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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES
ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

Authenticity and alterity:
evoking the fourteenth century in fiction

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THESIS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

English

Doctor of Philosophy

AUTHENTICITY AND ALTERITY: EVOKING THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY
IN FICTION

by Carolyn W. Hughes

This PhD thesis consists of two major sections. The critical commentary, *Authenticity and alterity: evoking the fourteenth century in fiction*, reflects upon issues of authenticity and alterity in historical fiction. The historical novel, *The Nature of Things*, through its structure, themes, style and language, aims to deliver an authentic and naturalistic portrait of life in the fourteenth century.

The commentary and novel are supplemented by a bibliography, and three appendices: a synopsis of the novel, a list of the characters, and a summary of a review of historical novels undertaken alongside the writing, which sought to discover how other novelists addressed the issues of authenticity and alterity.

The critical commentary considers what makes good historical fiction, specifically how to bring a sense of authenticity and the role of ‘alterity’. It first addresses the alleged ‘problems’ of historical fiction claimed by nineteenth-century author Henry James and others: the impossibility of authenticity, its innate falsehood, and its failure to portray the past’s strangeness. It then explains the process of writing *The Nature of Things*: its concept and themes, structure and characters, narrative metaphors, language and style, its quest for authenticity and ‘naturalism’. Then it looks at authenticity in historical fiction and how it can be achieved: through narrative form, recorded history, social context, physical details, and the historical thought-world, including religion and superstition. It goes on to consider the need for, and use of, ‘alterity’ (strangeness) as a means of achieving authenticity, looking at such concepts as magic, spells, the supernatural and monsters. Finally, it looks at the authenticity of language in historical fiction, the relationship between thoughts and words, and the problems of both anachronisms and archaic language. Throughout the commentary, examples are drawn from both *The Nature of Things* and other historical novels. Concluding remarks are given at the end.

The novel, *The Nature of Things*, spans the fourteenth century. It is structured in seven parts, each of which is narrated by one of seven different voices. The titles of the parts allude to the four biblical apocalyptic horsemen plus three invented ‘horsemen’ – Poverty, Famine, War, Plague, Death, Dissent, Despair. The titles allude to the disasters that befell the fourteenth century, which form the backdrop for the narrators’ stories, but are also metaphors for the narrators’ emotional sensibilities. People’s response to disaster is one of the novel’s themes, but so is hope and continuity, expressed in a garden metaphor that is given physical shape in a fictional thirteenth-century gardening book, *The Nature of Growing Things*.

LIST OF SECTIONS

Critical reflection – *Authenticity and alterity: evoking the fourteenth century in fiction*

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Appendices

Bibliography

DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, Carolyn Wendy Hughes,

declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

Authenticity and alterity: evoking the fourteenth century in fiction

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission.

Signed:

Date:

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I must also thank my husband, David, for providing not only lots of tea, but also much encouragement and practical advice. Also my son Christopher, for spending many hours discussing, among other aspects of my work, the nature of thought and language, and my daughter Rosie, for her continuing moral support through what has seemed a long, but ultimately satisfying, experience.

**CRITICAL REFLECTION – AUTHENTICITY AND ALTERITY:
EVOKING THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY IN FICTION**

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1 INTRODUCTION

Before I embarked on my PhD study and on writing *The Nature of Things*, I had already written an historical novel, *Meonbridge*. I enjoyed the challenge of recreating a past world for readers to immerse themselves in. My aim was to make the world I created feel natural, gaining ready acceptance by the reader in accordance with their expectations of the picture of life drawn in the novel. When I started my PhD research, I recognised that, for a novel set in the fourteenth century to *seem* “natural”, it required both authenticity and a degree of strangeness (alterity), even if I was not quite clear initially what I meant by those two terms. I would now define them as follows. Authenticity aims for an accurate representation of the artefacts, mindsets and behaviours according to what we know from records concerning what was used, thought and done in the fourteenth century. Alterity focuses on the otherness of the past, those aspects of mediaeval life, in particular mindsets and behaviours, that are unfamiliar or obscure to the modern reader.

However, while I was writing *Meonbridge*, I had some concerns. I worried, for example, whether the world I was portraying was *sufficiently* “authentic”, but also wondered how far that mattered, as long as readers believed, or sensed, that it was. My concerns arose partly from misgivings about my ability to portray the period and its people in a way that was true to what we know from historical investigation and the limited evidence available from contemporary literature, of the lives, mindsets, behaviours and voices of ordinary people of the time.

Ultimately, I was reasonably satisfied with the picture of fourteenth-century life I portrayed in *Meonbridge*: the physical aspects of environment, houses, clothes, and working lives – the practicalities of the past. However, I was still not confident that the words I put into my characters’ mouths were a fair reflection of what they might have thought and said.

Despite my concerns, I still wanted to write more historical novels. To assist my endeavours, I decided to explore what it is that makes historical fiction *seem* authentic, through writing a second novel *whilst also* looking critically at others set in the broadly mediaeval period, to assess their handling of mindset and voice, and

their sense of authenticity.¹ Writing the novel would enable me to develop my understanding of how mediaeval people thought, practise my skills at getting their voices right, and work out *how* to bring a sense of authenticity. Writing it in the context of a PhD study would encourage me to take an investigative view of the enterprise, to examine how other authors address the concerns I had, and also my own approaches to them in the light of what I discovered.

I had almost finished the novel when I came across the nineteenth-century novelist Henry James' view of historical fiction. James was famous for disliking it.

‘You may multiply the little facts that can be got from pictures and documents, relics and prints, as much as you like—the real thing is almost impossible to do...the invention, the representation of the old consciousness, the soul, the sense, the horizon, the vision of individuals, in whose minds half the things that make...the modern world were nonexistent.’²

It was not the practicalities of the past that James thought difficult to describe, but imagining with any degree of realism, or perhaps “naturalism”, the *inner lives* of those who lived in earlier times.

I wondered briefly if my efforts in writing *The Nature of Things* had after all been futile, but both my writing and my reading of other historical novels showed me that, despite James' discouraging views – and some others I have since discovered – so many such novels are written, read *and enjoyed*, there must be some value in the attempt. Surely not all those writers and readers can be wrong?

In section 2, I discuss further both Henry James' view of historical fiction and some other views that suggest that historical fiction's innate “problems” make the achievement of any sense of authenticity impossible. In section 3, I discuss the process of writing my PhD novel: its concept and themes; structure and characters; narrative metaphors; style and voice. In section 4, I look at the question of authenticity in historical fiction and how it can be achieved, citing examples from my own and other novels. I present my conclusions in section 5.

¹ The results of this critical review are summarised in Appendix 3.

² The words of Henry James quoted by David Harlan in ‘In this Issue’, *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 9:2-3 (2005), 141-145 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13642520500148980>> [accessed 20th March 2014].

2 THE “PROBLEMS” OF HISTORICAL FICTION

HISTORICAL FICTION CAN NEVER BE AUTHENTIC

Henry James thought that it was impossible to reproduce the mindsets of the past. Yet imagining the inner lives of characters (historical or fictional) for readers to experience is exactly what historical novelists attempt to do. So how does a writer make a novel set in the fourteenth century *seem* mediaeval? I want readers to put down my novel feeling they have been immersed in the mediaeval world, yet without really noticing its “mediaevalness”, as might happen, for example, if they found themselves wondering if this or that thing or image or phrase was “authentic”. To achieve this, artefacts must, or seem to, be of their time, and noticeable anachronisms of fact or thought must be avoided, to save throwing the reader out of the illusion. Mindsets (the characters’ thought-world) must be convincingly mediaeval, and language, narrative and dialogue, must reflect that thought-world. Last, but not least, the novel must reflect the strangeness, the “alterity”, of then as compared to now. Of course this all sounds fine in theory but how does it work in practice? James would presumably say it cannot work, that historical novelists and readers delude themselves in thinking the novels are in any way authentic. Yet writers do their best to portray their characters and settings with authenticity and many thousands of historical fiction devotees happily allow themselves to suspend any disbelief in order to enjoy the story.

However, this is true of any fiction. Historical fiction may not be able to *fully* convey the experience of the past, but it is difficult for any type of fiction to fully convey the experience of a character’s life, especially if that character, for example, commits murder, or blasts off into space to save the planet from a rogue asteroid, or perpetrates any number of actions beyond the experience of the average reader. However, this is of course what all novelists attempt to do.

HISTORICAL FICTION IS A LIE

In 2000, Richard Lee, president of the Historical Novel Society, gave a talk to an audience of writers about the problem of truth in history and fiction.³ The title of the talk alludes to a comment attributed to Napoleon, which suggests that history is a form of fiction, for its “truth” depends on who is telling the story: the written history of war differs depending on whether its author comes from the camp of the conqueror or that of the conquered. But it is also true that the “facts” of history are continually changing, as the latest research inevitably reveals previously unknown information and offers new interpretations of historical truths.

Lee went on to quote the literary critic Andrew Graham-Dixon who, in an unidentified book review the same year, said the ‘historical novel has always been a literary form at war with itself. The very term, implying a fiction somehow grounded in fact – a lie with obscure obligations to the truth – is suggestive of the contradictions of the genre.’⁴

Lee railed against Graham-Dixon and others who, in his view, misunderstood the nature of historical fiction, pointing out also that *all* fiction is a lie ‘somehow grounded in fact’. No one, he said, thinks that *Trainspotting* or *Bridget Jones’ Diary* is *true*, but rather that ‘they were in some way drawn from life’. Historical fiction is no more a contradiction than any other form of art, all of which seeks ‘both accuracy and illusion’.⁵

Jerome de Groot supports this view when he says that ‘all history lies to us, but at least historical fiction admits it.... Readers are aware that what they are reading is not “true”.’⁶

³ Richard Lee, ‘History is but a fable agreed upon: the problem of truth in history and fiction’ (2000), *Historical Novel Society, Guides, Defining the Genre* <<http://historicalnovelsociety.org/guides/defining-the-genre/but-a-fable-agreed-upon-speech-by-richard-lee/>> [accessed 2nd May 2012].

⁴ *Ibid.* para 3.

⁵ *Ibid.* para 4.

⁶ Jerome de Groot, ‘All history lies to us, but at least historical fiction admits it’, *BBC History magazine, Historyextra* (2011) <<http://www.historyextra.com/blog/all-history-lies-us-least-historical-fiction-admits-it>> [accessed 24th March 2014].

All fiction is an illusion created by the writer’s imagination. Yet historical, no less than contemporary, fiction must be sustained by a foundation of fact, creating a sense of “authenticity”, in order for readers to accept the illusion as temporary reality. Even fantasy fiction, science fiction and some forms of thriller, despite being illusion writ large, must be founded, if not on fact, at least on sufficient rationality or logic to sustain the illusion.

HISTORICAL FICTION FAILS TO PORTRAY THE STRANGENESS OF THE PAST

Jerome de Groot also says that ‘[readers] know that historical...fiction is just one way...to comprehend the strange other time we call the past.’⁷ Historical fiction explores the differences and the very *strangeness* of the past compared to the present, ‘making the past recognisable but simultaneously authentically unfamiliar.’⁸

This unfamiliarity, this strangeness – this “alterity” – is perhaps at the heart of well-regarded historical fiction. The people we encounter on the pages of historical novels are familiar to us in a way: they are mothers and fathers, farmers and carpenters, soldiers and merchants, people with families and concerns and feelings much like ours. But their environment, their habits, their attitudes and beliefs are mostly very different, and it is this dissimilarity, as well as the familiarity, that an historical novelist seeks to portray. Sarah Johnson describes this as making ‘the unfamiliar seem familiar’, and the one must be as carefully managed as the other.⁹

However, it is true that not all historical novelists are entirely successful. In a blog on a website for historical novelists, John Yeoman proposes an interesting split between types of historical fiction. One kind ‘depicts modern people, sensibilities and conflicts but...cloaks them expediently with props from history’s wardrobe: ruffs and farthingales, gibbets and jousts’; the other exposes the reader to a profound whiff

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Jerome de Groot, *The Historical Novel* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p.3.

