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Sunday Telegraph



1210 and
a black force is
sweeping England

THE
GALLOWES
CURSE

karen
maitland

author of COMPANY
OF LIARS

THE GALLOWS CURSE

Karen Maitland travelled and worked in many parts of the United Kingdom before finally settling in the beautiful medieval city of Lincoln. She is the author of *Company of Liars* and *The Owl Killers*, both of which are available as Penguin paperback.

By the same author

The Company of Liars

The Owl Killers

THE GALLOWS CURSE

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MICHAEL JOSEPH

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Historical Notes

Glossary

Mandragoræ. Of Mandrakes. Known also as Satan's apple. A root dangerous for its coldness, being cold in the fourth degree. The root is dangerous.

Nicholas Culpeper (1616–54)
Complete [Herbal](#) and English Physician

Nous appelons notre avenir l'ombre de lui-même que notre passé projette devant nous.

What we call our future is the shadow which our past throws in front of us.

Marcel Proust (1871–1922),
French novelist, author of
A la recherche du temps perdu

Forgive your enemies, but remember their names.

A Norfolk saying

Cast of Characters

Narrator

Yadua – the mandrake

City of Lincoln, England

Gunilda – a healer

Warren – a Norman nobleman

The Village of Gastmere, Norfolk

Raffaele/Raffe – Gerard's steward and friend

Gerard of Gastmere – lord of the manor

Lady Anne – Gerard's widowed mother

Hilda – an embittered old widow and Lady Anne's maid

Walter – manor gatekeeper

Elena – a fifteen-year-old villein working as a field hand at the manor

Cecily – Elena's mother

Athan – Elena's seventeen-year-old lover

Joan – Athan's mother

Marion – leader of the field hands

Gytha – a cunning woman

Madron – Gytha's blind mother

Osborn of Roxham – Gerard's former commander in battle

Hugh – Osborn's younger brother

Raoul – a member of Osborn's retinue

City of Norwich, England

Mother Margot/Ma – owner of the house

Talbot – gatekeeper

Luce – a prostitute

Finch – a small boy

Town of Yarmouth, England

Martin – a French visitor

City of Acre, Holy Land

Ayaz – a Saracen merchant

Prologue

Anno Domini 1160

‘I need poison ... now ... this very night. Poison that will kill a man for certain, but not too quickly; I can’t risk being discovered with him when he dies.’ The stranger hesitated. ‘It must appear a natural death ... one that’ll arouse no suspicions when the corpse is discovered.’

‘But why come to me?’ Gunilda protested.

‘I was told that if there is anyone in Lincoln, indeed in the whole kingdom, who has the skill to conjure such a substance, it’s you.’ The man reached across and grasped the edge of Gunilda’s skirt, tugging it like a wheedling child. ‘There’s no one else I can turn to ... help me, in your mercy ... I beg of you.’

In the dim mustard light of the guttering tallow candle, Gunilda could see little of the man’s expression, but she could hear the desperation in his voice. When a stranger comes knocking at the door of your cottage at the darkest hour of night, you can be certain it is not a cure for warts he’s seeking.

The man leaned forward, lowering his voice still further. ‘Your knowledge is valuable and the ingredients costly, I’ve no doubt.’ He spread his hands wide. ‘I’m a poor man, as you can see. I can’t pay in coin. But I do have something that might interest a woman like you, something so rare and precious it is beyond price.’

He reached into the leather srip hanging from his belt and pulled out a packet the size of his hand, bundled in rags. He began to unwrap it, but Gunilda caught his wrist to stop him.

‘Have you any idea what you’re asking? I’m not going to help you to kill a man. I don’t know what tattle you’ve been listening to, but I’m a healer, not a murderer. If you’ve some quarrel to settle, go to any of the alehouses and inns down at the quayside. You’ll find a score of men hanging around those places only too eager to slit a man’s throat or bludgeon him over the head for nothing more than the price of a flagon of ale.’

The stranger shook his head. ‘Don’t think I haven’t considered that, but this man is a Norman knight, well guarded. He doesn’t roam the streets alone.’

