Wolf at the Door

By Sarah Hawkswood

Servant of Death
Ordeal by Fire
Marked to Die
Hostage to Fortune
Vale of Tears
Faithful unto Death
River of Sins
Blood Runs Thicker
Wolf at the Door

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A Bradecote
and Catchpoll Mystery

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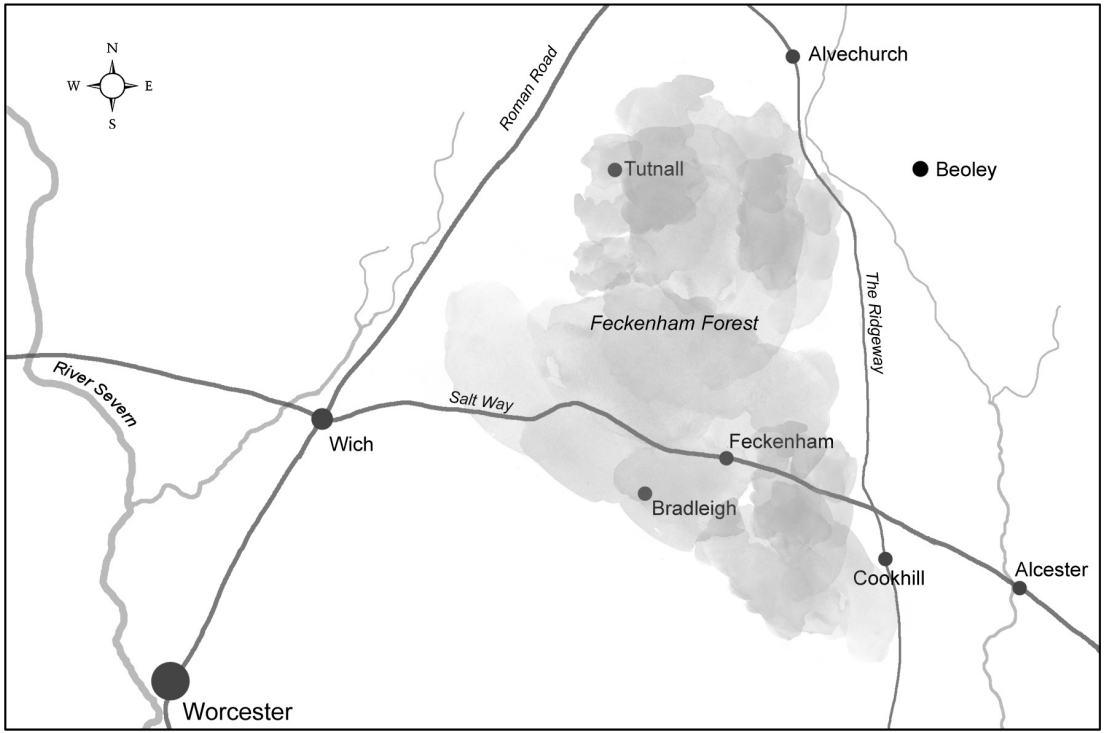
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Chapter One

All Hallows' Eve 1144

The sound of the thumping upon the door of the priest's house was insistent, and Father Hildebert opened it with a look of concern upon his still youthful face, expecting to see Wystan the village bailiff, whose wife was in her time of travail.

'I shall come—oh!' The man before him was not worried father-to-be Wystan, but a vaguely familiar, stocky man about his own age, very square of jaw, at odds with eyes that were close together above a thin nose that made him seem broader of cheek. 'I am sorry, I thought you were Wystan.' The priest now looked puzzled.

'I am William, son of Durand Wuduweard. You must come with me, now, and see . . .' The man took a deep breath and swallowed hard. 'He is dead, Father.'

Father Hildebert took in the man's pallor, and the working of the muscle in his cheek.

'Wystan the Bailiff?' The priest blinked in surprise.

'No. Not Wystan. My father.' The *wuduweard's* son enunciated slowly, not quite yelling. He wondered if the priest, still with the 'taint' of Norman French in his voice, was slow to comprehend him.

'Your father. Yes, of course. Oh dear. It must have been all of a sudden, for I am sure I saw him but yestereve, and he looked as always.' The good priest did not say he looked surly and unforgiving, which was his usual demeanour.

