Lusty Olde England

THORNAPPLE, by Chris Hunt, $11.00

The year is 1204 and a young peddler travels through the east of England buying and selling odds and ends. The peddler tells to all who will listen the many exciting and bawdy tales of his travels: a renegade monk; a scheming lady of the manor; a mysterious old crone and a beautiful boy guarding magical secrets. These tales are expertly woven into a fascinating story of romance, murder, and witchcraft.

When I left London they thought I was mad to put behind me the cheer and excitement of a town decked out in its bravery for the Yuletide revels. Certainly it was merry there, and in its packed and bustling streets the smells of cooking and the sounds of gusty laughter were inviting, and there was just about everything a man could need inside those walls if he had the money. And if I were telling my tale by a tavern hearthside I'd be hearing the knowing smutty sniggers now — everything a man could need, eh? That's the stews in the backstreets, where the lusty girls are lurking — yes, we know! But they'd be wrong. It was a boy I took, a hard-eyed city lad with small firm buttocks, who gave me a good time and tried to rob me afterwards. That's how it is in London, all commerce and thievery. It's a town that holds no charm for me, a place of business only; and if I could search out some cheap new bauble from a foreign merchant to add to the stock in my pack, that was all I asked of a visit there. And a boy to satisfy the itch of lust.

I'd have done well to have kept to what I knew, the ragged lads of wharves and alleys, but I'd stepped outside my proper place and had paid the penalty. I cannot help it: lust knows no boundaries.

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Juhel de Bracy was a creature such as minstrels sing of, with butter-colored hair and mischievous endearing ways, and an odd fancy for the low life, hence his taking up with me at all. But he was Norman. He lived in a house at the river's edge, a great stone stronghold with its base in the water and its front gates opening onto the slope of a street where traders and servants trudged to and fro in the service of his family. It was not stupid of me to sell my wares inside his house — his eagle-nosed majestic mother bought up most of my ivory — but it was stupid of me to stay on when invited by him. My weakness for yellow hair overcame my good sense. I went back again and again under cover of selling my wares, and I daresay even the most bone-headed dullard could have guessed there was more to it.

They had a little room leading off a stairway where they stored clothes, a dim airless hole where time and again I made love to the beautiful youth.

"No one will come in," he assured me as we pressed against tapestry and fur. Dust and the scent of lavender and southernwood rose from the hanging garments as our bodies moved together in the musty gloom. He was always eager to take off his clothes — a most attractive weakness — and I was able to glut myself upon that slim young body to my heart's content, remaining dressed for a quick getaway. His mother's silks and furs caressed his naked skin, vying with my lips that feasted hungrily on that rich fare. I could taste coriander as I licked his nipples, guessing that he overlaced his baths with herbs. He was almost like a child — so clearly pleased to give such pleasure, thrusting now his jutting prick and now his rounded arse for my delight, half disappearing in the ropes of fur and swathes of silk, to re-emerge laughing.

One day I left the house as usual, and in the street outside his father's men awaited, and on orders from Hubert de Bracy set upon me with their fists against the house wall. I was flung so hard against a passing cart I felt pain from neck to wrist; and I ended in the gutter with the street muck, in a pool of blood from nose or mouth or both, and with barely wit enough to roll clear of the cart.

De Bracy towered above me, a strutting hawk-faced lordling, seeming ten feet high. "And if I ever see you near my house again there will be worse for you, much worse."

I could have got up but deemed it best to appear all beaten down; and with my knees close to my chest and my arms about my head, I put up with the final couple of kicks that seemed to leave them satisfied. An oddly honest boy had gathered up my scattered wares for me, and though of course some were missing, I was still in business. I stacked them away in my pack, dripping blood onto the leather.

Back in Jug Yard, where I was staying at the time, Rahere the bone-gatherer advised me to leave town.

"I was planning to," I answered him.

"Now you have more reason."

"I wouldn't go just because of that."

"Wouldn't you? I would! Anyway," he added, squinting at me curiously, "what had you *done?*"

I shrugged. "Nothing. Normans just don't like Saxons, that's all."

But I reckoned I was lucky to get away alive, and I took Rahere's advice. A couple of days later I was on the road.

About Chris Hunt:

Chris Hunt's previous historical fiction, *Mignon* ($11.00) and *Street Lavender* ($10.00), have won high praise for his ability to combine romance and history into fast-moving stories.

"What Hunt has done is no less than the finest of literature: creating myth, in its most powerful form, whose vision enriches us." — John Preston, author of *I Once Had a Master*

"Chris Hunt consolidates a position as the Jackie Collins of gay, historical writing with the publication of *Mignon*." — *Him* magazine.

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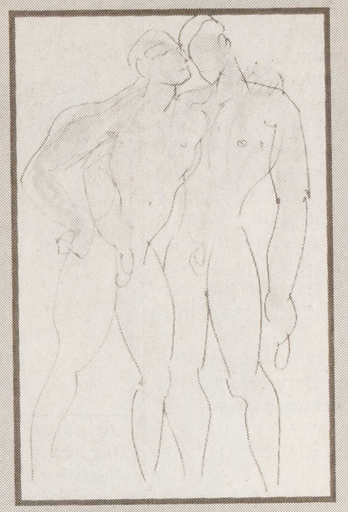

PRIVATE: The erotic art of Duncan Grant, with an introduction by Douglas Blair Turnbaugh, cloth, $45.00. In a major new addition to GMP's pioneering gay art series, *Private* is a collection of the never-before-seen homoerotic fantasy drawings and paintings of one of England's leading post-impressionists. This collection is a testament to Grant's gay sensibility and its lucid, intimate expression.

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