

THE  
SINISTER  
BOOKSELLERS  
OF  
BATH  
GARTH NIX



# CHAPTER ONE



Bath, Saturday, 10th December 1983

*Bees. With the Romans a flight of bees  
was considered a bad omen.*



THE SMALL BOOKSHOP IN BATH WAS NOT, IN FACT, SMALL. IT APPEARED to be no more than a cramped and narrow shop occupying half the ground floor of a three-story Georgian terrace house, the other half given over to an equally cramped tobacconist who sold dubious pipe mixtures of her own devising and cigarettes from “East of Istanbul.” But the Small Bookshop was actually an outpost of the St. Jacques clan, so there was more to it than could be seen from outside, both above and below. Even the tobacconist half was a front, inhabited by a right-handed bookseller whose awful offerings were a ploy to limit customers and allow her to get on with her researches into the works of Izaak Walton and obscure enchantments involving fish.

The other fifteen booksellers on the permanent staff of the Small Bookshop included a dozen of the left-handed variety:

field agents, enforcers, and occasional executioners. They were primarily there to keep an eye on human interactions with the entity the Romans called Sulis Minerva. She inhabited the ever-popular Roman Baths, and when given the correct gifts, properly inscribed, would grant boons of power, particularly to people seeking revenge or retribution. The Baths were visited by tens of thousands of people every year, so it was hard work for the booksellers who monitored the queue going in, keeping watch for Death Cultists and others of that ilk who came to ask Sulis Minerva for the causation of a fatal accident or an astonishingly swift mortal illness. A less careful watch was maintained outside the Bath's opening hours, the constant surveillance replaced by occasional random patrols through the evening and night.

The bookshop was often used as a temporary repository for bulk purchases of secondhand books made in the West Country. "An Auction of the Library of a Distinguished Lady" or "Sale of the Property of a Gentleman, being mostly books" and the like. The books were sorted and cataloged there before being dispatched to the New Bookshop in London, the Mews Bookshop in York, or if they were too arcane to be sold, sent to the Crawley Tunnel Library in Edinburgh, the Salinae mine in Cheshire, or to other secretive St. Jacques establishments.

When a shipment came in from one of these purchases, more right-handed booksellers were drafted into the Small Bookshop to help triage the books before cataloging. The right-handed, while not fighters like the left-handed, were proficient in various

arcane arts, including one often mistaken as purely mundane: extensive knowledge of printing, paper, bookbinding, and bookselling through the ages. A book of sorcerous interest might escape *magical* detection by various means, such as being bound in rune-etched bone disguised under buckram; or encased in a field of lunar misdirection by exposure to seventeen new moons in a silver bowl upon one of three particular hills in England (a procedure often spoiled by rain). These methods worked well against general spells of discovery but were of no use if a right-handed bookseller found some incongruous detail of binding, type, title, content, or provenance and looked more deeply.

Vivien St. Jacques, right-handed bookseller, had found just such a discrepancy in a volume of Thomas Moule's maps of English counties. The gilt letters embossed on the spine declared it to be *A Collection of Maps* and the engraved title page went further to say it was "A Collection of Maps by Thomas Moule, Bound for Sir Richard Wedynk by Amos Carlyle of Salisbury in 1954," which was all well and good, Moule's maps of English counties being very nicely done and collectible and Carlyle a well-known and excellent modern bookbinder. But Vivien had noticed a slight bulge in the back of the case and some not particularly expert resewing and gluing of the leather binding, work that would not meet Carlyle's standards, indicating it had been opened up later and something slid in against the board.

She set the volume down on the worktable and looked at it again carefully. She could feel a slight tingling in the thumb of her gloved right hand, which might or might not be related to

this book. It could be a general warning, a foretelling of something bad on the horizon.

“Hmmm,” she said.

“Got something interesting?” asked Ruby from the neighboring table. She was also a right-handed bookseller, one of the few permanently stationed in the Small Bookshop. She had asked for help to assess the recent purchase of the late Sir Richard Wedynk’s library, and Vivien had come from London in answer to the call. Ruby was a decade older than Vivien, in her early thirties, and was notionally in charge, inasmuch as anyone was, the right-handed booksellers tending to work most of the time as a kind of anarchist collective driven by shared interests and responsibilities, setting their own tasks to achieve the generally desired objectives. Though they did take direction from the senior-most, when required, and Great-Aunt Evangeline’s word was the final law.