'Oh, it was sudden, Father. I can promise you that.' William sounded grim. 'Come.'

The priest grabbed his cloak, for the wintery dawning was bitterly cold, and the ruts of the tracks that ran through the village of Feckenham were rimed with frost, and treacherous. The church and priest's house lay upon The Strete that ran north off the king's highway, which was an old road that showed in its straightness and occasional stony surface its use at least as far back as the Romans. It was the main route from Wich to Alcester and Stratford, a salt road, but at this season less frequented. William was not a tall man, but he strode swiftly, and Father Hildebert had to almost run to keep up with him. As they turned to the right at the junction of the two thoroughfares the priest exclaimed as he half slipped upon one of the hard ridges and his ankle turned. William did not so much as look around.

Durand Wuduweard had a dwelling at the western end of the village, on the Salt Way but set a little apart, as though to stress he was part of the King's Park that he oversaw more than the community of Feckenham itself, which lay within the forest

that took its name. There were still those who muttered that he was not really 'local', for he came out of Warwickshire and had more Norman blood than most of his peers. The *wuduweard* before him had fathered only daughters, and Durand had wed one of them, taken the forester's role within the first year, and seen her buried within five, leaving him with a small son. A few generous souls said it was his loss turned him into the solitary and miserable bastard he had become, but others claimed he was always thus, and his wife had died from misery. This much the priest knew, but he had held the parish for less than a year, and was even more of an outsider than Durand, having been sent by his abbot at the abbey of St Mary's at Lire, in Normandy across to their daughter-house at Wareham some years previously. The abbey had the advowson and thus appointed the priest, and since Hildebert had chosen the priesthood over the claustral life of a monk, and had an English grandmother, Father Abbot had sent him 'to preach to the English', as though they were heathens. Father Hildebert had found them far from heathen, but cautious in their welcome, and he was only just beginning to feel accepted.

With his breath almost freezing before his face, and the cold tightening his chest, the priest drew up, gasping, before the door of Durand's home. He nearly bumped into William, who did turn at last.

'I hope as you have a strong stomach, Father.'

'A strong—oh dear.' He crossed himself, as much to give himself courage as anything else, and stepped over the threshold as William opened the door and entered. It took some time for Father Hildebert's eyes to adjust to the gloom of the chamber,

and he wished that the sight had remained indiscernible. There were signs of a fight, a stool knocked over and a wicker basket upside down, but what drew the attention and kept it was the body of Durand Wuduweard. It lay sprawled upon its back, the feet so close to the now cold hearth as to have been in the fire. Shoes and feet had been burnt, leaving a sickly sweet smell that repulsed. The arms were bitten, one so badly the tendons at the wrist showed white, and the body was, in places, a mix of bloody rags and gashed flesh. What was far worse, however, was the face, or the lack of it. A priest saw death more than most, being called to give the last rites to all, from toothless babes to the toothless old, and was used to closing the eyes and seeing that absence of soul which left a body as a carcass. In this case, closing the eyes would be hard. The throat had been ripped out and the face was so mutilated it was barely recognisable as human, let alone Durand Wuduweard.

'*Sacré Coeur, qui* . . . who did this? Why did they . . . ?' The poor priest was so overcome that his native French emerged, even after a decade in England. He choked, for his stomach could hold out no longer, and he pressed his hand over his mouth and rushed back out of the door, and could be heard retching outside. William stayed where he was, being past any first horrors. After a short while Father Hildebert returned, apologising for his weakness.

'It is a terrible thing that has happened. We must raise a hue and cry, yes?' Father Hildebert had learnt the English law enough to know that after a theft or violence, a hue and cry should be raised, but was it so after some beast?

'What we need is hunters, not village folk with pitchforks and staves. You asked "who" did this, Father, but it was "what". I thought at first it was some brute of a dog, but . . . ever seen a wolf, Father?'

'A wolf?' The priest's voice went up an octave. He was a man strong in faith but weak and nervous of body. 'No, no, never.'

'They are rare nowadays, but in the forest they say as there are a few left in the deepest parts. Never seen one near people before, just a possible glimpse through the trees, but . . . There are bite marks, very clear, and the bones are broken. It would take a strong beast to do that.' He had sounded calm until this point, but now his voice shook. 'My poor father. Such a death!'