⁹ Sarah L. Johnson, *Historical Fiction: A Guide to the Genre* (Westport: Libraries Unlimited Inc., 2005), p.5.

of *strangeness*.¹⁰ He cites some novels where this strangeness can be found, including Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*. But he says ‘we do not find it in Philippa Gregory.’ Indeed, he refers to *The Other Boleyn Girl* as ‘a sentimental blend of history and kitsch’, so perhaps this falls into the “props” category. Many readers would dispute Yeoman’s dismissive view of Gregory’s work, though some others think that aspects of *The Other Boleyn Girl* are historically wrong or at least disputed, and for them that can be a real issue.

SUMMARY

To summarise, there seem to be three principal “problems” with historical fiction. The first is that we living in the present can never fully understand the inner lives of people living in the past and therefore may not be able to portray their thoughts and voices with any degree of authenticity. Secondly, historical fiction is a contradiction, lies pretending to be true. Thirdly, some historical novels fail to reflect the alterity of the past, dressing their characters in authentic-looking clothes but giving them modern sensibilities.

Yet these problems might also apply to many types of contemporary fiction. In science fiction, thrillers, murder mysteries and fantasy, novelists attempt to portray all sorts of characters’ inner lives that neither they nor the reader could actually experience. All novels of whatever genre are essentially “untrue” – they are fiction. Even the need for alterity is not confined to historical fiction but is required in novels portraying *any* world that is different from readers’ experience.

I do not believe that historical fiction in general suffers from such “problems” any more than any other type of fiction. However, it is true that, when I started writing *The Nature of Things*, I did have some concerns about *my own* ability to produce a novel with sufficient authenticity and alterity. For, although I was reasonably confident about describing the practicalities of the past, I remained nervous that I might fail to portray my characters’ inner lives truthfully, that they might seem to be modern rather than people of their time. It is these concerns that I will consider in the

¹⁰ John Yeoman, ‘How do we define “historical fiction”? A modest proposal’, *Clio’s Children* (25th April 2010) <clioschildren.blogspot.co.uk/2010/04/how-do-we-define-historical-fiction.html> [accessed 19th March 2014].

rest of this thesis, first describing the creation and development of my novel, *The Nature of Things*, and then discussing how I, and other historical novelists, have approached authenticity and alterity.

During the course of my PhD studies, I read a wide range of historical novels set broadly in the mediaeval period (eleventh to fifteenth centuries). However, in order to obtain a view of how other historical novelists had addressed the issues of authenticity and alterity, I looked again at thirty of those novels, with the specific purpose of making notes about my perception of their “mediaevalness” (or simply historicity), the authenticity of their characters’ thought-worlds, the degree of alterity, and the modernity or otherwise of the language used. I selected the thirty from a spectrum of different types of historical fiction, including traditional (historical figures and events), adventure and military, mysteries, and literary (including social history). I had thousands of novels to choose from – Sarah Johnson’s encyclopaedic tome on the history, trends and appeal of the historical fiction genre describes nearly four thousand in thirteen sub-genres.¹¹ However, I selected first from those with which I was already familiar, and then later from those that I discovered that seemed to offer a different style of writing or literary perspective from those I had already read. The full list of novels and my findings are summarised in Appendix 3.

¹¹ Sarah L. Johnson, *Historical Fiction: A Guide to the Genre* (Westport: Libraries Unlimited Inc., 2005).

3 WRITING *THE NATURE OF THINGS*

THEMES

The original inspiration for *The Nature of Things* came from a book by American academic John Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse*, which explores how mediaeval people coped with the adversities of famine, war, plague and death in the Later Middle Ages.

I had already written a novel set in the fourteenth century: *Meonbridge* also explored how people coped with adversity, in this case, the aftermath of the Black Death. I have long been attracted to the mediaeval period, for its relative remoteness in time and understanding, and for the very dichotomy between the present-day perception of the Middle Ages as “nasty, brutish and short” and the wonders of the period’s art and literature. I wanted to know more about the period, and, through writing fiction, I had the opportunity to interpret the mediaeval past, to bring both learning and imagination to my writing, which is I suppose what all historical novelists hope to do.

Aberth’s treatise is that fourteenth-century people faced ‘a daunting and fearful series of crises but faced them squarely, carrying on with their lives and proving remarkably resilient...’, perhaps finding comfort in their belief in the ‘promise of redemption, renewal and resurrection’. Aberth referred to this dichotomy as the ‘paradox of despair and hope’.¹²

The historian Barbara Tuchman called the fourteenth century “calamitous”.¹³ Catastrophic events affected every part of fourteenth-century life: overpopulation and severe poverty in the first decade; the famines of the second; the start of the Hundred Years War in 1337, which continued on and off for the rest of the century and beyond, imposing severe financial burdens on the whole population, both rich and poor; the Black Death in 1348-9 and the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381. Alongside

¹² John Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse* (London: Routledge, 2001), p.6-7.

¹³ Barbara W. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror* (London: Macmillan London Limited, 1979), p.24.

these particular adversities, disease and death were constant and familiar companions to people's lives, and conflict and despair were undoubtedly major factors for everyone then just as they are now.

I am particularly interested in social change and how events affected the lives of ordinary people, and I wanted to write a second novel, in which readers could inhabit my characters' heads and hearts and somehow understand *how* they experienced their lives. The "disaster" theme seemed a very suitable medium through which to portray mediaeval people's inner lives: I could show how my characters experience the terrible trials they are enduring, and how they cope with them within the context of their everyday lives.

However, if I originally thought I was writing a "disaster" novel, this is not entirely what it turned out to be. As I wrote and rewrote the novel, I realised that it was not so much focused on the disasters, but rather set ordinary people's lives against the *backdrop* of calamitous events, perhaps indicating that, as a novelist, I was in fact more interested in the relationships than the events. The novel has romance, happy and unhappy marriage, and illicit love. There is war, uprising and dissent. Terrible natural events occur that severely test people's character and resources. Some people fulfil their ambitions and others fail. The calamities are part, but not all, of what drives and determines the characters' stories.

Also, later in the writing process, the introduction of a secondary element of the garden, as an alleviating and hopeful thread throughout the book, changed the spirit of the novel, from one concerned primarily with adversity to one concerned also with the continuity of life. The gardens represent the inevitability of change and continuation, nature's seasonal cycle overlaying the chronology of human events. Adversity is still fundamental to the stories but so is hope, in both the characters' personal resources and, crucially for a "mediaeval" novel, in their understanding of life and death, and in the part religion played in their lives and thoughts. These *two* themes of "adversity" and "continuity" are an effective reflection of Aberth's 'paradox of despair and hope'.

STRUCTURE AND CHARACTERS

The Nature of Things is structured in seven parts, with each part narrated by a different principal character. The naming of the seven parts came from the four “horsemen of the apocalypse” as referenced by Aberth (Death, Plague, Famine and War), plus three of my own invention (Poverty, Disorder, Despair) – I thought that these names would add an appropriately “mediaeval” touch.

There was nothing especially numinous in my choice of *seven*, even though the number does have somewhat mystical properties. I wanted the novel to span the whole century and, moreover, I wanted to have a number of distinct viewpoints across the century. I considered five or six viewpoints, but concluded that seven main voices, telling seven discrete, yet linked and interconnected, stories, would work well.

The structural device of *The Nature of Things*, a novel told as a sequence of stories in different voices, rather than a chronologically continuous narrative, has a few precedents. In historical fiction, Adam Thorpe’s *Ulverton*, which spans more than three hundred years, is told in twelve different voices and media, including diaries, letters and a film script. Annie Proulx’s *Accordion Crimes* is a sequence of discrete stories, spanning a century, about the “lives” of the novel’s central character, an accordion. Peter Ackroyd’s *The Clerkenwell Tales* has each chapter told from the viewpoint of a different character, although the stories are linked and do all contribute to the final denouement.

Having seven different main characters gave me the opportunity to explore different types of lives. I chose characters for whom the particular catastrophes – famine, war, plague, rebellion, and so on – would have a particular impact. The idea was to have the characters “experience” the disasters in the context of their everyday lives.

Novel part	Principal narrator	Relationships	Period
1: Poverty	William Beneyt (Priest)		1300-1314
2: Famine	Agnes Tyler (Villein)	William’s niece	1314-1328
3: War	Richard atte Hyl (Villein/Archer)	Agnes’ husband	1328-1346

Novel part	Principal narrator	Relationships	Period
4: Plague	Peter atte Hyl (Villein/Merchant)	Richard's son	1346-1359
5: Death	Joanna Godfrey (Merchant's daughter/Merchant's wife/Chatelaine)	Peter's wife	1359-1371
6: Disorder	Tom Godewryght (Cottar/Carpenter)	Joanna's servant	1371-1382
7: Despair	Susanna Rolfe (Maid/Prostitute)	Tom's mistress	1382-1399

To tie the seven characters and stories together, the garden metaphor that supports the novel's continuity theme is given a physical presence by a fictional thirteenth-century book of plants, *The Nature of Growing Things: Plants, Herbs and Trees*. The garden is intended to offer an affirmative metaphor for the hope that can come out of even desperate struggle and tragedy – a symbol of the continuity of life. For William, the garden is a source of spiritual joy as well as food and medicine; for Agnes, it is a vital source of subsistence that she sees severely threatened; and Richard, despite his own rejection of the farming life, recognises that gardens are the lifeblood of French peasants, now being devastated by the English army in its brutal *chevauchées*. Peter, if unconsciously, re-experiences his great-uncle William's pleasure in a garden's beauty when he visits Italy, and brings home his discoveries to his new wife, Joanna, who becomes a passionate creator of Italian-style gardens in Southampton. Joanna encourages her servant Tom's love of trees and, later, his passion infects even Susanna, who had little innate interest in them. Finally, Tom, when he has the time and money, plants acres of trees, 'for the future', he says. The fictional book of plants, originally owned and used by William, passes down from character to character until it reaches Susanna, who treasures it although she cannot read.

The idea of having an object such as the book running through the novel and linking the parts is perhaps not dissimilar to *Accordion Crimes*, in which an accordion passes down the years through the hands of different owners.

NARRATIVE METAPHORS

Underlying the narrative of each part are the character's emotional reactions for which the part's title is also a metaphor. So, in 'Poverty', the physical poverty central to William Beneyt's story is mirrored in what he considers his own spiritual

poverty, his failing ability to trust in the Church's teachings, and indeed in his own beliefs.

1: Poverty, p.31

I was so full of enthusiasm for the task the bishop and his lordship gave me, but I often feel myself inadequate to the undertaking. I can trot out the usual words of comfort to my troubled parishioners, and I can put calluses on my knees in relentless offerings of prayer for their deliverance, but I seem unable to bring them practical respite from the misfortunes that beset them.

I should seek advice from the archdeacon – even from the bishop himself – but I am fearful of exposing my inadequacies before such devout and virtuous men.

In truth, I am a poor specimen of the priesthood. Not only because of my inability to give my flock the comfort I so want to provide. Almost more serious a flaw to my efficacy as a servant of the Church is my powerlessness – perhaps my unwillingness – to put the vision of Alys Dyer from my mind.

In 'Famine', the gnawing hunger of the great famine depicted in Agnes Tyler's story reflects her own emotional hunger, for knowledge, but mostly for love.

2: Famine, pp.113-114

I know now where my hunger for Tom Wodeman has led me.

In truth – although it's only days ago – I can't remember how it happened, or even *what* happened. Richard won't speak of it. He blames me entirely – for allowing another of his sons to die – and I can do no other than admit he's right.

I seek Tom out in Broadham, and find him working on some house repairs in the middle of the village. I make no attempt to draw him away for a private conversation.

'I heard about your little lad,' he says, and reaches out to take my hand. But I take a step back, not trusting myself to permit his touch. I look up and see the hurt in his eyes, but I'm resolved.

'It was my fault,' I say, keeping my voice low. 'I let myself be distracted.'

He looks perplexed. 'Distracted?'

I nod. 'By you.'

He frowns. 'You're blaming *me*?'

‘No, of course not,’ I say. ‘I knew what I was doing – I wanted it! But I shouldn’t have.’

‘You regret it, then?’

