



The Traitor's Tale *by* Stuart Edwards

Who would have thought it! Me, Ælfhere, the murderous Mercian Prince, panting up the hill with old faithful Archbishop Dunstan. Paying homage to the witless bones of a boy. Needs must, I suppose. Each step covers my tracks. Each prayer nails down the lid.

Dunstan may not care to admit it, but he is as guilty as I am. He didn't strike a blow; then nor did I. Yet between us, we conjured up the blows to be struck. As soon as he fastened his strings on the boy, he must have known the knives would be out. It was Dunstan's need to cling on, to be the power behind the throne, that put the boy in harm's way. I merely arranged for harm to be there at the right moment - Corfe Castle, 18th March 978, as dusk fell. And harm didn't need much encouragement. A sidelined stepmother, caring only for her own flesh and blood. Ambitions aligned, poison was poured and knives fell.

I wondered how Dunstan would acknowledge me when I arrived at Wareham. By the time I got there, the boy's body had already been dug up and was safely shrouded in its coffin, ready for the journey. I thought it best not to be there earlier. Besides, I am a busy man these days. Dunstan has more time on his hands.

When I first set eyes on him again, he is a shrivelled version of the Dunstan I had known - and hated - the juice all sucked out of him. I had last seen him two years earlier when we crowned Æthelred, just a couple of weeks after his stepbrother, Edward's unfortunate demise. As the crown left Dunstan's hand, so did the power behind the throne. And where did it drop. Into my lap. A 10 year-old cannot be ready to rule. That's why they called him, "Æthelred the Unready". But I, Ælfhere, was ready. My strings were attached. All I had to do was lift my hand to tauten their hold. The faithful were banished and the traitors took all.

Shrivelled he may be, but Dunstan still knows where his interests lie. Ornamental impotence is not the worst fate. He greets me with a studied warmth and just a hint of sanctimony. Our shared insincerities march in step for three long days, now panting as they reach the final summit. New accomplices come out to greet us. The Abbess of Shaftesbury and her noble nuns ready themselves for the final act.

Dunstan confects a ceremony fit for the burial of a King. He sets the bones on their path to resurrection as saintly relics. No one now needs to question Edward's legitimacy or the manner of his death. Dunstan has his own path to sainthood. The nuns have their income in perpetuity. I am in the clear. We are all in this together. The case is closed.