The priest nodded, overwhelmed, and trying desperately to muster his thoughts, beyond a very natural fear that if a wolf had been so bold at Feckenham's edge, it might seek prey deeper within, at the church. Eventually, he swallowed hard and spoke, softly but with certainty.

'Dying, however terrible the manner of it, is but a small thing in eternity, and God's mercy is upon those who suffer. Pray for your father's soul, which is beyond earthly concerns, and we will bring him to the church, and alert the village. Everyone must have a care.'

Durand Wuduweard was not a man many would weep over, but the tolling of the church bell summoned folk to its open doors, and weeping there was, among women fearful for their husbands and for their children. The swine boy was reduced to a gibbering wreck, even when it was promised he would not be sent alone into the woodland with the few remaining animals after the autumn culling. The village had both a reeve and bailiff,

though a killing, by man or wolf, was beyond the scope of any village official, and a hurried gathering of the village menfolk soon came to the conclusion that this matter needed the lord Sheriff of Worcestershire, as the King's man, with forest rights, to deal with it.

'I shall go to Worcester,' announced Edgar the Reeve, 'and William, you must come along, and you also, Father, if you would. Most likely them in Worcester will not credit a wolf, but then they needs have no fear of one inside the walls and in their streets.'

'But we should bury Durand first.' Father Hildebert was confident the reeve would agree with him.

''Tis so cold I doubts the earth will be breakable enough to bury him yet. What say you, Leofric?' The reeve turned to the village gravedigger.

'Hard as iron it is this morn. If 'n it keeps as cold, you would need to delve as for stone to break the sod. I would not fancy trying to dig a grave.'

'And also, Father, if the lord Sheriff sends anyone to Feckenham, and doubts us, they can see for themselves what happened.' The reeve did not see that they would be believed without proof.

This met with a murmur of general approval. No man wanted his family savaged in their bed, but neither did they like the idea of hunting a wolf that had already tasted human flesh. The sheriff and his men sounded a far, far better idea.

William, son of Durand, did not look as happy. He had perforce had dealings with the sheriff's serjeant in the past, and was not keen to renew the acquaintanceship. However, he

realised his objections would fall upon deaf ears, and so gave a grim nod of acquiescence, and kept his thoughts, and plans, to himself.

Serjeant Catchpoll did not look happy. This did not particularly perturb Walkelin, his serjeanting apprentice, because 'not looking happy' was a look the sheriff's serjeant had perfected over decades, and it successfully ensured that most of Worcester regarded him as a man to treat with circumspection. The honest were respectful and the dishonest tried their hardest to avoid him at all times. This was just how Catchpoll liked matters. However, this morning he was genuinely unhappy. Before William de Beauchamp, lord Sheriff of Worcestershire, stood three men. There were the priest and the reeve of Feckenham, with a man whom Catchpoll did not trust in the slightest; a man who was now describing himself as 'William fitzDurand' when most of Worcester knew him as William Swicol, or Deceitful William. They were gabbling a tale of a wolf and a faceless corpse, and he knew it would all mean him trailing out to Feckenham in bitterly cold weather that made his joints ache. This did not please him overmuch, but it was not the cause of his growling discontent. Catchpoll felt he was hearing a tale to scare children that had somehow been given a physical form. Nobody in Feckenham would be set at ease with anything less than a wolf's pelt on display, and Catchpoll really doubted there were wolves in Feckenham Forest that would ever get within howling distance of human habitation.

'My lord Sheriff,' the reeve was in full flow now, 'we ourselves cannot hunt a wolf pack. We are but village folk,

and with but an ass and a pony among us all.'

Catchpoll shut his eyes. Now the wolf had become a pack of wolves.

'It will take mounted men, and hounds, to save us from this peril. You must—'

'I what?' William de Beauchamp enunciated the two words slowly, with heavy menace. His temper was not difficult to rouse, and being told what he must do by some village nobody was guaranteed to inflame it. Those in the chamber who knew him, now awaited his wrath. 'I "must", must I? I do not have to do anything upon your command, wyrmling. I answer to the lord King,' he paused for a moment, and added, grudgingly, 'and God.'

The reeve shook, visibly.

