lived in squalor, they were in possession of one thing. They somehow managed to cling to their faith, that God would deliver them from their shackles of suffering and fear.

The path away from town was littered with

the stench of human filth. The dead simply lay where they had dropped, while the living hobbled around as nothing more than skin clad skeletons, robbing the decomposing of what little might be tucked in their pockets. Aiden's mother had always tried to shield him from the horrors of the world, but there was only so much she could do, and she didn't want him growing up without a firm grasp on the real world. He had to learn sometime and the real world seemed to be falling in on him at a rapid rate.

Finally, making their way from the human cesspool that Doncaster had become, the first thing Aiden noticed was that the air cleared. It

smelled clean and sweet with the fragrance of grass, elm and oak trees. Having never ventured beyond the town, he had become too accustomed to the odors associated with human activity. He'd never known anything else until the warm smell of the earth struck his senses. And as they passed into the grasslands of the English countryside, Aiden's mind would give birth to another experience. For all of his six years, he had been surrounded by wooden walls, dirt streets and the bustle of traffic. He, like all the children of Doncaster, had been warned against straying away from the village. They had been told stories of a host of demons and witches living in the shadows of the forest as creatures

cowardly hid behind trees and beneath rocks. They waited for those who refused to heed their parents' advice. And once within reach, they would become ensnared in the evil, greedy grasp of the things the devil himself had made. But, with his parents, Aiden felt safe to let his eyes drink in the landscape he had never before been allowed to see. The grass grew high atop the fertile ground and shifted with the warm English breeze, together, as one living creature beneath the watchful eyes of the creator. Beyond this waving sea of endless emerald autumn scape lay the distant hills of central England's lowlands. Aiden had never seen such magnificence and stopped to admire its beauty.

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