I sigh and shake my head. ‘I don’t know. Of course I regret losing Geoffrey.’ I can’t stop tears leaking from my eyes. ‘But how can I regret our love? How can I wish away our little Beatrix?’

He shrugs, but my tears are falling faster, and I’m wondering if I can bear it, never to see him again, never again to have my hunger for him sated. When I look up again, I can’t construe his face. I’d thought – hoped, perhaps – he’d try to change my mind, but he’s saying nothing.

Richard atte Hyl’s initial personal “war” with himself, between his duty to his family and his longing for adventure, is set within his experience of the real Hundred Years War. His son, Peter, having survived the cataclysmic peril of the Black Death deliberately courts danger again in his pursuit of a travelling merchant’s life. Joanna Godfrey, a young woman with a bright and happy future ahead of her, loses everything, not just those she loves, but also love itself and finally her liberty. Tom Godewryght’s story of the Peasants’ Revolt and his part in it is underscored by his recognition of society’s disorder and injustices. Finally, Susanna Rolfe’s story is one of despair, betrayed by her father, by the woman she thought her protector and by a priest she might expect to be morally virtuous.

TONAL VARIETY

The seven main characters “narrate” their stories in the first person and present tense, so readers are inside their heads, sharing their experience. One reason for choosing the present tense over the past was that I did not want my readers to know whether or not the characters survived the adversities they encountered – using the present tense together with the first person maintains a degree of suspense. But the first person/present tense voice was also intended to bring a sense of immediacy to the narrative that I hoped was also naturalistic – as if the story is being experienced rather than told.

However, as the novel developed, the idea grew of bringing more tonal variety into its structure. Two thoughts were behind this idea.

Firstly, I wanted to provide a balance to the intimacy – claustrophobia, perhaps – of readers being constantly inside a character’s head. To this end, I introduced some third person passages (in the voice of the prologue’s omniscient narrator) to lend insight into the thoughts and actions of some secondary characters, things the principal narrators could not know.

Secondly, I thought that providing an analogy to mediaeval manuscripts, where words and images are used together to relate a story or educate the reader, would lend a little further “mediaevalness” to the novel’s concept. The novel does not of course have pictures, but a number of different textual forms are used as “word pictures” to balance the regular narrative: various texts, poems, letters and literary extracts are intended to illuminate each narrator’s story in some way. In the event, I think that the “mediaeval manuscript” analogy has proved rather thin, but I do feel that these extracts both successfully round out and illustrate the stories and also bring additional authenticity.

Three of the parts – those narrated by the three women, Agnes, Joanna and Susanna – include extracts from the gardening book. Although the book is fictional, the extracts are reworkings of various real mediaeval texts about gardening and garden design, including a thirteenth-century book on plants by Albertus Magnus, a French fourteenth-century guide for housewives, and others.¹⁴ Gardens and gardening are important in these three stories, either throughout or, in the case of Susanna, at the end of her story. For William the priest, in ‘Poverty’, extracts from scripture help to underscore his personal struggle with his beliefs. For Richard, in ‘War’, the tales highlight his yearning for a soldier’s life of bravery and comradeship. In ‘Plague’, Peter’s longing for adventure and his love of his profession as a merchant, are highlighted through extracts from adventurous accounts, both real and invented. Tom’s story of the Peasants’ Revolt in ‘Disorder’ is given some additional

¹⁴ Albertus Magnus’ words reinterpreted from an extract included in John Harvey’s *Mediaeval Gardens* (London: Batsford Limited, 1981), p.6. Other gardening extracts gleaned and reinterpreted from several pages of Frank Crisp’s *Mediaeval Gardens* ed. by Catherine Childs Paterson (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1979) and of Eileen Power’s edition of *The Goodman of Paris (Le Ménager de Paris), A Treatise on Moral and Domestic Economy by a citizen of Paris c.1393* (London: The Folio Society, 1992).

authenticity by the inclusion of the real John Ball's letters and contemporary poems.¹⁵

“SOCIAL REALISM” AND NATURALISM

In the nineteenth century, many British novelists claimed to write about “ordinary people”: George Eliot, Dickens and Gaskell ‘used the historical novel to contemplate social change’.¹⁶ The way they wrote was essentially “social realism”,¹⁷ and naturalistic. In her introduction to *Felix Holt*, George Eliot said that all lives, however humble, are to some degree influenced by what she called ‘wider public life’, but her interest was in ‘lives...rooted in the common earth, having to endure all the ordinary chances of past and present weather.’¹⁸ As de Groot says, ‘Eliot’s [novels] explore historical periods in forensic philosophical, cultural and social detail with a view to understanding...change through the experience of a range of ordinary people.’¹⁹

The Nature of Things is also concerned with “ordinary people”, chosen at least partly to give a voice to those who are rarely heard, to recover something of what has been lost from that time. Despite the difference in period setting of Eliot’s novels from mine, I do feel that my *objective* was not much different from hers, or from that of some modern authors, such as Bernard Cornwell, who de Groot says, ‘is interested in the experience of the common man within the wider sweep of events, the microcosmic relationships and occurrences that make a life within history.’²⁰

Michel Faber, writer of *The Crimson Petal and the White*, a novel set in the nineteenth century, has spoken of historical novelists who [want] ‘to write a novel exploring a specific clutch of themes and human conflicts, and who [realise] that a

¹⁵ Reinterpreted from texts given in R.B. Dobson’s *The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381* (London: Macmillan & Co Limited, 1970), pp.305, 358-362 and 380-383.

¹⁶ De Groot, *The Historical Novel*, p.34.

¹⁷ ‘The realistic depiction in art of contemporary life, as a means of social or political comment.’
<<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/social-realism>> [accessed 11th July 2014].

¹⁸ *Felix Holt*, p. 129, quoted in de Groot, *The Historical Novel*, p.38.

¹⁹ De Groot, p.38.

²⁰ De Groot, p.82.

particular era, which happens to be in the past, is right for this story.’²¹ Faber’s comment set me thinking: I had thought I simply wanted to write about the Middle Ages, but it was also true that I wanted to write a story about how people coped with adversity, and the fourteenth century was an appropriate context for considering such a topic.

My characters’ stories, to a greater or lesser extent, concern social changes in turbulent times. It might be said that the novel includes a fair degree of social realism, in the style of Eliot, Gaskell and Dickens. But, technically, it is not social realism at all, for my realism is not intended as a means of social or political comment, but rather as a way of simply showing life as it was.

Moreover, it seems that, in this style of writing, *The Nature of Things* is tapping into a currently favoured genre of historical fiction, “social history”. Sarah Johnson, writing about the changes in historical fiction over the past forty years or so, says: ‘while retellings of well-known events and famous people continue to be popular, today’s historical novels are just as apt to emphasise more neglected topics, such as common people’s daily lives and how they were affected (or not) by major events’.²²

²¹ Quoted in Celia Brayfield and Duncan Sprott, *Writing Historical Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p.126.

²² Johnson, p.4.

4 AUTHENTICITY AND ALTERITY

WHAT IS AUTHENTICITY?

In writing *The Nature of Things*, my objective has been to bring the past to life, but with a sense of “naturalism” and a high degree of “authenticity”. For readers who enjoy learning about history through fiction, a sense of historical truth is important, although those who simply enjoy reading stories set in the past may not mind too much if a novel tends more towards the imaginative than the true. Book reviews of any number of historical novels show how widely readers’ needs and sensibilities can differ: for some, historical accuracy is vital, whereas, for others, a *sense* of authenticity is enough, provided the story is sufficiently engaging.

In 2013, a survey of historical fiction readers asked, among other things, why people read historical fiction.²³ The answers accorded with my own reasons for reading, and indeed writing, it: principally to appreciate how people lived and coped then and to understand the experience of those marginalised by history. Respondents cited the feeling of immersion in time and place, authenticity and learning, as aspects of historical fiction that were most important to them. Johnson says that readers ‘want to be seduced into believing that the historical world an author creates is real’.²⁴

For those readers, and for me, authenticity *is* important, and there are many ways for the historical novelist to achieve it: choosing a particular narrative form for the novel; using aspects of recorded history; portraying the social context of the time; describing physical details, such as houses, clothes and food; and depicting the historical thought-world, including such aspects as religion and superstition.

²³ M.K. Tod, ‘2013 Historical Fiction Survey’, *A Writer of History, Inside Historical Fiction* <awriterofhistory.com/2013-historical-fiction-survey/> [accessed March 17th 2014].

²⁴ Johnson, p.5.

ACHIEVING AUTHENTICITY

NARRATIVE FORM

In *How Novels Work*, John Mullan says: ‘Some stories account for their existence. The framing device is...the fictional explanation of how a narrative has been discovered or recorded...the frame (or explanation) surrounds the rest of the narrative.’²⁵

In some historical novels the very structure, the narrative form, can purport to bring authenticity to the story. Examples include Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* and Adam Thorpe’s novel, *Hodd*. As Jerome de Groot says, *The Name of the Rose* uses ‘the framing narrative of the lost manuscript’.²⁶ The book purports to be a manuscript written by a fourteenth-century monk, discovered by a seventeenth-century scholar, translated into French by a nineteenth-century monk, and finally finding its way into Eco’s hands, who translated it into Italian before “losing” it. Eco tells us that he could find no evidence of a real manuscript and suspected it might all have been a hoax, but decided to publish his Italian version anyway. We should, of course, read the “hoax” as Eco’s.

In *Hodd*, Adam Thorpe uses a similar premise, a ‘translation from a soiled Latin manuscript’.²⁷ In this case, the narrator of the story is the fourteenth-century writer of the manuscript; the narration *is* the manuscript. But to avoid having to write the novel in Middle English, Thorpe introduces, in a preface, the translator of the manuscript, allegedly a soldier-scholar who discovered it during the First World War. Thorpe mentions his use of footnotes in *Hodd*: ‘They remind you that the story is a document, soiled and transposed.’²⁸

²⁵ John Mullan, *How Novels Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.31.

²⁶ De Groot, p.127.

²⁷ Adam Thorpe, author’s website, Fiction, *Hodd* <www.adamthorpe.net/Fiction/Hodd.html> [accessed 18th March 2014].

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Hodd, pp.5-6

‘If I had happened not to have met with the outlaw called Robert Hod, so many years ago that none are still living from that time but myself, I would be less tormented in my spirit, for...it was Hodde who put strange ideas and questionings into my head.’

This paragraph is annotated with a footnote noting that ‘this manuscript’ never uses the modern spelling of the name ‘Hood or Hoode’. Footnotes are part of the “device”.

Even though such devices deliberately set out to beguile the reader into believing something is true that is not, they can undoubtedly bring a sense of authenticity to the novel. However, I was unable to come up with any such device for *The Nature of Things*. Rather I concluded that a simple seven-part structure would allow each of the seven characters to convey their experience of their part of the century’s story, and I devised themes that would reflect both their struggles against the forces of nature and politics, and the possibility of optimism for the future.

RECORDED HISTORY

The Nature of Things is not *about* the history of the politics and events of the period, but neither is history merely an ornamental backdrop – it drives the plot and underpins each constituent story. In ‘Poverty’, the poverty and famine of the early 1300s and King Edward I’s concerns about public disorder, which led to the introduction of his “trailbaston” commissions in 1305, are significant to the storyline. In ‘Famine’, the bad weather and resulting famine are key to Agnes’ experiences, and contribute to her despondency about her future.

In ‘War’, the history of the early years of the Hundred Years War is central to Richard’s story, with descriptions of battles (Sluys, Caen and Crécy), raids and *chevauchées*, and the life of soldiers. I owe my understanding of these historical details to the work of several historians, but principally to Jonathan Sumption,²⁹ although of course my imagination overlays the history.

²⁹ Jonathan Sumption, *Trial By Battle: The Hundred Years War I* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999).

3: War, p.167

Towards the end of the afternoon the sky clouds over and it begins to rain. The first ranks of crossbowmen come into view. The trumpets sound and we're on our feet, restringing our bows. The crossbowmen advance, shouting what we take to be abuse. But we don't move. We don't give a rat's arse about insults and provocations.