'You bring me this report of a violent death, and I will send Serjeant Catchpoll here,' he gave a nod in Catchpoll's direction, 'and his underserjeant, to see for themselves what you have related, and they will come back to me. I am not going to spend fruitless days charging about Feckenham Forest hunting a possible wolf, which sounds unlikely. Catchpoll, how many wolves have you heard of in Feckenham Forest in your lifetime?' He did not look at the serjeant, and thus did not see Catchpoll's fleeting but obvious expression of surprise, which had nothing to do with wolves and all to do with hearing he had an 'underserjeant'. There was a slight pause, which might have been interpreted as Catchpoll ruminating upon fanged predators.

'I cannot say as I have heard of many, my lord, and such a thing would be known over all the shire if seen upon the roads

or prowling round newly cleared assarts and villages. There was wolves enough in the forests in the days afore the sainted Confessor and I doubts they all dropped dead at the news of the death of King Harold, but they was rarely close to Worcester by the time of my oldfather. He spoke of one, just one mind, that had taken swine in the forest for a season right near to Himbleton, and then been found dead, starved and mostly toothless. For the most part, the odd report has come from further north, in the Lickey Hills, and the *wuduweard* who lives in Tutnall has brought in two wolf pelts in my time, when a few of the King's deer was lost to attack in the northern part of the King's Forest. The pelts were owed to the lord King, and he was granted a bounty for them. That is not many wolves over many years and acres of forest. There will be some out there, I doubt not, but wolves keep away from folk and in only the wildest places. 'Tis not for nothing that a man declared outlaw is called *wulfeshéafod*, wolf's head, for he is cast out of folk-life, like the wolf. But outlaw and wolf avoid people to survive. What wolf would enter a village? I also never heard of a beast within four walls. 'Tis not natural. It does not fit.'

'However true the serjeant's words, my lord Sheriff, my father lies in the church, torn by teeth no hound possesses, his bones crushed by strong jaws.' William fitzDurand combined a pleading tone with the determination of a dutiful and bereaved son. 'I would have justice for him, as I would against a murderer, though his killer walks upon four feet not two, and if the killing of kine and swine was reason enough to hunt a wolf, none can deny it is right to hunt one who has killed a man.'

'You would have justice. Well, that is not something I

thought to hear from you, William,' Catchpoll paused for a moment, 'fitzDurand.' He almost spat the 'fitz', and glared at the man. 'More likely you would seek to avoid it.'

'You have nothing against me, Sheriff's Serjeant, beyond your own dislike, and that is no law.'

'There are those in Worcester who might disagree with you,' murmured William de Beauchamp, his anger ameliorated by watching the animosity between the two men. He wondered how fitzDurand had come to his serjeant's notice. Catchpoll heard the comment, but did not react by so much as a muscle.

'So did you creep off back home to Feckenham when all the alehouses in Worcester barred their doors to you and your cheating?' Catchpoll's eyes were on William fitzDurand, but also on the priest, who looked puzzled for a moment. No, Catchpoll thought, you have not been in Feckenham, yet you appear just upon the day your father meets a grim death. Interesting.

'Where I have been is not important, and you have no right to know. This morning I went to see my father and found a corpse. That is what is important,' William flung back at the serjeant.

Father Hildebert shrank at the raised voices and winced as if in pain.

'*Mon seigneur*,' the priest reverted to his native tongue, hoping that it might weigh more with the puissant lord, 'I have a village where this morning all is fear and trembling, all questions and no answers. The lord King is our overlord, and you are his representative in the shire. It is only to you that we can look. I thank you for hearing us and sending your *serjant*.' He glanced briefly at Catchpoll, who had grasped the gist of

what he had said, in that it involved himself, the King, the village and fear.

'I will not send hounds and hunters upon horseback, but my best hound to smell out wrongdoing, my best hunter of the truth, which is Serjeant Catchpoll. If he says there is no wolf, there is no wolf and Feckenham will cease to act like a headless fowl. Now, if you are to be in Feckenham before' – de Beauchamp paused for a moment, and smiled, slowly – 'wolf-howl, you must be gone swiftly. Yet I will speak with my serjeant privately first.' It was a dismissal to all but Catchpoll, and, after one questioning look, Walkelin. The Feckenham men withdrew, two a little relieved and one complaining at this delay, though under his breath. Reeve and priest shot him a warning look.

'What do you think then, Catchpoll?' William de Beauchamp looked straight at his serjeant.