“There’s definitely something hidden in the binding,” said Vivien. She pushed her chair back and got up, wending her way between the piles of tea chests full of books that had been stacked in lines to allow navigation, over to the essential cupboard that stood by the door to the stairs. Every work room of the right-handed booksellers had an essential cupboard. Some had more than one. They varied in style, if not in contents. This one was originally an eighteenth-century housekeeper’s cupboard, with three individual cupboards above two ranks of drawers.

Vivien touched her white-cotton-gloved right forefinger to the third drawer on the right, which sprang open. She looked into it and frowned.



“Someone hasn’t put the dowsing rod back,” she said.

“Oh, I’ve got it,” replied Ruby. She held a Y-shaped hazel branch over her head, only the stick and her hand visible above the line of tea chests. “Sorry.”

Vivien retraced her path through the narrow way between tea chests, narrowly avoiding tearing her very new Laura Ashley white lawn blouse on a bit of jagged tin that had broken off the corner of one of the plywood boxes. Most of the younger right-handed booksellers would have preferred to pack books in cardboard boxes, but the older ones still insisted they must use the considerable stock of tea chests that perennially shifted back and forth between the various St. Jacques locations like flotsam borne upon the tide.

“Thanks,” said Vivien. She took the hazel stick, and holding it in approved dowsing fashion, returned to her own table. When she passed the rod over the book it bucked in her hand, drawn like a very powerful magnet to iron towards the slight lump in the binding. She had to use considerable strength to hold it back and then even hold her breath for a moment to add sorcerous strength in order to turn the stick aside before she let it go, and it became just a forked hazel branch again.

“Something hidden, and powerful,” said Vivien. “Can you stand by me for this one, Ruby?”

“Of course!” replied Ruby eagerly. She slid back her chair, got up, and sidled over next to Vivien. “That whole chest has been nothing but editions of *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There*. Unexciting editions at that. No firsts, not even a later printing, nothing earlier than 1896.”

“Pity,” said Vivien. “I’ll get the gear.”

She returned to the essential cupboard to fetch a silver-washed straight razor, two mismatched sets of very long similarly silver-plated tongs that once might have been salad servers, and a vintage silver hatpin. Coming back in a hurry, she did tear her shirt on a tea chest corner, but paid it no attention, all her thoughts now on this mysterious object in the binding of the book. “The Alice fixation suggests Sir Richard had an interest in the esoteric. Was he a known practitioner or anything of that sort?”

“A fringe-dweller, most likely,” replied Ruby. She was peering at the book of maps through a jeweler’s loupe, her face close to the binding. “A good customer of the bookshop, but as far as we know not actively involved in the Old World. He was vetted in 1965 and again in 1978, cleared of associations. I don’t think he was clever enough to keep anything hidden. He must have had his suspicions, but he didn’t act upon them.”

“No connection with Sulis Minerva?” asked Vivien as she made her way back to the worktable. Ruby lifted a tea chest off a stack that was partially blocking the window, allowing more of the weak winter sunlight to come through. There was a six-bulb chandelier above, so plenty of illumination, but they both knew the sun was a better source to see things that were hidden, or if it came to that, as a protection against things inimical that prospered in the dark.

“He has never been observed entering the Baths,” she said. “If he was a real follower he couldn’t keep away. Though there are

some other adits of her power, I very much doubt he frequented them. He was what he seemed, a nauseatingly rich, amiable old buffer who never worked his whole life and just collected books.”

“So, this is an anomaly,” said Vivien. “Let’s see what we’ve got.”

Taking up the straight razor, she carefully cut a slit in the leather binding at the top of the back case, then used the tongs to lift the leather up a little.

“Looks like a folded page has been slid in here,” she said. “Old paper. Older than the book.”

Her right thumb was twitching now, uncontrollably. Outside, the wintry clouds parted a little and a beam of actual, honest-to-goodness sunshine came through the window, making the previously unseen motes of dust twinkle. But it only lasted for a few seconds before the clouds closed up again and the sunshine disappeared as if turned off with a switch.

“It’s powerful,” added Vivien. “Saturated with sorcery. An entity’s, I think, not a human practitioner’s. We’d better get one of the sinisters up here.”

“I’ll call down,” replied Ruby. “I’m not sure who’s available right now. Ibrahim and Polly have gone to escort the next shipment from Sir Richard’s library, and there’s a full shift watching the Baths.”

She hurried over to the intercom mounted on the wall next to the door and pressed the orange button. It squawked for a second, then a testy woman’s voice answered.

“Yes? What?”



“Ruby here, Delphine. In the sorting room. Can you send up a leftie or two? Vivien’s found something sorcerous in one of the books.”

“I’ll see who’s available.”