Gunilda snorted. ‘And you think that’s going to convince me to help you, do you? You’re not merely asking me to murder some old midden-grubber or ship’s rat. No, you want me to slaughter a Norman, and a nobleman no less. You’re not just moon-touched; you’re a

gibbering cod-wit. I think you'd better leave now, before you put us both on the gallows for even talking about it.'

But her visitor made no attempt to rise. He leaned forward on the low stool, his face masked by the shadows from the bunches of herbs swinging above his head.

'You don't understand. The man I want to kill is the man who raped my daughter. She's not yet twelve years old. He hurt her, and she's beside herself with terror that he'll return. I can't accuse him without for ever defiling her reputation and besides, who would take notice of a poor man like me? If I brought such an accusation against a nobleman, he'd only deny it and the sheriff would believe him. Even if he didn't, what could the sheriff do? Fine him, if that, and then he'd be free to take his revenge on me and, worse still, on her. My child will never be able to sleep without fear until that monster is dead, and he deserves to die for what he's done.'

Gunilda glanced behind her at the small figure of her own daughter curled up asleep under a heap of rags. She was the same age as this man's child. If a man ever touched her daughter she'd rip his throat out with her own teeth. Any louse who forced himself upon a child deserved more than mere poison.

The man had followed her gaze. 'For my daughter,' he begged.

He continued to unwrap the small package and this time Gunilda made no move to stop him. She gasped when she saw what lay inside.

'Can it be ... is it genuine?'

But she didn't need him to answer that question for as soon as she took it in her bare hands she could feel it stirring to life. It was a black and twisted thing, a shrivelled root, shaped like a human with a body, two arms, two legs and a face as wrinkled as time itself. A mandrake! A genuine mandrake and here in her own hands. He was right; it was a creature beyond price.

'How did you come by this?'

'I ... acquired it in the Holy Land, when I fought for the Cross.'

Gunilda knew that some blood-soaked tale must lurk behind that careful word *acquired*, but she didn't press him. There are some answers no one wants to utter or hear.

The stranger was watching her intently. 'So you will give me the poison ... for the mandrake?'

Gunilda hesitated. It wouldn't be the first time she'd helped a man to die, though mostly :

was some poor soul who, racked with pain or misery beyond enduring, begged her to help them speed their passing. They all came to her, those who could not afford the exorbitant fees of the apothecaries and physicians. She was well loved for her cures, and feared for her curses. But, though the physicians ranted against her, she did only good to the innocent and harm to the evil, so she was mostly left in peace.

Finally she rose. ‘What he’s done to your daughter he’ll doubtless do to others. For their sakes – to prevent a greater evil – I’ll give you what you need.’

Before the [Nocturn](#) bell had finished sounding from the priory, the stranger had slipped out into the stinking alley, a phial of poison safely lodged in his scrip where the mandrake had nestled.

Gunilda sat in front of the fire cradling the tiny creature in her hands, feeling the flutter of life beneath her fingers, the throbbing power rising up through her hands.

‘What did he give you?’ A sleepy little face appeared at her side.

Gunilda hugged her daughter tightly to her, thinking of another child. Then she held up the mandrake. ‘It’s something I’ve only ever dreamed of possessing. It has the power to cure every ill if used well, even to turn back curses upon the sender.’

‘Can I hold it?’ her daughter asked.

Gunilda shook her head. ‘It’s too dangerous; first you must learn how to use it well. Used wrongly, it can bring death and worse. I’ll teach you all its secrets one day, but there is plenty of time for that. Go back to sleep now.’

Gunilda wrapped the mandrake carefully again and hid it in the darkest corner of the cottage, in the hollow under a stone in the floor where they kept their coins, on the rare occasions they were ever paid with money. She lay down beside her daughter, smoothing her hair and singing softly until she felt the child relax and heard the rhythmic breathing which signified sleep. Then she closed her own eyes. She slept without guilt for the nobleman whose death sentence she had signed. One tyrant less in the world was a blessing.

At dawn, nearly two weeks later, Gunilda was again awakened by a knocking at her door, but this time the visitors did not wait for her to answer it. Before she had even struggled upright the door was kicked in and soldiers were pouring into the tiny cottage. Her daughter screamed and fought the men as they dragged Gunilda from her hearth, but they pushed the child to the ground, kicking her until she curled up into a ball and lay sobbing. The soldiers lashed Gunilda’s wrists to a horse’s tail and ran her up the great hill to the cathedral. She

could hear her little daughter crying and calling out to her as, bruised and battered, she toiled up Steep Hill behind her mother.