'I would swear oath that whatever Durand Wuduweard's son said, whether he gives himself airs and titles himself William fitzDurand or not, would be as false as a whore's promise. Yet the priest and reeve swear he speaks true.' Catchpoll shook his head, but then cheered himself slightly. 'Of course, the good father has not had his parish more than a year and is foreign, so he might not know the difference between a wolf and a chicken.'

'Oh, I am sure he would kn—' Walkelin shut up, realising that the serjeant was not being literal.

'And Edgar the Reeve has less brain than he has hair, and the man is nearly bald-pated.' Catchpoll ignored the interruption.

'Nevertheless, even rumour of a wolf is bad for the King's Peace, so we will not let this go lightly.' William de Beauchamp

leant forward in his seat, resting his chin on one large palm. 'Even if it was not a wolf, Catchpoll, something made such a mess of Durand Wuduweard's face that he was recognised by scraps of his garb and the general size of the man. What else might do that?'

'That I could not say, my lord. It is just . . . something smells all wrong.'

'Then best you go and sniff it close, Serjeant, and report your findings back to me. I want all the wolf talk to cease. You can be sure it is already in the alehouses of Worcester and soon at every fireside. We will be having every cur that howls of an evening being named a wolf before Advent, you may be sure.'

'Aye, that is sadly true, my lord, and wasting our time chasing shadows.'

'Then best get to Feckenham today.' De Beauchamp gave a cheerless smile.

'And the lord Bradecote?'

'No need to have him chasing shadows as well, not yet. Report back to me and hopefully there will no need to disturb him from worrying himself witless over his lady's swelling belly.'

Serjeant Catchpoll wondered if the lady Bradecote might wish that her loving but overprotective lord would be called to service, and leave her to the business of breeding in peace. You could understand whence sprang the man's worry, having been blissfully married under a year and after seeing his first wife bleed to death before his own eyes in the trial of childbirth. However, he was, in Catchpoll's view, and evidently that of William de Beauchamp, taking his concern too far. Last time he had been called from his manor she was only just showing

properly, but by now must be about seven months gone. When he had come to speak with de Beauchamp at Michaelmas he had been so eager to get back to her he had nearly leapt into the saddle to be away, and had clearly fretted during his few days' absence. Catchpoll had offered up prayers that the lady would be safely delivered come her time, and the lord Bradecote return to his usual manner.

'I will take young Walkelin, my lord, and yes, with good fortune, none of us needs be set chasing after invisible wolves.'

William de Beauchamp gave a nod of agreement and dismissal, and as they left, Catchpoll and Walkelin heard him call for more wood for the brazier. Catchpoll growled. It was not him setting forth in the late autumn chill.

It was beyond the gloaming and full dark when the small party forded the brook and reached Feckenham, and the priest's teeth were chattering not just from the cold. He refused to be cheered by the assertion that no wolf would attack a group of five men on horseback by daylight or moonlight, even if there were only four mounts. William Swicol was upon the pony from his father's stable, with the reeve up behind him, and Father Hildebert was uncomfortably astride a donkey borrowed from the bailiff, with his habit riding up and revealing bone-white, skinny calves.

Feckenham was a good-sized village, but there were the two yoke of oxen for the ploughing and no need of horses. Durand Wuduweard's pony had been a source of gossip for weeks when it appeared in the village. Fortunately for the party, the moon was full and lit their way, but each of them was as chilled to the

bone as Father Hildebert, and Catchpoll was in no mood to talk, even to Walkelin.

As their hoofbeats on the hard ground brought them into the middle of the village, on the north side of the Salt Way, a few shutters were cautiously set ajar, and nervous chinks of light crept out to meet them. They went to the church, and Father Hildebert gave an audible sigh of relief as the door was closed behind them with a reassuring creak of oak. The cold kept the death-scent from pervading the nave, and it was only when the priest, who knew his church so well that he had no need of the sanctuary light to tread confidently in the gloom, lit more candles at the altar and brought them from the chancel that their flickering birth illuminated the trestled board set to the north side of the nave, and the covered shape upon it. Catchpoll genuflected respectfully, crossed himself, and went without a word to lift the dark cloth that covered the corpse. He sucked his teeth as Walkelin came to stand beside him and took a sharp intake of breath.