There was a hatch set in the wall between the tobacconist and the bookstore. Vivien and Ruby heard footsteps, the hatch being slid open, Delphine calling out and some indistinct reply.

“One of you layabouts is needed upstairs, in the sorting room. Yes, you’ll do. What? I don’t care if you’re not rostered on. Up you go.”

The footsteps came closer, then Delphine’s cigarette-rasped voice issued a curt, “Done.”

The intercom clicked off.

“Any preliminary ideas?” asked Ruby, returning to the worktable. They both stared at the book, which was facedown, the slit in the back binding towards them.

“Not yet,” replied Vivien. She took up the long tweezers in her right hand and closed and opened them a few times, the points clicking. Ruby held her own right hand six inches above the book, palm down, and inhaled deeply.

Ruby exhaled.

“You’re right about the sorcery. But I’m not sure you’re correct about it being an entity’s magic. I’d say it was a joint effort, some mortal practitioner drawing the map and providing the focus, an Old One supplying the power. Not an entity I know. Something old and cold and hard.”

Vivien nodded. She tilted her head, listening to the sound of

someone coming up the stairs, taking them very swiftly, leaping up three or four or even five at a time, in heavy shoes or boots.

“Our left-handed helper comes,” said Ruby drily.

“Hmmm,” said Vivien. There was something familiar about the style of the stair ascent, a wholly unnecessary rapidity and *joie de vivre* in simply trying to leap as many steps as possible in one go. So while she was not expecting this particular left-handed bookseller, she was not surprised when the door was flung open to reveal an exceptionally stylish young woman, albeit one exceptionally stylish for circa 1816.

This stunning apparition wore a fox fur tippet over a high-waisted morning dress of pale-blue Italian taffeta with golden ribbons at the neck and wrists, a single white kid leather glove on the left hand, and a straw hat also beribboned in gold, atop a lace coif. The ensemble’s historical accuracy was somewhat spoiled by the addition of a surprisingly large carpet bag and the toes of black Dr. Marten boots peeking out from under the almost floor-length dress.

Thanks to their somewhat “shapeshiftery nature,” the booksellers could and did change gender from time to time, but at present, this Regency arrival was male, and was in fact Vivien’s younger brother, Merlin. He simply liked clothes of all kinds, and let his fancy take him where it would. Vivien was physically very similar, and obviously his sister, but she lacked whatever it was that made (nearly) all eyes look first to Merlin, and Vivien preferred it that way.

“When in Bath,” said Merlin, interpreting Ruby’s enquiring

look at his clothes. “I made four pounds fifty posing for photographs with American tourists on the way up from Manvers Street. If I’d brought a Polaroid camera I could retire after a few days, I’d say they’d be good for two pounds a pic, at least. Surprised there’s still so many around at this time of year. Tourists, I mean.”

“They come for Christmas and hope for snow,” said Ruby. “They might get it this year.”

“Are you Jane or one of her characters?” asked Vivien. “And where did you get that dress?”

“I’m Elizabeth Bennet, of course,” said Merlin. “The dress is from the BBC, the miniseries *Pride and Prejudice* from a few years back. You know, with Elizabeth Garvie. I’ve made friends with one of the wardrobe department assistants. This was Garvie’s dress halfway through episode two.”

“That carpet bag is much too big and ahistorical,” said Ruby. “Should be a reticule.”

“I know,” replied Merlin with a shrug. “But those tourists don’t, or they don’t care. Besides, a reticule would be far too small.”

He set the bag down on the end of the table and opened it. Shrugging off the tippet, he folded it carefully and tucked it in one end of the bag that contained, among other things, his favored .357 Magnum Smython and two speedloaders; a turned lignum vitae truncheon from William IV’s time, marked with the royal arms; a parrying dagger reputed to have belonged to Sir Philip Sidney, the blade later plated with silver; his current reading material, a Penguin paperback of *Cold Comfort Farm*

by Stella Gibbons, the 1977 edition with the generally scorned cover; a day-old Chelsea bun wrapped in waxed paper; two wire coat hangers; and a variety of other small useful odds and ends.

“Why are you in Bath?” asked Vivien. “I thought you had the weekend off.”

“I do, or did,” replied Merlin. He hesitated, then added, “Susan’s visiting her mother. I thought I might pop over and see her later.”