The shouts then give way to the deafening clamour of French trumpets, drums and roaring infantrymen, and the crossbowmen begin to move in our direction, firing as they march. But their bolts fall short. We can't help but raise a cheer.

'That must've pissed them off,' says Simon in my ear. We share a grin.

The early part of 'Plague' depends on the history of what we call the Black Death of 1348-9, and 'Disorder' relies heavily on the known details of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. To describe these devastating events, I gleaned information from the works, inevitably not always entirely consistent, of many historians,³⁰ and derived a version of events that would fit my characters' stories, although, in the interests of authenticity, and because I had no reason to do otherwise, I have not changed any events that appear to be commonly agreed.

'Death' and 'Despair' rely less on major historical events for their storylines, though they are obviously not absent: plague returns to devastating effect in 'Death', and 'Despair' is set in a time of political upheaval, in which the king was eventually deposed. But forcing history into 'Despair' would have been inappropriate, indeed inauthentic, for a girl like Susanna would be largely unaware of "history", and little would have touched her directly. This is in contrast, for example, to 'Famine', where the history – the famine – greatly affected and changed young Agnes' life.

SOCIAL CONTEXT

What was it like to live in the fourteenth century? The popular modern view might well be "nasty, brutish and short", which, while bearing some measure of truth, suggests an unrelenting grimness that I feel unreasonably excludes humanity and emotion.

³⁰ See Bibliography, 'The Black Death' and 'The Peasants' Revolt'.

It is true that life expectancy *at birth* was short, children being in constant peril from accidents, untreatable illnesses, the effects of poverty, and natural disasters. But if an individual survived childhood and reached the age of around twenty or so, he or she might then hope to live until at least middle, if not old, age. In *The Nature of Things*, several children die, from accident, illness and plague, and their deaths cause inevitable anguish. Of the adults, four do not reach old age. Peter ('Plague') dies young, at twenty-eight, in the pursuit of his longing for adventure, in a skirmish with brigands. Three die in their forties: William ('Poverty') is murdered, Agnes ('Famine') succumbs to an incurable illness, and Richard ('War') perishes in the Black Death, all brutal (but not brutish) and untimely. But Joanna ('Death') is sixty when she dies, and in the final part, 'Despair', we have every reason to imagine that Tom and Susanna will achieve a good, and happy, old age.

Perhaps most people did live in environments that, to us, would seem horribly dirty, foul-smelling and dark – the image of a gloomy, dank and stinking hovel comes to mind. Sometimes historical novels or films are criticised for presenting too clean a picture, and it is also true that, in *The Nature of Things*, nasty environments are not much mentioned. It is undoubtedly correct that peasant houses were generally dark from a lack of windows, and smoky from the central hearth, and even great houses would be cold and draughty, but there seems to be no reason to imagine that people of every station in life did not make every effort to ensure their homes were as comfortable as possible.

If we time-travelled into a mediaeval town or village, we would undoubtedly find the whole environment pretty unpleasant. However, in *The Nature of Things*, the main narratives are spoken by the characters themselves, so, even if their homes and general environment were smelly and uncomfortable by *our* standards, *they* surely would not recognise it as worthy of remark, unless it was in some way unusual. Any lack of reference to unpleasant environments is deliberate, as we are looking at life through their eyes, eyes that would not notice what is commonplace.

In the following passage, William remarks upon the poor physical condition of the tavern because he notices how unfavourably it compares with his parsonage.

1: Poverty, pp.8-9

Tonight the alehouse is full to bursting. It is a large building, popular with the less worthy in the village, but a ramshackle place, with crumbling walls and a roof of rotting, gap-ridden thatch. Jakys Coupere, as dissolute as his patrons, barely bothers to keep the building in any sort of good repair.

A short while ago I saw old Dan Miller, drunk beyond feeling, as usual, topple from his flimsy bench onto the thick layer of stinking rushes. No one else appeared to notice: none of the drinkers sitting nearby got up to look at the inebriated old man lying in an undoubtedly noisome heap, or bothered to try to set him back onto his bench.

Agnes comments more than once on the difficulty of walking out of doors, because of the particular devastation to roads and pathways wrought by the constant rain.

2: Famine, p.75

... as I struggle to keep my footing in my awkward pattens and not slide into the ditches – raging torrents now instead of useful dykes.

It was not, presumably, *always* quite so bad, although it must be true that, without paved roads, travel in the Middle Ages, especially in wet weather, would often be an arduous, uncomfortable affair, and I have always borne this in mind.

Indeed, weather plays a strong role throughout the book and, in some cases, primarily in ‘Poverty’ and ‘Famine’, it is so fundamental to events that I decided to try and discover what is known about it. John Kington’s *Climate and Weather* contains detailed descriptions of weather from the first century BC to 2000 AD, and has a summary for each year of the fourteenth century.³¹ It is perhaps unlikely that many readers would know what the weather was like in 1305, but being able to draw on a “factual” description of it does, I feel, bring a sense of authenticity.

1: Poverty, p.48

The warm, dry summers of recent years continued the run of good harvests. But, this year, the sun’s heat is not warm but oppressive, the hay crop has failed and beasts are dying in the fields from a lack of fodder. Tempers are fraying and, despite my efforts

³¹ John Kington, *Climate and Weather* (London: Harper Collins, 2010), pp.221-232.

with the village youths, the very heat seems to spur them on to even more ill-tempered brawling.

PHYSICAL DETAILS

Describing accurately what we know or can deduce about how people lived, their homes, clothes, food, tools, working practices, is perhaps not too hard to achieve. If writers read enough history, visit museums and, where appropriate, study contemporary documents, they stand a fair chance of getting the physical picture of the period right, although even the most careful researcher might slip up, or choose one version of the “historical truth” over another, which some readers might question. That is true of any fiction, of any period.

So what happens if a writer gets a detail wrong?

Noticeable anachronisms – events not yet happened, artefacts not yet invented, ideas not likely to have entered anybody’s mind – must be avoided. However, I would guess that many readers do not always recognise anachronisms. Some evidence for this can be found in book reviews, where 5* reviewers may say nothing negative about a book, while 1* critics of the same book appear to exult in pointing out every historical failing. The fact is that, for readers who do notice problems, the writer’s credibility as a portrayer of authenticity may be immediately compromised.

As an example, I was surprised to find mention of potatoes in Julia Blackburn’s *The Leper’s Companions*, a novel (shortlisted for the Orange Prize) set in England in the year 1410. This may seem cavilling, but potatoes did not arrive in Europe until the mid-sixteenth century. Blackburn also refers to a ‘shift...with the lace around the sleeves and neck’, apparently belonging to a peasant woman, which seems unlikely for the time. Yet, it seems, if a reader likes a story enough, these details may not matter, even if they are recognised. On the back cover of *The Leper’s Companions*, an anonymous critic described it as ‘profoundly researched as all [her] work’; and an Amazon reviewer said ‘It is exquisitely written in lean & learned detail...’³² Indeed I found myself happy enough to overlook these apparent glitches in research because

³² Reviewer “A Customer” (2002), Amazon Customer Reviews, *The Leper’s Companions* <<http://www.amazon.co.uk/product-reviews/022405127X/>> [accessed 25th June 2014].

of the other qualities of Blackburn's book. It is an intriguing story, and the strangeness of the world she created is fascinating, if not very naturalistic, thus showing that the balance of acceptability is different for different readers.

However, *The Nature of Things* was intended to be a *naturalistic* story, showing "everyday life", so getting the physical details of the period right was important, with food and clothing just two aspects of the physical that can lend an air of authenticity.

For example, in 'Famine', Agnes describes a meagre meal taken during the privations of the famine.

2: Famine, pp.85-86

Ma ladles pottage into a large serving bowl, and puts it down in front of him. 'There's a scrap of that good bacon in there,' she says, 'so eat up, husband.'

He turns to look at her and smiles. 'A little,' he says, picking up his spoon. He dips it into the pottage and, filling it with the gravy, raises it slowly to his mouth and tips it in. 'It's good,' he says and smiles again.

'But you took none of the bacon,' says Ma, standing over him like she used to when we were children. 'Nor any of the turnip.'

'Let the children have some first,' says Pa, signalling to us to dip our spoons and take our share.

[...]

When the bowl is almost empty, Ma fetches a small hunk of the coarse bread she's made from barley mixed with ground up peas and beans, and cuts it into five pieces, three larger and two smaller, and, handing one to each of us, bids us wipe the big bowl clean.

There are many references throughout the novel to clothing: kirtles, cloaks and headdresses, cotehardies and surcoats, wooden pattens and fleece hoods, workmen's coifs and whores' striped hoods. Most items of clothing are mentioned more or less in passing, but one or two are described in a little more detail. For example, when I discovered a suggestion that peasants might have used hoods made of fleece to keep off the rain, I realised it might not be "true", but it seemed likely enough and had an authentic ring.

2: Famine, p.75

Then I pull on one of the sheepskin hoods Ma's laboured to make us all. It made her fingers bleed stitching through the skins, and Pa complained at the waste of fleeces.

[...]

It's true the fleece hood keeps my head dry, though I hate the sheepy smell and scratchy itch of the unwashed, oily wool so near my face.

Also I thought that clarity and authenticity might come from an intimate view of how a particular kind of headdress was worn, with its elements of band, veil and barbet.

7: Despair, p.347

I hate rubbing her wrinkly neck, and her flabby arms, and her puffy ankles. I don't want to touch her horrible old body at all. But I have to, to ease the stiffness that creeps into her bones when she's been out all day and come home tired, or when she's fallen asleep in the chair and woken up too stiff to move, like now. Of course I keep my grumbles to myself, and go to stand behind her chair. Gritting my teeth, I take off the band holding her veil in place and put it and the veil on the table. Then I unpin the linen barbet, and unwrap it from under her chin, letting her thin greying hair fall to her shoulders. I always feel queasy at the sight of the balding patches and scraggy throat the veil and barbet make such a good job of hiding. I gather up her wispy hair and catch it under a close-fitting coif, so her neck's completely uncovered and ready for my soothing hands.

However, although physical details are important, it is not really *factual* authenticity that is the main concern of historical fiction's detractors.

THOUGHT-WORLD

Henry James distrusted historical novelists' ability to imagine the gaps between their own inner lives and those of people who lived in earlier times, whose experience of the world was so much more limited than ours. It was this that he thought made historical fiction impossible to write with any degree of authenticity. But this is surely the very essence of historical fiction – to portray what Barry Unsworth once called the “spirit of the age”. He thought that authenticity could be

found in the way a novel sensed the past, the way readers experienced what it was like to be alive at that time.³³ The *truth* of the novel lies in the characters' thought-world.

I have found that portraying the intangible aspects of my characters' thought-worlds, such as sexuality and gender, religion, superstition, belief in magic and monsters, peoples' sensibilities and mindsets in general, is more difficult than getting right either the social context or the physical details. Although there is no shortage of academic writing about these subjects, the difficulty lies in transporting *oneself* as a writer into a very different thought-world. Fourteenth-century people must have been like us in many ways, yet also *unlike* us in many others, and tapping into these dissimilarities is both a challenge and, perhaps, one of the principal points of writing historical fiction.

Sexuality and gender

The Nature of Things was always intended to focus on the lives of relatively ordinary people, although I did want all the characters, both male and female, to be quite "strong", more ambitious perhaps than many of their real counterparts would have been. I think that is partly what makes them engaging as characters. Yet, it was important for the sake of authenticity that they were not anachronistic. *The Nature of Things* has three principal, and four secondary but still important, female characters, and most of these are strong but not "feminist"; they do more or less conform to the norms of the day.

Fourteenth-century sexual relationships were undoubtedly different from the norms of modern day Britain. Sex outside marriage and adultery were sins in the eyes of the Church. Even sex *inside* marriage was a sin if it was not knowingly for the procreation of children. However, I feel sure that women would have experienced the same desires and passions as modern women, even if they knew they were "sinful". So, despite their undoubted fears, three of my female characters, Agnes, Joanna and William's mistress Alys, are both eager for love and enthralled by sexual passion.