Gunilda recognized only one man in the crowd who awaited her outside the cathedral, the stranger who had come in the night to her cottage. But he was not clad in a poor man's garb any more. And now it seemed he had a name, a name she would remember to her grave and beyond – Sir Warren. With trembling hand Warren pointed to Gunilda and feigned to weep as he betrayed her.

It took a while for Gunilda to understand the charge which had been brought against her, but eventually they told her that Sir Warren's wife was dead. The death had not been marked as suspicious at first. The deceased had been placed in her coffin while messengers went out to recall her poor grieving husband from London and to summon her brother from Winchester for her funeral, which, given her wealth, was to be a lavish affair.

But when Warren installed his comely, and obviously pregnant, young mistress in the house before his wife's coffin was even laid in the tomb, his brother-in-law began to suspect foul play. He insisted on the coffin being opened in the presence of witnesses. Despite the outraged protests from Warren and the parish priest, he commanded the tiring maids to lift the dead woman's clothes as he searched the body for the marks of violence he was certain he would find. He looked for stab wounds, bruises from strangulation, bumps on the head, but there was nothing.

He was about reluctantly to admit he had been mistaken, when a clerk pointed to the head of maggots that had fallen to the bottom of the coffin as the clothes were disturbed. The woman had been dead a few days, so at first none but the clerk could see anything amiss in discovering maggots feasting on the corpse. Until, that is, the clerk pointed out that the maggots were no longer feasting; they were as dead as their dinner. And the unfortunate pig which was fed a morsel of the corpse's liver, the hounds having refused it, likewise sickened and died the next day. There could be no doubt; Warren's wife had been poisoned.

Although the brother now had evidence of his sister's murder, proving that his brother-in-law was the murderer was not so easy. Warren had been engaged on urgent business in London when his wife had died, and furthermore he swore that before he left, his wife told him she was intending to send for Gunilda to cure her of some woman's malady. No husband in the land could be expected to define precisely what a woman's problem might be. So no one questioned him further on this point.

A quaking servant in turn swore that he'd seen Gunilda visiting his mistress the very day she died. Gunilda denied it, of course, but who could she call upon to confirm her story that Warren had visited her? A nobleman, a Norman, creeping to her hovel in the night – it was a preposterous idea.

Gunilda was tried by ordeal of fire. She was forced, in front of the clergy, to carry a red-hot iron bar for ten paces. Afterwards her hand was bound and a seal put upon the wrapping and she was left to lie in the Bishop's dungeon for three days. Her daughter was permitted to stay with her, and for those three days, despite her mother's agony, they whispered and talked and slept little. There were so many secrets Gunilda had to entrust to her daughter, so much knowledge and so little time left. Just a few hours before, Gunilda believed she had years left to pass on all her skills to her child, now she knew she had only three days and three nights.

For Gunilda was certain of what they would discover beneath the bandages on the third day. There was no use hoping for a miracle. If she'd had time, a warning before the ordeal, she could have protected herself. She'd saved many others from the gallows over the years, for she could make unguents, almost invisible to the eye, which, painted on to the hand, would protect it from serious burns and help the skin to heal rapidly. But there had been no time to anoint herself.

When the seal was broken and the priest removed the bandages, the raw, festering wound proclaimed her guilt. The sentence was death by burning with the mercy of strangulation before the flames reached her, if she confessed.

She did confess. The falsehood made no difference now; she couldn't save her life, so why die in agony? She didn't fear going to the life beyond with a lie weighing down her immortal soul, for neither she nor her sobbing daughter believed in the merciful God in whose name these men were murdering her. Gunilda trusted in the old ways, the old goddesses of earth and water, fire and blood, and it was in their name that, with her dying breath, she cursed Warren and the unborn child his mistress carried, cursed every child that would ever spring from his loins.

Her daughter, alone now, quite alone, watched the body of her mother fired to ashes and smelt the stench of her mother's roasting flesh. No longer weeping now, she stood, aflame with hatred, as the white dust of her mother was carried up by the wind and fell soft as snowflakes upon her own dark hair.