Merlin and Vivien had met Susan Arkshaw earlier in the year, and they’d been involved with her in deep matters that led to the binding of a powerful and malevolent entity, the unmasking of a traitor among the booksellers, and the discovery that Susan’s father was the Old Man of Coniston. An Ancient Sovereign, as the most powerful entities of the Old World were known. All three had become friends, and Merlin and Susan more, though their relationship had recently run into stormy waters. Susan’s mother lived near Bath, though Susan herself was now a student at the Slade School of Art and so spent most of her time in London.

“I thought you two were taking a break?” asked Vivien. “Or something.”

Prior to Susan, Merlin’s relationships had tended towards the spectacular and short-lived, usually ending without recrimination on either side. Merlin gravitated to those as outwardly attractive as himself, similar bright comets whose orbits crossed in a flurry of sparks and spun onwards to new collisions without looking back.

“Susan thought we should go slow for a while,” said Merlin stiffly. He was evidently unused to still being with the same person after several months, and with the concept of even temporary rejection. “She wants to concentrate on her studies, so we’re only going out once a week. I haven’t seen her since Wednesday!”

“As it’s only Saturday you seem to have not grasped the once-a-week thing,” said Vivien. “Does she know you’re going to ‘drop in’ on her at her mum’s?”

“I didn’t expect I’d miss her so much,” said Merlin, not answering the question. “It is quite aggravating. And I am waiting until the afternoon.”

“This is all very interesting,” said Ruby brightly. “But however dull I’m finding my current tea chest of books, I do have to get through it, and together we have many more after it, so perhaps we could investigate this sorcery-laden paper and move on?”

“Suits me,” said Merlin. “What are you expecting?”

“We don’t know,” said Vivien.

Merlin sniffed, hiked his dress up above his knees, pulled hidden elastic loops to keep it there, and took the lignum vitae truncheon out of his bag, throwing it up to spin twice before he caught it in his left hand and made some swishing motions in the air, missing a tea chest by a masterly sixteenth of an inch.

“Ready?” asked Vivien.

“Ready, aye, ready,” confirmed Ruby. She stepped back a pace, raised her right hand, took in a deep breath, and held it. This was a necessary precursor to the use of right-handed

magic, and a limitation, because the magic would only endure as long as the bookseller could hold their breath. Nearly all of the right-handed were swimmers and divers, and those that weren't practiced holding their breath in the depths of their generally claw-footed baths.

Merlin looked questioningly at Vivien.

"Ruby's father was an admiral," said his sister before taking her own breath. She held it and, lifting the tongs, pulled the paper out of the binding. She placed it on the table and took up the other pair of tongs. Using both pairs with dexterous skill, she unfolded the heavy, ivory parchment to reveal a map, or a portion of one. Unfolded, it was obvious it had been torn away from a larger whole.

"A garden," said Merlin. "Eighteenth century? Or a little later?"

Vivien nodded, using the tongs to place four six-ounce bronze weights purloined from a post office decades ago on each corner of the map fragment.

The map, which was a quarter or perhaps an eighth of the original, was hand-drawn in meticulous detail. It showed a portion of a wonderful garden, designed by the likes of Humphry Repton. There was a small fraction of a moated great house to the north, most of it lost beyond the tear. A bridge over the moat connected the house to a broad avenue that led to a freestanding tower that was labeled in perfect copperplate "Clock Tower." From the tower the avenue continued due south to a large ornamental lake, which had a kidney-shaped island,

and on it a Grecian structure labeled “Temple of Diana.” The bridge to the island was also drawn in detail and labeled “Pont Saint-Bénézet” and looked to be a one-tenth scale replica of the famous bridge at Avignon. The eastern side of the avenue was wooded, and labeled as “Wolf Wood.” To the west of the avenue there was a walled kitchen garden in one corner, with a row of beehives by the wall; and a much larger garden surrounded by high hedges, accessed by a masonry gate labeled “Egyptian Gate,” which from the drawing looked to be a hodgepodge of orientalist ideas. Rows of flower beds ran east to west, all drawn as being in full bloom, possibly with roses though it would need close inspection with Ruby’s loupe to see what they were. South of the flower beds, but still within the hedge walls, there was a maze that appeared to be made of brick or stone walls overgrown with climbing roses or something similar, but most likely roses, as it was labeled “Rose Court Maze.”

“There’s rather an abundance of statues along that avenue,” said Merlin. “Odd ones.”

Vivien exhaled, letting her preparatory magic slowly leave her. Her right thumb had settled down to a low vibration, no longer full-on twitching. The map was sorcerous, but it was quiescent. There was no immediate threat. She leaned closer.