³³ Arlo Haskell, 'Barry Unsworth: The Economy of Truth', Key West Literary Seminar, Audio Archives (7th October 2009) <www.kwls.org/podcasts/barry_unsworth_the_economy_of/> [accessed 25th March 2014].

Like women throughout time until the contraceptive pill brought them unprecedented sexual freedom, they engage in “illicit” sex despite the risk of pregnancy and therefore discovery, and despite their fears about sin.

2: Famine, pp.111-112

Later, when he’s gone, I’m in an agony of conflict. I’m racked with terror at my sin but unable to confess it for the shame of seeing Master Anselm’s shocked and disappointed eyes. Yet I’m quite powerless to tell Tom not to come to me again. For the truth is my hunger for the pleasure Tom brings me is far stronger than my fear.

7: Despair, p.353

But I hate how the old bawd tricked me...I begin to feel bitter about it, thinking the food and kirtles aren’t enough to make up for what I’ve become. Maybe I was only a kitchen maid before, but I was at least still decent. Dame Margery and all those men have shamed me. I worry my soul’s doomed to wander in Purgatory for ever, maybe even to go down to Hell.

Mediaeval literature and court records make it clear that adultery was common enough, if by no means socially acceptable, so Agnes’ adultery (‘Famine’) was quite possible. But unsurprisingly her behaviour gets her into trouble, and she realises it is the result of her hunger for a different sort of life. She has dreams, but they are not – indeed, cannot be – fulfilled: in the end ordinary life gets in the way and her role as wife, and especially mother, prevents her from leaving (while her husband Richard can and does renege on his responsibilities). Instead, Agnes’ desire for a different life turns into a hunger for love, love that proves perilous as well as sinful. I see Agnes as like any modern woman who longs for something “more” in life, although her “more” is limited to what was likely in the fourteenth century, constrained as she is by social mores as well as circumstance.

William’s illicit relationship with Alys (‘Poverty’) is equally risky, because he is consciously flouting the Church’s rules on the celibacy of the priesthood. However, as I understand it, mediaeval priests often had mistresses, and even wives and children, so the scenario is plausible. Alys, impatient for the relationship despite her fears, tries to force William to fall in love with her by obtaining a “love potion”, although we know that he does love her, but is struggling with his conscience. He succumbs, with or without the love potion, because ultimately his desire is stronger

than his religious scruples. Yet neither Alys nor William is truly comfortable with their decision to become lovers – they are not modern people. It is perhaps surprising that they – indeed mediaeval people generally – would commit these “sins” at all whilst apparently so fearing punishment in the next life, but, as Johnson says, “human nature doesn’t change”.³⁴

1: Poverty, p.41

I did not know until that moment that the top of Alys’s lovely russet head stands just below my chin. I lower my face and knowing, once I have done so, the bond between us will be sealed, I kiss her hair.

The bond is sealed, but the nature of it remains unsettled. I feel yet unable to make a public denial of the rules of clergy by taking Alys as my wife, and yet I cannot shake off the conviction that I am sinning – and forcing her to sin – when we share my bed without the sanctity of marriage. Alys, for her part, is patiently risking her mortal soul for the sake of our nights of joyful – and guilty – pleasure.

Joanna (‘Death’) is coquettish and high-spirited and ultimately absorbs ideas about society that were undoubtedly unusual for women of her time – for example, about equality, the power and wealth of the Church, the freedom of women to manage their own lives. Yet she barely acts on them. She does have an “unsuitable” relationship with her servant but it is not sexual – not Lady Chatterley – even though she might desire it. After being widowed, she remarries for the sake of regularising her position in society and giving her children security, initially finding her sexual desire rekindled but having no idea how much she will eventually lose in terms of love and freedom.

5: Death, p.243

Despite my grief at leaving all my wonderful memories of Peter behind, I find it easy enough to fall for Ralph’s undoubted charms and my body blossoms eagerly at his touch. Night after night he plies me with wine and carries me to our bed, gently stripping me of my clothes and covering me with moist kisses and tantalizing caresses so tender and so skilfully placed that, each day, I wander the castle grounds distracted and alone, yearning for night to come again.

³⁴ Johnson, p.5.

I wanted Joanna to start as a vivacious girl, both a little rebellious – against tradition and against her mother – and eager for love. Her vivacity is a counterpoint to the losses she will experience: the deaths of her husband and children, then her parents, the flight of the boy she nurtured, and at length her own freedom. She copes well with all that life flings at her, but she almost allows her rebelliousness to undo her by refusing to give up her relationship with her servant Tom, or perhaps blinding herself to the likely outcome. Of all the women in *The Nature of Things*, she is perhaps the most “modern”, a woman determined to make her own decisions. Her mother Christina thinks her recklessly headstrong when she refuses her father’s advice and, as a consequence, loses two of her sons to the plague.

5: Death, p.234

‘Your father told you what you should do,’ she says, her eyes narrowed and steely, ‘but you ignored his advice. You think you are so modern and independent, and do not need the advice of your elders.’

I shake my head, weeping still. ‘That is not true, Mama,’ I whisper. ‘I just thought–’

She flies at me. ‘You just thought you could defy God’s will – you arrogant, irresponsible girl.’

Susanna (‘Despair’) comes from a very different background, the child of a poor, if hardworking, mother and a feckless father, although I think that her difficult life would not have been unusual in the fourteenth century. Her story is one of despair, betrayed first (she thinks) by her father, who sells her into servitude – although it was normal for a young girl to go away from home to work – then deceived by her employer’s son, who makes her pregnant, resulting in her dismissal, then duped by a seemingly kindly old woman into prostitution, possibly common enough for young girls alone in a town, and finally assaulted by a man she might expect to be paternal rather than predatory, a priest. Yet she is strong-willed enough to escape from the old woman for, despite her lowly start in life, she does not consider prostitution an acceptable way of life. She knows her mother would be ashamed of her, and fears that she is putting her soul in danger. When she (with her sister Alice) is later forced back into prostitution in order to survive, it is a desperate act, and she retains a low opinion of herself, believing that no good man could ever want her after all her sinning. But she is redeemed by her sister’s love and finally by Tom’s. I have

allowed Tom to accept her past although I realise this might make him appear to be a “modern man”. My justification is that he regards himself as flawed, because of his behaviour during the rebellion, yet, through the example set him by Joanna, and by the two men who later give him the opportunity to train as a carpenter, he has learned the virtue of giving people a second chance.

Religious views

The central role of religion in the lives of fourteenth-century people is perhaps difficult for many people living in twenty-first century, science-focused, largely secular Britain to fully appreciate. It is true that some people of some faiths in Britain today would find it perfectly easy to understand, but I think my anticipated readership overall might not, although they would nonetheless expect mediaeval religious sensibilities to permeate my characters’ thought-worlds.

In the fourteenth century, God was central to daily life: in prayers and oaths, in how people thought of their position in the world and of life after death, in the way they behaved. The Church directed how people ran their lives, to an extent that we would undoubtedly consider deeply interfering. As Eamon Duffy says, ‘The Christian calendar determined the pattern of work and rest, fasting and feasting, and influenced even the privacies of the bedchamber, deciding...when husbands and wives might sleep together or must abstain. Everyone, *in principle* [my italics] at least, subscribed to the Christian creed.’³⁵ However, Duffy’s “in principle” makes me think that perhaps strong faith was not quite as universal as we might suppose. I imagine that most people believed in God, and in Heaven and Hell, and may have feared the consequences of committing too many sins, yet many probably had the most simplistic understanding of God, Christ and the Holy Spirit. But I imagine too that most were happy enough to engage in the main events of the Church year – the many Christian feast days and the annual confession at Lent or Easter – and to celebrate the sacraments of baptism and marriage, and I suppose most went to church every Sunday.

³⁵ Eamon Duffy, ‘Religious belief’, in *A Social History of England 1200 – 1500*, ed. by Rosemary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.293.

However, if most people believed something, at least a few undoubtedly eschewed religion altogether, although they might well have kept their scepticism to themselves. In *The Nature of Things* I have drawn Agnes' father Geoffrey ('Famine') as having lost his faith, because God continues to ignore his (indeed everyone's) prayers for help in the midst of devastating famine. His apostasy frightens his wife and family, who fear God may punish him, and also that those in authority on the manor may regard Geoffrey as subversive.

The fourteenth century was a world where what we now consider natural (or perhaps man-made) disasters, such as ruinous weather, famine, plague, were presumed to be God's punishment for man's sin. This would, I think, have been what priests taught their congregations. In the following passages, both characters "know" that God has sent their suffering, without understanding why.

2: Famine, p.84

Ma says we must believe our suffering is God's will. But I don't understand at all why He's making our life so hard, for I don't think me, or Ma, or Pa, or my brothers, or anyone in Broadham, has been so wicked we can possibly deserve such punishment.

Ma tries to comfort me. 'Think of it as part of God's great plan. He's testing us—'

'But *why*, Ma?' I cry. 'Why do we need to be so tested?'

She shrugs. 'Master Anselm says God wants us to understand we're weak and must trust in Him alone.' She wrings her apron for a few moments. 'Which is why I worry so about your Pa,' she says, in a whisper. 'He thinks he's no need of God at all – can manage by himself.'

'But he can't, can he?' I say, thinking of how thin and frail Pa's become. 'So will God think badly of Pa?'

Ma shakes her head. 'I don't know, Agnes,' she says, wiping her face with the edge of her apron. 'He's a loving and merciful God, Master Anselm says, but all the same I'm fearful for Pa's soul.'

4: Plague, p.185

The loss of my brother and his family is hard too for me to bear, despite Will and me not always seeing eye-to-eye. I think of what Isabel said – what cause did God have to punish them? Will was a good man, hard working, honest, a loving husband and

father. Isabel was vexing but hardly a sinner. And the children'd had no time to sin!
No one, not even Master Nicholas, understood why God must be so cruel.

INCLUDING ALTERITY

I have already commented on the views of some writers about the need to include a sense of “alterity” in an historical novel: such things as superstitions, religious charms, dreams, magic and spells, monsters and mediaeval art (illuminations, misericords, church paintings), strange ideas and seemingly fantastical happenings that today could be readily explained or dismissed.

Yet, when I embarked on writing *The Nature of Things*, because my declared intention was to write a *naturalistic* novel, one that portrayed what I thought of as “everyday life”, such strange and fantastical elements as “myth and magic” did not seem to have a place, because I felt that such elements might somehow detract from the naturalism I wanted to achieve. For, although myth and magic may have been part of the mediaeval person’s ordinary experience, they are the *opposite* for us. In writing a historical novel, I am not just portraying the past, but am conscious of how certain aspects of the past might now be seen by a modern reader. A potential danger of introducing “magical” elements that today would be dismissed as fantastical, however authentic they might be to the mediaeval experience, is that the novel might appear less naturalistic historical fiction than some sort of fantasy. A balance must be drawn between the authentic past and the sceptical present.

I enjoy reading the novels of Karen Maitland, an expert at writing novels redolent with “mediaeval” atmosphere, dark and suffused with weirdness. In *Company of Liars*, set against the spread of the Black Death, the principal characters are mostly rather uncommon people, including a magician, a one-armed storyteller and a child witch, and the story has elements of the fantastic and the supernatural. For example, the storyteller, who has a swan’s wing where his missing arm should be, describes his childhood.

Company of Liars, p.158

‘One day my mother found me in a corner of the byre, beating my little stump with a stick and sobbing. It was then that she...explained that my little buds would soon sprout feathers and grow into a beautiful white wing just like a swan’s.’

It is by no means unrelievedly fantastical, but *Company of Liars* has a degree of strangeness that does seem “mediaeval”, but does not evoke (for me) the naturalistic everyday atmosphere that I wanted for *The Nature of Things*.

The Leper’s Companions by Julia Blackburn seems largely fantastical. It has a strange premise, of a modern woman suddenly, and inexplicably, transported back to the fifteenth century to live as an unseen ghost among the villagers. Initially, the picture of mediaeval life painted by Blackburn appears normal enough, yet superstition and strange ideas soon pervade the novel to a degree that makes it appear fantastical rather than naturalistic. It is perhaps difficult to draw the line between the simple strangeness of the time and the introduction of magical elements into an otherwise normal setting. Whatever Blackburn’s intention, it is disconcertingly strange and detracts sufficiently from the naturalistic to be a form that, again, I did not want to emulate.