'Sweet Jesu!' Walkelin crossed himself devoutly. The reeve and William fitzDurand hung back. They had seen more than they could have wished already, and did not seek to look again.

Catchpoll had a good memory for faces, but even had he met Durand many times before, he would have been totally unable to give this corpse his name. Not even a wife or son could have done so, for there was little of the face that still looked like features. The nose was ripped away, and half a cheek, leaving teeth in a grimace seen most usually on a skeleton. The one orbit was empty, the brow reduced to splintered bone, and there was not enough of the jaw left to bind the mouth closed, not that

the hole that remained could be termed a mouth. The throat too had been ripped out. Whatever – and Catchpoll reluctantly doubted very much a man could have done such damage with any weapon and achieved the same effect – had done this to Durand Wuduweard was big and vicious. At the same time the idea of a wolf-death was all wrong. He felt it.

'How did you come upon him? Exactly.' Catchpoll glanced at the man's son.

'He was lying on his back and—'

'No. Start at the beginning. You went to his house. Why?'

'He was my father. Of course I went to his house.'

'But you do not live in Feckenham. I ask why you came here this morning to see him.'

'I . . . We had a falling out over something foolish and I wanted to tell him I had come to see that he had the right of it. I came to the house a little before full light and the door was open, and the place in darkness, with not even fire glow, which made me fearful. I lit a rushlight and then I saw . . .' His voice trailed off, and William swallowed hard.

'The door was open, you are sure?'

'Yes.'

'And I saw the poor man yesterday evening, at least as darkness was falling, *Serjant*.' The priest spoke, rising from his knees before the altar, whence he had returned to avoid looking at the body and had taken strength from silent prayer. 'I had been collecting sticks for kindling and saw him coming from his stable to the house.'

'But he was not at the door?'

'No, he was not. But he must have been inside for some

time because we saw the fire had been lit, and was burnt out this morning.'

'What concerns me is how a man, in the bone-bite cold of All Hallows' Eve mind you, enters his house and does not set the latch, to keep out cold and stranger both, when he has done so.' Catchpoll pulled a 'thinking face'.

'Perhaps he did?' suggested the bailiff.

'And that would mean this wolf could open doors. Now that is truly a thing to scare us all in our beds, that is.' Catchpoll was scathing.

'Then he must have forgotten to close it properly or heard a noise outside and gone to the door and opened it and . . .' Edgar the Reeve's suggestion withered on his lips at Serjeant Catchpoll's expression.

'And this wolf just happened to be there waiting to come in and sit before his fire and then attack him, yes?'

'Well, I . . .' The bailiff looked at the floor and gave up.

'I am trying to see how a wolf, a beast not seen by a soul in this hundred for two dozen years, and then but one, appears from nowhere, and attacks not in the forest but in a man's house. What wild animal would dare do such a thing?'

'But there is no other explanation, Serjeant Catchpoll.' Edgar the Reeve was frowning.

'Unless,' William fitzDurand crossed himself and dropped his voice to a hoarse whisper, 'he entered as a man and killed as a wolf. What if it was a *werwulf*?'

'A what?' Father Hildebert looked puzzled.

'A man as turns into a wolf at full moon, Father.' Edgar shuddered.

'A-a *garoul*? No, no, surely . . .' The priest looked to Catchpoll, clearly hoping for reassurance. Catchpoll was trying to work out how he was going to get the inhabitants of Feckenham to see this as a crime, because it was, he just knew it, however much he could not prove it right now.

'What you see was not the act of a man.' William fitzDurand shook his head, but sounded slightly relieved, as though a monster was better than a murderer.

'No. It was not.' Catchpoll spoke slowly, reluctantly, drawing back the cloth from the rest of the body. He noted the burning to the feet, and the wounds upon the torso and both arms. If this was a wolf's work in hunger, then why was there no sign of the body being eaten? 'Not the killing bit, but . . . We need to see the house.'

'Well, there is no wolf there now, I can promise you.' William sounded annoyed. Why was the sheriff's serjeant trying so hard not to see the obvious?

'I did not suggest there would be. Just show us the house.' Catchpoll drew the cloth over the corpse so that it looked no different to any other awaiting full shrouding, and requested a lantern from Father Hildebert. The priest hurried to bring one, and suggested that he remain and pray for them, which was not as cheering as he intended, but Catchpoll wanted all three present. He had questions.