“Statues of heraldic beasts,” she said. “Including the unusual ones. A hippalectryon, pismire, musimon. I don’t know what that tusked thing with the camel body and the serpent’s tail is—”

“An ypotryll,” said Ruby, letting her own breath out with a sigh of relief. “A veritable parade of heraldic statues. I’ve never

heard of such an extensive collection. Is it a real place do you think, or a plan that was never executed?”

“I don’t recognize it,” replied Vivien, frowning. “And I haven’t read about such a garden.”

As she spoke, the clouds outside split again, and the sun caught the chance, streaming in through the window. Golden dust motes danced once more, and everything on the map on the worktable became sharper and more defined, as if it had only just been completed, the ink still shiny and drying. Summer spread across the room, borne on a warm breeze, carrying the scent of new-mown grass and gillyflowers, and the mellow languid evensong of several blackbirds. The two right-handed booksellers stepped back, sucking in urgent breaths.

“A bee!” exclaimed Merlin.

“No!” shrieked Vivien, reaching for his arm, but it was too late. Merlin caught the bee in his right hand, fingers cupped around it to keep it safe before putting it outside. But as the bee landed on his palm, the map shone even more brightly. Merlin and the captured bee disappeared and the map began to crumble at the edges, vanishing as if it were millennia older and unable to withstand the open air without turning to dust.

Vivien, in the middle of recapturing her breath, snatched up the silver hat pin and drove it through the top right corner of the map into the table. Ruby laid her gloved right hand on the bottom left corner and pushed down hard with her fingers. In those two places, the dissipation stopped, the map was held in place and its internal light dimmed. But in the other two corners



it continued to ebb away into nothing, until Vivien weighted each one down with a pair of silver tongs. Finally, she laid the straight razor down across the corner in front of Ruby's fingers. The other bookseller slowly lifted her hand and exhaled.

The clouds closed up and the sunshine disappeared. But the map still emitted its own golden summer light, even if it was now subdued.

"It's still active," snapped Ruby. "We need to properly pin it down *now!*"

"Yep," said Vivien. She dashed to the essential cupboard and opened a drawer, taking out a black varnished seventeenth-century papier-mâché box that was full of silver-plated iron tacks as old as the box. Rushing back she spilled a pile of tacks on the table and she and Ruby fixed the map in place, using their right thumbs to drive tacks in every inch along the edges.

The map was smaller now. The great house was completely gone, as was nearly all the moat, and the lake in the south reduced to halfway across the island, the temple of Diana bisected. The eastern wood's label now read "Wolf Wo" and in the west, the kitchen garden was a third smaller and the larger garden was reduced to a narrow swath next to the western edge of the maze.

"I can see Merlin," said Ruby. "He's in the center of the maze."

Vivien bent close and peered at the map. She could just make out a beautifully drawn, very tiny Merlin, not even an eighth of an inch high.

"He's moving," she said with surprise. "Very, very slowly. I don't know much about these translocation maps. Is it normal to see movement?"

“When it’s active, it’s effectively a window,” replied Ruby. Merlin was moving, but it was so slight it was more like the tiny figure was shivering. “One way, at least. He is *slow*. There must be quite some time dislocation between here and there.”

“I’d better go in after him,” said Vivien. She started to reach out with her bare left hand, but Ruby stopped her.

“No. You’ll be trapped there as well.”

“What? We can walk out—”

“No. It’s not anywhere,” said Ruby. “I felt it when I was holding the map here, and you can see it from Merlin’s movement, or lack of it. This is a real place, but it’s been taken out of our world. Time is running *much* slower there. You’d need another translocation map to get out.”

“So I’ll take one with me,” said Vivien impatiently.

“We haven’t got any maps of that kind here,” replied Ruby. “We’ll need to get one sent up from London, or perhaps Thorn House. We don’t have to be hasty. I’d say an hour here is only a few minutes there. We have to call this in, see if anyone has any good ideas. I’m not a map expert either—”

She was interrupted by the sudden clanging of a fire alarm bell on the stairs outside, followed a second later by a sickeningly loud crash that made the whole house shake.

The fire alarm bell was not for fires.

“General Quarters!” shouted Ruby. “All hands to repel boarders.”

She started towards the door, stopped, and looked back at Vivien, who was still standing by the map.

“All hands,” she said gently. “The map can’t go anywhere.”

Only minutes will pass for Merlin. Come on!”

Vivien followed her to the door. A cacophony of shouting and what sounded like sledgehammers smashing stone echoed up the stairs, with the occasional ringing ricochet of metal rebounding instead of breaking whatever it struck.

Behind them, on the map, in slow time, a tiny Merlin moved a fraction of a step in the heart of the maze.