The Leper’s Companions, p.13

On the following morning a cow died for no good reason and the shoemaker’s wife gave birth to a baby with the head of a monstrous fish.

The Leper’s Companions, p.62

She ate the map entirely...it made her feel she now contained the knowledge of distant lands growing inside her like a new baby.

By contrast, there are many novels with settings in the Middle Ages that do not seem to include much of what we would regard as fantastical, although the normal religious and superstitious sensitivities of the time are well integrated.

For example, Elizabeth Chadwick’s novels about real mediaeval historical figures are essentially naturalistic; all her novels are noted for historical accuracy and sense of period. If any of them have fantastical elements (I have not read them all), I think these elements would be incidental, not fundamental, to the story.

The Scarlet Lion, p.32

Waving away the table attendants, [Hubert] wiped his eating knife, cut the tags and opened out the vellum. William cleaned his hands on a napkin and looked at the Archbishop expectantly. On occasions like this, it was a nuisance not to have the skill

of reading. He had tried to learn, but the letters remained so much spider crawl to his eyes.

Here, the ship's master's reference to a superstition is not derided by the well-born lady, Isabelle – it is presumably as natural an idea to her as it is to him.

***The Scarlet Lion*, p.73**

[The ship's master] nodded with grim approval at their prayers, shouted something about being fortunate if you were born in the caul and returned to his crew.

'What's "born in the caul"?' Richard wanted to know.

'It means that you were born inside the bag that held you in the womb,' Isabelle told him, 'and that you'll never drown.'

Bernard Cornwell, too, in his *Grail Quest* trilogy, sets out to deliver a more-or-less true-to-life account of action in the Hundred Years War.

***Harlequin*, p.243**

That army of England must have looked like twenty thousand men when the trumpets tore the summer sky with their massed defiance...One moment the horizon was empty...and then there was a sudden host, a horde, a swarm of men glinting iron-hard in the sun and topped by a forest of raised lances and flags.

Yet, in this passage, although Thomas is a mostly rational man, he does not think it strange to believe that a lance hanging in a little Dorset church is the actual weapon of a centuries-dead saint. But if such a belief strikes us as strange, it was surely just normal for the time.

***Harlequin*, p.11**

...plenty of folk ...said it could not have been St George's lance, but Thomas believed it was and he like to imagine the dust churned by the hooves of St George's horse, and the dragon's breath streaming in hellish flame...

Susanna Gregory's mediaeval mystery novels also manage to achieve what seems like a naturalistic portrayal of fourteenth-century life: all the characters seem of the time, with religion and superstition prominent in their day-to-day thinking. There is nothing particularly "other" in the novel, yet "mediaevalness" is somehow on every page, making the slightly other seem utterly normal.

***A Vein of Deceit*, p.32**

‘Tell him, sir,’ Risleye cried, outraged. ‘Tell Valence that garden mint should not be given to teething children, because it is a herb of Venus, and so stirs up bodily desires. That is bad for babies.’

The same could be said of *The Clerkenwell Tales*. Here, Peter Ackroyd’s leech – a “doctor” – has some quite strange ideas, but they are essentially superstitious rather than weird.

***The Clerkenwell Tales*, p.10**

‘Comb your hair each morning with an ivory comb, since nothing recreates the memory more. Walnuts are hurtful to the memory. And so are onions. Avoid them. Do not stay in the house of a red-haired or red-faced person.’

The balance of naturalism and superstition in these novels was what I wanted to emulate.

In *The Nature of Things*, both Agnes’ understanding of the nature of lovemaking (‘Famine’) and Susanna’s fears about the results of her sinful sexual relationships as a prostitute (‘Despair’) show different perspectives on the same superstition.

2: Famine, p.102

I’ve always thought a woman must enjoy the act of love as much as her husband if she’s to conceive a child, but now I know that’s just something people say. For though in truth I shrink from Richard’s nightly ploughing, and have to grit my teeth to bear it, yet a child’s growing inside me, conceived, I think, not long after our wedding night. Already, it’s kicking against my belly.

7: Despair, p.391

... as I lie each night next to my beloved husband, worry stops me sleeping: we’ve been married months and still there’s no baby in my belly. And now I wonder why, since that first time with Gilbert, I’ve never got with child, despite all those men I’ve been with.

Dame Margery always said her “girls” hardly ever did have babies.

‘Everyone knows,’ she used to say, ‘unless a woman enjoys it as much as the man, she’ll not get a child. So you just make sure it’s *them* getting the comfort, Susie dear, and not yourself, and you’ll be safe enough.’

I believed her, because I always hated what those men did to me and certainly got no pleasure from it. But, now, I love what Tom and me do together.

So why isn’t there a child growing in my belly?

Still talking of babies, it is perhaps unsurprising that mediaeval midwives – in later centuries in some places considered to be akin to witches – practised their undoubted skills while upholding what might seem to be curious superstitions about the birthing process.

2: Famine, p.105

But the baby doesn’t seem to want to come.

[...]

Then Edith jumps up from her stool. ‘Stay here with Agnes, Marjory, while I go round and open things up. That usually does the trick!’

Ma grunts, and when Edith’s out of earshot, mutters ‘foolish woman!’. But I’ve no objection to Edith’s funny ways, if they’ll help this baby out. I can hear her bustling from room to room, and know she’s opening cupboard doors, unlocking chests, and untying any knots she finds.

In ‘Plague’, Peter scoffs at the commonplace trade in so-called relics, even though the wealth of pilgrimage routes and bequests to relics would suggest that many people believed in their efficacy. It is perhaps surprising that a peasant boy would be wise enough to understand when people are being conned, but I wanted Peter to seem unusually perceptive.

4: Plague, p.178

Preachers come too, with a different kind of story: they say God’s so angry at men’s sins He’s sent this pestilence to punish us. They say we’re all sinners and all of us’ll die. In the crowd that gathers, men moan and women weep, and when all are quaking and wailing with fear of what’s to come, the preacher gives a guileful grin.

‘But you can save y’self!’ he cries, delving deep into his scrip.

‘See ’ere.’ He holds up a small white thing that could be a bit of chalk dug up from our fields. ‘A finger of the blessed Saint Sebastian!’

Some folk part with their pennies for a fragment of the holy relic, hoping to cheat Death.

Some other novels are both historically accurate and suitably religious and superstitious, and yet move beyond superstition into something a little stranger. Two novels that seem to me to have a strong sense of alterity, yet are not based on the supernatural, are *Hodd* (Adam Thorpe) and *Morality Play* (Barry Unsworth).

At the very beginning of *Hodd*, it is hard to be sure what the narrator is thinking but it is certainly strange. I do not know where Thorpe found the idea of birds as flying fish, perhaps from bestiary lore, or perhaps it alludes to the belief that swallows hibernated under water.

***Hodd*, p.1**

The seas are folded over us, above our heads, the lower sea becoming the upper sea and yet still blue when not girt with sea mist, which is grey and melancholy. Some men when they look up see birds, but I see only a kind of fish... These fish are beaked and feathered, as we all know, and return to dry land to nest in trees...

In this passage from *Morality Play*, despite appearances, there is no beast; the narrator has mistaken what he thinks he has seen because his mindset tells him to expect the supernatural. But the image, and the fear it engenders, are strikingly other.

***Morality Play*, p.58**

The snow made a mist...dark shapes in it...a great black beast...[with] red eyes and above its head there moved a shape of red, dark red in the white of snow, and I knew this for the flame of the Beast’s breath and I knew what Beast it was...and I crossed myself and groaned aloud in my fear, seeing that the Beast had come and my soul was unprepared.

I admire all of the novels I have cited with their varying degrees of naturalism and alterity. As I have said, in writing *The Nature of Things*, above all, I wanted naturalism and authenticity. Yet I did recognise that, in the context of the fourteenth century, “naturalistic” and “authentic” might well mean at least a degree of “strange”, perhaps even that the novel had to involve such elements *in order to be*

authentic. Alterity did not have to be fundamental to the story, but an impression of alterity would add to, rather than detract from, readers' sense of authenticity, and to their belief that what they were reading was a naturalistic account of the period.

The characters in *The Nature of Things* are normal, everyday kind of people, who would be likely to hold at least some strange (to us) views of the world. Alongside their belief in God and the teachings of the Church, some people, maybe most, would almost certainly have embraced a variety of superstitions, and believed in or feared monsters, and might consider potions and charms (if not actual witchcraft) a natural way of curing ailments or influencing behaviour. I did not want the supernatural to be a major influence in the novel, because the story intended to show the resilience of the human spirit, rather than the conquest of suffering by magic, but I concluded that introducing a few "magical" elements would bring a degree of alterity to the novel that might contribute to its authenticity.

Alys (in 'Poverty') turns to a wise woman to get William the priest to love her, although we would infer that it was not the potion that persuaded him but rather his own sexual desire overruling his piety.

1: Poverty, p.37

[Sybil Kemp] takes jars down from a shelf and puts a pinch of this, a scoop of that into a mortar, and crushes it all to powder with a dirty pestle. Then she tips the greyish dust into a little vial and bids Alys put it in his wine.

Alys Dyer takes the vial but her lips are pursed. She had hoped there might just be a charm she could recite.

The old woman shakes her head. 'Potion's best. Goes straight to the heart of the matter, if you get my meaning. '

Another character in 'Poverty', Matthew, turns to what he thinks is magic, but for a much darker purpose than Alys.

1: Poverty, p.27

His old Ma knew how to hurt people. When he was a lad, he watched her from his hiding place, listening to her mutterings. She filled a jar with pins and something her victim owned: a trinket or a scrap of clothing. Then she pissed into the jar, stoppered it and hid it beneath the hearth. What happened then? He is not quite sure, but thinks

that, when the fire was lit and heated up the jar, the victim's skin would prick all over, his guts burn with searing pain.

Some time after Matthew's magic making, his victim Jakys does indeed suffer pains in his belly, although William the priest (who knows nothing of Matthew's "spell"), deduces that they are the result of his incarceration in a dungeon. Readers may accept William's conclusion (as I do), or believe that Matthew's magic has worked, depending on their view of the power of magic.

It is worth noting that many modern depictions of "the Middle Ages", particularly in film, draw as much on fantasy as on history, and conversely much fantasy fiction, and many films and computer games, draw on what is perceived as "mediaeval" as the apparently natural setting for fantasy worlds. However, in some ways, this tendency seems more than simply natural, for the mediaeval world was full of fantasy: the fantastical images in, for example, the thirteenth-century *mappa mundi* housed in Hereford Cathedral, or the fourteenth-century Luttrell Psalter, or the writings of, for example, "Sir John Mandeville" about his travels to supposedly real countries, are all evidence of this. I realised that incorporating a few such images and ideas into the novel would add to its authenticity by further illuminating the mediaeval thought-world.

William, more educated than the average village priest, has seen a map, perhaps something like Hereford's *mappa mundi*, and was struck by the marginalia depicting strange creatures. Readers might question whether William would believe such creatures really exist. My view is that he simply does not know.

1: Poverty, p.19

Sir Philip is not a noble man – or at least not in his bearing... Yet it is Philip's face that detracts most from his lordly mien, for it is very long, his nose uncommonly sharp, his dark eyes prominent and widely spaced, his mottled beard poorly clipped and straggling over the neck of his crimson velvet hood. When I look at Philip, I am reminded of drawings I once saw upon a map, of men called *cynocephali*, dog-headed men, who some say live at the far edges of the Earth.

Peter, in 'Plague', has heard about monsters living in the seas and at the edges of the world, as has his patron Master Hugh Godfrey. Do they *believe* in the existence of these creatures? Peter is quite young and naïve enough perhaps to imagine that they

could exist. But would Hugh? Like William, he does not know, but perhaps the mediaeval delight in the fantastical persuades him to want them to be there.

4: Plague, pp.202-203

‘But now I know the sea doesn’t end, but just goes on and on, further than you can ever see.’ I pause for a moment. ‘How far d’you think it does go, Master Godfrey? The edge of the world? And what happens then?’