Anno Domini 1210

Periwinkle – This herb mortals call also *Devil's eye* and *Sorcerer's violet* for it is much used in spells and enchantments. Felons are crowned with a garland of this herb on their way to the gallows for it signifies death. If a mortal plucks it from a grave, the spirit of the corpse who buried beneath that sod shall haunt him to his own death.

The leaves laid upon a boil will draw its venom. The green stems bound about the leg shall relieve the cramp and chewed shall ease the aching of a tooth or stop the bleeding of the mouth or nose.

But the plant is also much used in love potions. If man and woman eat periwinkle, houseleek and powdered worms together at a meal it shall kindle the love between them.

The Mandrake's Herbal

The Mandrake's Tale

You've no doubt been told that mandrakes scream when they are dragged from the earth. That's not entirely true. There is a scream certainly, long and agonizing, which can drive a human to self-murder just to escape the pain of it. But it is not we, the mandrakes, who cry out; it is our mother, the earth. Every woman moans and shrieks in childbirth when her baby is torn from her womb, so why should our mother not scream in pain when we are dragged squirming from the warmth and darkness of her belly into the bitter light? As they writhe in labour, mortal women curse the men who got them with child, but the curse of our mother is the most terrible of them all, for her curse lasts a hundred generations.

Our fathers never witness our births for their eyes have long since been plucked out by the ravens. Our fathers were a bad lot – murderers, traitors, forgers, warlocks, rich men, poor men, beggar men, thieves. Each of them danced on the gallows to pay for the pleasures they took in this world. You will no doubt tell me that innocent men too are hanged. But I will ask you this – is there any man alive or dead without guilty secrets? And as for those who condemn a man to be hanged, are they not the worst villains of them all?

But you must be the judge of guilt and innocence, sin and sinner. We mandrakes make no judgment for those you pronounce guilty are, after all, our own dear fathers. For the fact is when men are hanged, innocent or guilty, their semen, that salty white milk, falls on to the earth and there on that very spot we spring up, white and black, male and female, the monstrous offspring of the dead, the familial image of their dark souls. Yes, if you could only glimpse those wizened and twisted souls, you'd see there's no mistaking I am my father's daughter.

Why men should ejaculate in the throes of death is a mystery even to me. Perhaps death really is the consummation of life, or maybe it's the last act of the body desperate to bequeath a life that will go on even as its own is obliterated. But I like to believe it is a final one-fingered gesture of defiance at their executioners, the only obscene gesture they can make since their hands are tightly bound behind them. Whatever the reason, felons with the dying gasp impregnate our mother and so we, the mandrakes, are conceived.

Semi-human, demi-gods, they call us. Demi-gods? *Semi, demi, less than, partial, almost* – that, if you ask me, is a hemi-insult. We are gods, totally, fully complete. How could it be otherwise, when we are fathered by eternal sin and born of Mother Earth who was old when

time began? We are the immortals and the mortal men who tear us up are mere midwives to our quickening.

You've heard of our powers, I've no doubt. How we can bestow children on the barren and make a man besotted with a maid. Ask that Jewess, Leah, if we did not bring Jacob to her bed and that very night get her with child? But remember this – we can also strike a woman barren and tear apart the most faithful of lovers. We can soothe the cruellest pain. We can conjure demons straight from hell. We can raise a woman to great wealth and cast a rich man into beggary. We can prolong the agony of those who beg to die, and snuff out the breath of those who plead to live. We can do all this for you. You think you can use us to gain whatever you yearn for, and you can. We don't judge if what you desire is good or evil. But never forget that we are gods. So have a care for what you wish – we might just grant it.

But there is one wish all men want us to grant them. It is the desire to know their own destiny. Men and women are so desperate for a glimpse into their futures, they will squander a kingdom for the knowledge – 'What will I become?' 'What will become of me?' – that we have the power to show them. But knowledge always comes at a price, knowledge changes you, perhaps it can even change your destiny too.

You don't believe me? Let me show you. I have a tale for you, one that concerns me intimately. Hear it out and then you shall judge, for as I told you, we never do.

I was born, dragged from the earth, as you would say, in the hot, blood-soaked lands of the Saracens. Who my midwives were and why they risked their lives and sanity to pull me from the ground is another story, and perhaps I shall tell it to you one day, but the tale I want to share with you now begins many years after my birth. It begins in the cold lands far to the north, in England to be precise, in a piss-poor village called Gastmere, in Norfolk, during the reign of King John.

John has borne many titles, one such was Duke of Normandy, though he lost that to King Philip of France. But he has others; his toadying courtiers call him the true king of England. His nephew, Arthur, would doubtless have dubbed him thief, traitor and regicide, if he had lived to utter such words. The Pope proclaimed him apostate, the worst of the Devil's brood. John ignored them all for he had once had another title – John Lackland.

His own father, King Henry II, had bestowed on him that mocking epithet. For Henry had lands aplenty stretching from England to northern Spain. But when John, his youngest son, was born, Henry promised him nothing, not so much as a stinking village, for as the youngest

of five lusty sons, John was surplus to requirements, his father's lands already pledged to his
brothers. And what can you do with a babe that has no inheritance, no glorious destiny?
Why, you give him to the Church, dump the infant in an abbey, and bid him pray for the
souls of his royal father and lordly brothers.

But the boy without a future was determined to obtain one, steal another man's destiny if
there was no other way. He lusted after his brother Richard's lands, those great domains of
Normandy, Aquitaine and England. The premature demise of Richard Cœur-de-Lion might be
considered by some a misfortune, but to his loving brother John, it was as if the stars were
smiling on him. Fortune has blessed him, nudged along by a good sprinkling of cunning and a
little dash of murder. For John has finally got his wish; he rules England. And the people of
England have been granted their wish too; they finally have a king prepared to stay on
English soil and govern their fair realm. So all is well, a happy ending you might think. Not
so, not so at all. You don't need the powers of a mandrake to see that both king and people
are deeply regretting their wishes now.

For the year is 1210, and it is not a good year for England. The land lies under Interdict;
the churches are locked; corpses lie in unconsecrated ground and babies sleep unbaptized in
their cradles. The cause is the problem that has always vexed the throne of England. The king
believes he should have the right to name the Archbishop of Canterbury, and is determined to
see the plump backside of his own secretary, John de Gray, sitting upon the most powerful
ecclesiastical throne in the realm.

But Pope Innocent III has other ideas. He dared to send word to John declaring that his
most favoured cardinal, Stephen Langton, had already been appointed to the post. King John
replied with cordial greetings and begged to inform His Holiness that if Cardinal Langton
should ever dare to set foot again on English soil, he would take the greatest pleasure in
having him hanged from the highest gallows in the land.

So the Pope has ordered the Bishops of London, Ely and Worcester to lay an Interdict upon
England. No church services may be held for the laity. The people are denied all the rites of
the Church, save for baptism of infants and shriving of the dying, which might save their
souls from hell. But these rites too have been snatched from the people of England, for John
in his fury has seized the property of the Church, and the bishops and priests have fled the
land or are hiding and dare not show themselves even to save the souls of their parishioners
from eternal damnation.

So here is a merry England indeed. The populace are terrified of dying in sin; the Church threatening eternal damnation; the barons are plotting rebellion and King Philip of France, with the blessing of the Pope, is planning invasion; but despite the army of entreaties and threats which daily assault his ears, King John remains obstinately defiant. And you have to admire him for that at least.

But our tale does not concern King John himself, though you might say he is the cause of much that occurs, if indeed you hold that any man may be blamed for the crimes of others. No, our story is about two of John's most humble subjects, Raffaele and Elena, both unknown to the king.

To be fair, if the name *Elena* means nothing to King John, his name likewise means nothing to her, for as a villein, it doesn't matter so much as a beggar's arse-rag to her who sits on the throne of England. It's the lord of the manor who has the power to make her life heaven or hell and, for all she knows, he will have that power in the next life too.

But the man, Master Raffaele, or Raffe as his few friends call him, knows King John's name only too well. He fought for him in Aquitaine. He knows him by sight and reputation. And just at this moment, Raffe is striding across the courtyard of Gastmere manor and cursing his sovereign lord to the foulest pit of hell. For Raffe blames John, the Pope and every cowardly priest in the land for what he is about to do.