Master Godfrey laughs and shakes his head. ‘Some say monsters lurk at the edges of the world.’

I nod. ‘When I was little, my Ma told us a story about sea monsters, great fearsome beasts with scales and claws.’

He laughs. ‘Ah, yes, but *these* monsters are not dragons, but men with their faces in their chests, and men with one foot so large they can use it to shield their heads from the sun.’

My skin tingles at the thought of meeting such strange creatures. ‘Are they dangerous?’

The Nature of Things does not have the darkness of *Company of Liars*, the weirdness of *The Leper’s Companions*, nor the mysteriousness of *Morality Play* or *Hodd* – it somehow seems less “strange” than all of these, but does that mean that it is also less suffused with a mediaeval thought-world? I do not think so. It is not much different in tone from Bernard Cornwell’s novels, or Susanna Gregory’s murder mysteries, or even Elizabeth Chadwick’s work, in that it is essentially naturalistic, with sufficient touches of “mediaevalness” and strangeness woven through its social context, physical details and thought-world to give it authenticity.

AUTHENTICITY OF LANGUAGE

If I am satisfied with the degree of authenticity I have achieved in *The Nature of Things* in terms of history, social context, physical details and thought-world, there remains the important aspect of language, the way the characters’ thought-worlds are expressed through the medium of the novel’s words.

THOUGHTS AND WORDS

If historical novelists choose to have their characters speak in modern English, might that give the impression that they also have modern mindsets? Conversely, if characters are given dialogue that purports, or even contrives, to sound like, say, fourteenth-century English, does that somehow give the impression that they also have authentic fourteenth-century mindsets? I do not believe that either case is necessarily true. From all my reading of historical novels, I have realised that by far the majority are written in straightforward modern English, though whether the mindsets that the words convey are authentic often depends on other factors.

When Henry James complained that historical novelists could not imagine the inner lives of people who lived in earlier periods, it was “mindset” he was talking about – people’s ideas, values and beliefs. Of course there is no such thing as “a” mindset for a period: people in past times did not hold a single set of values and beliefs, any more than they do now, but there is undoubtedly a generalised difference between the inner lives of fourteenth-century people and ours, evidenced by the dissimilarities in thought-worlds illustrated earlier. It is this difference that James considered impossible to bridge, but from my reading of historical fiction I have deduced that most writers give the impression of doing it well.

A blog for historical novelists raises the matter of language in historical fiction: ‘...to what degree can we legitimately – or even intelligibly – use language or literary forms *authentic to a given period?*’ [my italics].³⁶ The writer, John Yeoman, says that readers expect writers to have done their historical homework, and if they believe the language used is wrong, their illusion will be shattered, regardless of whether their belief has any foundation. Perhaps the shattering of illusion applies particularly when the language is deemed too “modern”? Yet, says Yeoman, ‘how else can an historical writer communicate with a modern reader, except in a modern idiom?’, although, as I will show later, this view is not universally held.

Of course, Yeoman is only one of many to have addressed this problem.

³⁶ John Yeoman, ‘Can the language of historical fiction ever be “authentic”?’, *Clio’s Children* (24th June 2010) <clioschildren.blogspot.co.uk/2010_06_01_archive.html> [accessed 19th March 2014].

Hilary Mantel says that ‘[historical novelists] don’t want to misrepresent our ancestors, but we don’t want to make the reader impatient.’ Too much period flavour, she said, slows the story and may even make readers laugh. When we have little idea how people actually spoke in the distant past – because we have no audio or even written records – we must simply imagine it. Mantel recommends ‘a plain style that you can adapt...not just to [your characters’] ages and personalities and intelligence level, but to their place in life.’³⁷

The late Barry Unsworth said much the same: ‘You can’t make your characters speak in the language and idiom of their own time if the language of the period would seem archaic. It would put too much strain on the understanding and would seem false in any case.’³⁸ Unsworth, too, recommended using straightforward English, though he advised also ‘a certain kind of tactful formality’ and an avoidance of contracted forms (isn’t, don’t etc.).³⁹

None of these writers advises the use of “authentic-sounding” period language, perhaps because it is difficult to make such language sound right, and to keep readers engaged with what might be a difficult read. As I have already said, my reading has shown me that most writers do not attempt to present voices in anything other than more-or-less modern English, although there are exceptions, which I discuss below in *Archaic or strange language*.

I have also concluded that, in most of the novels I have read, the characters’ thought-worlds *seem* acceptably mediaeval, and that holds true regardless of the modernity or otherwise of the language used. However, certain aspects of the language can detract from the seeming authenticity of the characters’ words, and these include both archaic or “difficult” language, and anachronistic language or ideas, *both* of which, in their different ways, can throw the reader out of the illusion the novelist is trying to convey.

³⁷ Quoted in Brayfield and Spratt, p.135. Adapted from Hilary Mantel’s article ‘The Elusive Art of Making the Dead Speak’, *Wall Street Journal*, April 27th 2012.

³⁸ Arlo Haskell, ‘Intensity of Illusion: a conversation with Barry Unsworth’, *Key West Literary Seminar, Littoral* (28th June 2008) <www.kwls.org/littoral/intensity_of_ilusiona_conversa/>, para.8 [accessed 25th March 2014]

³⁹ Arlo Haskell, ‘Barry Unsworth: The Economy of Truth’, Key West Literary Seminar, Audio Archives (7th October 2009) <www.kwls.org/podcasts/barry_unsworth_the_economy_of/> [accessed 25th March 2014]

MODERN LANGUAGE AND THE PROBLEM OF ANACHRONISMS

Ken Follett is one novelist who has been accused of using overly modern language in his mediaeval historical novels. For some of his readers (evidenced from book reviews), their impression of undue modernity in the novel's language *does* matter:

‘Obviously, a novel set around the 12th century could never be written in contemporary prose... But some concession needed to be made in order to emphasise antiquity, or it might as well be set in the present. ...I found myself jerked out of the spell by the kind of prose and dialogue that I can hear on the street every day. And because it was written in modern English, it inevitably portrayed 20th century thinking.’⁴⁰

This writer does not quote examples but makes an interesting point: is it “inevitable” that modern language portrays modern thinking? Not, presumably, according to the majority of historical novelists who use it. It is also true that the vast majority of Follett's readers are evidently so engrossed in the story that the modernity or otherwise of the language is of little importance.

‘From the first page Follett conjures up the earthiness and superstition of those times. I can't comment on how accurate it is as I wouldn't know, but it certainly rings true and even if it wasn't all completely correct, I don't think it would really matter.’⁴¹

This reviewer does not mention language, but for them the authenticity comes in the small details of daily life. It “rings true” and, for them, that is what matters. For most of his readers, Follett's language does not seem to detract from their enjoyment of his books, but if the language a writer uses does make readers stop and question the authenticity of the mindset that “thought” the words they have read, this will surely destroy the illusion the writer was trying to create.

⁴⁰ Reviewer “Seatinthestalls” (31st March 2011), Amazon Customer Reviews, *World without End* <<http://www.amazon.co.uk/product-reviews/033045692X>> [accessed 26th November 2011] – one of 13 one-star reviews out of a total of 202 reviews.

⁴¹ Reviewer “BookWorm (UK)” (14th November 2007), Amazon Customer Reviews, *World without End* <<http://www.amazon.co.uk/product-reviews/033045692X>> [accessed 26th November 2011] – one of 123 five-star reviews out of a total of 202 reviews.

I have already discussed anachronisms in the context of factual accuracy, but linguistic anachronism, where words had not yet come into use or, more importantly, imply ideas that had not yet entered anybody's mind, is equally likely to throw a reader out of the illusion.

Hilary Mantel says '[characters] mustn't express ideas they could not have had, and feelings they would not have had. They did not draw metaphors from a scientific worldview, but from a religious one. They weren't democrats. They weren't feminists... The reader should be braced by the shock of the old; or why write about the past at all?'⁴²

The novelist Tracy Chevalier says 'I am forced to be careful with the kind of language I use – I try to strip it of 21st century usage.'⁴³ Although Chevalier uses standard modern English in her novels, she works hard to ensure the language is not overtly modern and does not contain anachronistic howlers.

In contrast, Christian Cameron's *The Ill-Made Knight*, the language and idiom are generally very modern, although mediaeval words are also used occasionally.

I did something absolutely brilliant... (p.79)

...(shows how observant I am, not)... (p.122)

The principal narrator in the novel is a soldier, so the use of slang is not unreasonable, but the way it is used sometimes gives a very modern tone:

Abelard didn't give a shit... (p.58)

...that's just the sort of crap men say...' (p.64)

But then Cameron uses an archaic word as a form of oath:

But certes, I confess...(p.64)

⁴² Quoted in Brayfield and Spratt, p.135. Adapted from Hilary Mantel's article 'The Elusive Art of Making the Dead Speak', *Wall Street Journal*, April 27th 2012.

⁴³ Tracy Chevalier, Tracy, page on author's website <www.tchevalier.com/faq/writing.html#w10> (no longer available) [accessed 2nd October 2011]

The fictional world an author creates should be consistent in evoking the past, so an archaism slipped into otherwise largely modern language can strike an odd note that is not necessarily authentic.

Cameron also uses many words and expressions that are neither twenty-first nor fourteenth-century. Both these examples are sixteenth-century:

...cooling my heels... (p.184)

...swashbuckle... (p.32)

Such instances do tend to throw *me* out of the illusion, but it is also true that *The Ill-Made Knight* is otherwise historically accurate and very entertaining, and *in general* the language seems to work.

In *Mistress of the Art of Death*, by Ariana Franklin, the language again is largely modern and generally works well, but at times anachronistic expressions or metaphors creep in.

In this example, “giving gyp” was possibly not used first until the nineteenth century:

...it seems his guts – which are considerable – are giving him gyp. (p.11)

Here a different, and perhaps more overt, type of anachronism is used:

The deer ran, scattering among the trees, their white scuts like dominoes tumbling into the darkness. (p.16)

This is a nice image but dominoes had not arrived in Europe by the twelfth century, so the narrator (a twelfth-century person) would not think of using such a metaphor.

So these two novels use mostly modern, and therefore accessible, language, but also have some anachronistic words and expressions that *could* destroy the illusion of the mediaeval world. One might say that an expression like “cooling one’s heels” is not really anachronistic, but a “translation” of what the character was thinking about being kept waiting. Similarly, “giving gyp” is an accessible rendition of the narrator’s thought about a character’s pain. However, looking at it another way, both “cooling my heels” and “giving gyp”, while not being mediaeval, are also not current expressions, and therefore somehow draw attention to themselves. I think this is often a problem with anachronisms – one can slip through unnoticed, but if

something *sounds* wrong, the critical reader will spot it and feel obliged to check up on it.

Anachronisms may be subtler. In Julia Blackburn's *The Leper's Companions*, set in 1410, references to "kitchen", "bedroom" and a fire burning in the "grate" do not ring true for the period, when such room designations had not yet reached peasant homes, and fires were generally still hearths in the middle of the floor. But this is perhaps to be too exacting.

One should ask, then, how far a *degree* of anachronism in a novel's language, especially in the use of individual words, really matters? How far does it detract from a novel's "authenticity"? Clearly, I have noticed these anachronisms, but many readers would not recognise them, or not much care if they did. However, of those readers who *do* notice problems, some may not trust anything else the writer says about the period, while, for others, at the very least their pleasure in the book may be diminished.

Anachronism does matter, but perhaps the degree to which it matters is largely a matter of taste.

In writing *The Nature of Things*, I consciously followed the guidance of Mantel and Chevalier to avoid anachronism in language as well as fact. I tried not to use words and phrases that came into use much later than the fourteenth century. I frequently used an etymological dictionary to help me select words more or less appropriate to the time and my characters, although I was not overly exacting with myself: I allowed myself to *sense* when a word was not right, and, if necessary, replace it with something more suitable, but I did not examine every word. However, I am aware of using the occasional word that *is* anachronistic. One example is the eighteenth-century "ha-ha", which perhaps should just be "ditch" or "bank", but I kept it because in the voice of the character that uses it (in 'Death') it just "sounded" right. Another is "hubbub", a sixteenth-century word of Irish origin and therefore in principle unsuitable, but which again seemed to have a mediaeval "feel" to it. Having allowed myself this latitude, perhaps I should not criticise others.