1st Day of the Waning Moon, August 1210

Deadly Nightshade – which some call *Belladonna* or *Devil's berry*. A plant that befuddles the mind and brings death, for its other name is *dwale*, which means *mourning*. Since it is poisonous, it is sacred to the goddess Hecate who taught her daughters the knowledge of all plants.

Mortals make wreaths of the plant to cure horses that are witch-ridden and to ward off spells from their own persons. But the Devil jealously guards the plant for it does his bidding. So mortals who wish to gather it must first release a black hen which the Devil will not be able to resist chasing, and the plant must be quickly harvested before the Devil returns.

For a man who desires to accomplish death must first deceive.

The Mandrake's Herbal

The Chosen

Elena didn't notice Master Raffaele at first. Only when she became aware of the other girls jerking their heads in his direction did she glance behind her and see him standing just outside the barn door in a patch of dazzling light. The outline of the man shimmered against the sun, his form bleached to the pallor of a ghost.

The doors were wide open at either end of the long wooden barn to catch the slightest breeze and channel it between the walls. Inside, a circle of women shuffled around a large pile of sheaves. Marion was singing the chant, and the flails whistled through the air in answering chorus. The steps of the women had slowed to the pace of a hobbled donkey in the drowsy afternoon heat, but catching sight of Master Raffaele lurking outside, Marion took up a more lively song to quicken the threshers, knowing full well that the steward's fury would descend upon her if he thought the women were slacking.

*... I heard a pretty maid making her complain
That all she wanted was the saltiest grain ...*

The women swung the flails in such a rapid, practised motion of the shoulders that a perfect circle hung for an instant above their heads as if drawn on the air, before they brought the shaft down to the ground, bouncing the full length of the swelpe across the ears of grain. After each blow the women took a single step sideways in unison as the flails were raised again, swing, thump, step, swing, thump, step, obeying the rhythm of the caller. Miss beat, miss a step and it would be a human skull that was cracked instead of the ear of grain.

*... Kind Sir, you're the man to do the deed,
To sow my meadow with the wanton seed ...*

The grain skipped and pattered in golden raindrops across the threshing floor and the dust rose in a dense cloud until the women seemed to be dancing on mist. The girls had masked their mouths and noses with rags to keep from choking, but still they coughed.

... then I sowed high and I sowed low,

And under her bush the seed did grow ...

Several of the girls began to giggle. Marion shook her head at them, but though her mouth was covered against the dust, Elena could see that her eyes were watering with mirth. Had she chosen that song deliberately, knowing that Master Raffaele was listening?

Elena glanced over at the tall figure standing motionless in the hot sun. His expression had not changed. If he knew they were taunting him, he showed no sign of it. She felt a surge of pity for the man, but it was not without a shiver of revulsion.

Master Raffaele strode towards the barn.

Marion, watching him out of the corner of her eye, shouted, 'Cease flail!'

Like dogs whistled to heel, the women instantly lowered their flails. It was a command they never disobeyed. If a small child ran heedlessly into the barn or a woman stumbled and fell, those words could save a life.

All heads turned to Master Raffaele as the dust swirled around his knees. Marion took a step forward, expecting the manor's steward to address her with an instruction or complaint, but he ignored her. His eyes searched the circle. The women shuffled uneasily. Why didn't the man speak? Someone was in trouble, they could tell from his grim stare. It was typical of the old bastard to make them wait for the axe to descend.

Elena stared fixedly at the battered sheaves lying at her feet, praying she would not be noticed. She saw his thick leather shoes take a pace towards her, but she didn't look up. Her face flushed with guilt beneath the rag mask as she remembered the full flagon of wine she'd broken in the manor's kitchens yesterday. She'd scuffled the rushes on the floor to hide the spill and smuggled the smashed flagon out, hiding the pieces under a pile of rubbish in the yard. Surely he couldn't have found out? But what if one of the other servants had seen her and reported it? There were always those who sought to ingratiate themselves or divert attention from their own crimes by reporting someone else's.

She saw the brown shoes turn as if the wearer was about to walk away. In her relief she must have relaxed her grip on her flail. It slipped from her sweaty fingers and fell with a dull thump. The shoes turned back.

'You, come with me.'

He was addressing someone else, he had to be. She dared not look up.

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