I decided early on in writing *The Nature of Things* that I would not attempt to mimic the speech patterns of the fourteenth century, because I felt that "pseudo-mediaeval" dialogue might inhibit modern readers' enjoyment, rather than give the narrative any

greater credibility. The language I put into my characters' mouths is broadly modern English, with some slightly old-fashioned phrasing just to give a sense of the past. I did not follow closely Unsworth's advice about formality and avoiding contractions.⁴⁴ Rather, my choice was to use more formal, non-contracted, forms for educated characters, such as William the priest and Joanna the merchant's daughter, but to reflect the voices of the peasantry – Agnes, Tom, Susanna and others – by using contractions (it's, isn't, shouldn't). I accept that this is a relatively crude distinction and that, to some, the contractions may give the voices too modern a tone, but I am satisfied that it works, and helps to give some individuality to the different voices. I also used occasional "dialect" phrasing or words ('He's gone to drown hisself'; 'Or mebbe Devil's come for him') to suggest rural or working-class voices. The following passage highlights the contrast between the voice of the narrator William, the priest, and the voices of the peasantry. The tone and word forms are different.

1: Poverty, p.15

But all this complaining is of no avail, for Jakys Coupere has disappeared.

In the marketplace, opinions on why and where to fall eagerly from many lips.

'He's gone to drown hisself,' says one man – 'or hang himself' interrupts another – 'for shame at letting that alehouse get such a death trap.'

Another grins, and licks his lips. 'Or mebbe Devil's come for him already, and even now he's burning in the infernal fiery pits.'

This suggestion finds great favour with the crowd, who cheer. 'Serve him right!'

But a woman shakes her head. 'I reckon he's just scared of what'll happen if we catch him.'

I agree with her. Jakys may be a rogue but he is no fool. He would have seen the way the wind was blowing, and figured his chances of a fair hearing bleak.

⁴⁴ Arlo Haskell, 'Barry Unsworth: The Economy of Truth', Key West Literary Seminar, Audio Archives (7th October 2009) <www.kwls.org/podcasts/barry_unsworth_the_economy_of/> [accessed 25th March 2014].

Here, Joanna, the merchant's daughter, speaks in somewhat lyrical tones, reflecting her education and her romantic outlook on life.

5: Death, p.239

Passion took me unawares: although I had been longing to be his wife, I had not known until our first night alone together quite what it was I had been longing for. That night, Peter quickly stripped off all his clothes and stood before me naked. I gasped at the beauty and strength of his body, and could not stop myself reaching out to touch his smooth golden skin, running my finger lightly along the silvery scar upon his thigh that spoke of courage and adventure.

Then, gently and carefully, he removed my headdress and gown, leaving me standing in my chemise. I realised then that I was quaking, whether from fear or yearning I did not then know, and, needing his strength, I stepped forward and laid my head against his chest. He wrapped his arms around me and held me tight, and it was then I felt that queer sensation inside me that I later knew to be desire.

By contrast, Susanna comes from a lowly background and her language is more basic, with contracted forms, and little poetry.

7: Despair, p.350

When M'sier and me get to the top, I stand at the door of my room and point to the bed. He goes inside but, as I turn to go, I find the old woman at my elbow.

'You too,' she says, taking hold of my arm.

'What d'you mean?'

'You too, in the room.' She almost hisses out the words. Then she pushes me inside and closes the door behind me. I spin round at once and take hold of the latch, but at the same moment I hear the clunk of the key turning in the lock, and realise the old witch planned for this to happen.

ARCHAIC OR STRANGE LANGUAGE

Even though most of the historical novels I have read are written in standard modern English, most are also sprinkled with unusual words, which give a sense of the period.

The Clerkenwell Tales is full of examples, including close-stool, five wits (senses), queynte, thunder-light, and prick-song books (music written down in dots). *Hodd* includes descried (noticed), swink, dorter and leech. *The Scarlet Lion* has mesnie, lackwit and justiciar. They all help to add mediaeval flavour.

The Nature of Things too is peppered with mediaeval words. Examples include: cottar (landless peasant), mazer (drinking cup), braies (men's underpants), chevauchée (destructive march), pottage (peasants' daily food), porray greens (cabbage-type leaves for pottage), and scrip (satchel). Some writers provide glossaries to explain unusual or strange words, which some readers greatly enjoy, but I hope and intend that, in most cases, my readers can deduce meaning from context, and I prefer it, in order to minimise distraction from the illusion.

However, some historical novelists go further than just using a few strange words. By contrast with those who use modern language, and may introduce anachronisms, some historical novelists actively try to distance their language from modern English. A few of these use language that is peculiarly archaic, where characters are given what might appear to be "historical" dialogue, but which seems strained and artificial and, importantly, may be incomprehensible or, at the very least, annoying to readers. For example, in *The King's Mistress*, Emma Champion, a highly respected historical novelist, puts (to my eyes and ears) some rather peculiar dialogue in her characters' mouths. Fourteen-year-old Alice Salisbury says:

‘I have been cast out from my parents’ home, am no longer privy to their comings and goings...’ (p.64)

This seems awkward language for an adult, more so for a child. Teenaged Geoffrey Chaucer replies:

‘I did wonder why you are suddenly abiding here...’ (p.64)

This is strange phrasing, not modern but perhaps not "mediaeval" either.

Of the reviews I have read on *The King's Mistress*, there is fair balance between the positive and negative comments overall, but only one I found actually commented on the writing style:

“The book is packed with comments like "She looked on me with a confusing mixture of coldness and sorrow, as if the former were to protect her from the latter" as said by

Alice...a 14 year old girl!!!! Her over-inflated emotional intelligence really irritated me. She's a child and she'd think like a child, not some pseudo-psychiatrist.”⁴⁵

I deduce from reviewers' lack of criticism of Campion's language that most readers do not agree with this particular reviewer.

I suppose that Emma Campion's intention *was* to give an historical flavour to her narrative and in particular to her dialogue.

It is interesting to note her own view of her writing style. On her website blog, Campion refers to a review of *The King's Mistress* that praises her style as being of its time without being obscure. Campion's response suggests that she considers her language is direct and clear, the dialogue in keeping with the characters, saying that she uses “more traditional syntax and a vocabulary that's fairly restricted to modern words that showed up by the 17th century” in order to make it clear that her characters are not modern.⁴⁶ I am not sure I quite understand her point about the vocabulary but agree entirely with her wish to have her readers become absorbed by the story, and not distracted by the language.

However, for me, some of her language does not work, because I find that its oddness draws attention to itself in a way that *is* indeed distracting.

Emma Campion is the pen name of Candace Robb, who, in *The Riddle of St. Leonard's*, a mediaeval mystery, writes in broadly modern English but also uses some archaic-sounding dialogue:

‘Nay. ‘Tis best Magda and thee know the worst. Into the house with thee. But first attend thy protection. There is no wind to carry off the vapours.’ (p.20)

This certainly delivers a sense of strangeness but, again, for me, it is distracting. Yet Candace Robb's reviewers do not complain of her language, so, without evidence to the contrary, I must assume that her readers generally do not share my view. As I have said in the context of anachronisms, maybe it is a matter of taste.

⁴⁵ Reviewer Katy123 (2011), Amazon Customer Reviews, *The King's Mistress* <<http://www.amazon.co.uk/product-reviews/009949793X/>> [accessed 9th October 2015]

⁴⁶ Emma Campion's website <<https://ecampion.wordpress.com/category/the-writing-life/the-kings-mistress/>> [accessed 9th October 2015]

Hilary Mantel says that her use of modern English (in *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*) is slightly askew, with a sprinkling of unusual words to give ‘a suggestion of otherness’.⁴⁷ Historical novelist Elizabeth Cook says that ‘...one cannot write in the exact language or idiom of a very distant...period and still remain comprehensible, but [one must] find a way in which to honour the alterity of that distant world. A sense of strangeness should be present.’⁴⁸

Both these writers recommend a *degree* of strangeness for the language, not the more comprehensive peculiarity that (for me at least) detracts from enjoyment of the story. For example, an historical novel that I find difficult to read is *The Game of Kings* by Dorothy Dunnett. Dunnett’s Scottish novels, set in the sixteenth century, have a strong reader following, so not everyone finds her writing overly challenging, but much of the language, and particularly that of the main protagonist, is decidedly ornate.

One hand on the standpost, he turned... “Watch carefully. In forty formidable bosoms we are about to create a climacteric of emotion...we shall have a little drama; just, awful and poetic, spread with uncials and full, as the poet said, of fruit and seriosity.” (p.22)

There is much that is almost incomprehensible, together with snatches of untranslated French, Spanish, German and Latin, and obscure classical references. Some readers clearly love it: a reviewer complains that she cannot persuade her friends to read Dunnett.

“They all whine it’s too hard to follow with the classical references, obscure poetry, and French quotes. I say the story stands on its own without the reader being as well-read as dear Dorothy. Or you could look it up and learn something. They groan. Lazy readers.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Quoted in Brayfield and Sprott, p.135. Adapted from Hilary Mantel’s article ‘The Elusive Art of Making the Dead Speak’, *Wall Street Journal*, April 27th 2012.

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Cook, quoted in Brayfield and Sprott, p.122.

⁴⁹ Reviewer “J” (2008), Goodreads, *The Game of Kings* <www.goodreads.com/book/show/112077.The_Game_of_Kings> [accessed 6th February 2015].

Very many readers must agree with this reviewer, for 80% of Goodreads reviews of the book are 4 or 5*; only 1% are 1*:

The Game of Kings...has so many five star reviews that I am wondering what I am missing...The plot doesn't seem to have any direction, I can't keep the characters straight, and I couldn't care less about the characters or what is happening to them. The distant and erudite tone of the book is strange and off-putting to me.⁵⁰

Of those who disagree, plotting and characterisation are also issues, but I find myself in their camp and, for me, it is the arcane language that is the particular stumbling block.

An attempt to go even further and distance its language as far from modern English as possible, *The Wake*, by Paul Kingsnorth, long listed for the 2014 Man Booker prize, could be considered to have a lot more than just a degree of strangeness. Speaking of writing an historical novel, Kingsnorth says he could not write in twenty-first century English because 'the language that we speak is so utterly specific to our time and place. Our assumptions, our politics, our worldview, our attitudes – all are implicit in our words, and what we do with them.' He needed to 'imagine [him]self into the sheer strangeness of the past' and that demanded constructing a language that was a middle ground between Old English and present day English.⁵¹

when i woc in the mergen all was blaec though the night had gan and all wolde be
blaec after and for all time. a great wind had cum in the night and all was blown then
and broc. (p.1)

This is essentially simple language and close to phonetic spelling, so anyone who wants to could "hear" it well enough. Yet I suspect that, for most, it would not be an easy read. Undoubtedly some readers greatly enjoy it and feel the language lends authenticity to the story, but I imagine most people would not want to be so challenged.

A few Amazon reviews on the book illustrate contrasting opinions:

⁵⁰ Reviewer Sarah (2013), Goodreads, *The Game of Kings* <www.goodreads.com/book/show/112077.The_Game_of_Kings/> [accessed 9th October 2015].

⁵¹ Paul Kingsnorth, 'The Wake', *Unbound* (2014) <unbound.co.uk/books/the-wake/> [accessed 24th July 2014].

“It’s not some sort of gimmick; it’s absolutely necessary to put you inside Buccmaster’s mind and looking out of his eyes and to create the world he inhabits. He’s not a modern character plonked down in the 11th century, and the language makes this obvious. I honestly don’t think Kingsnorth could have achieved anything even close to the same effect without it. It’s little things like, for instance, the way the word “women” is “wifmen”, highlighting how in Buccmaster’s worldview, a woman is a wife, and that’s that.”⁵²

“The whole book is written in a made up, pseudo Anglo Saxon, which has neither the benefit of readability nor authenticity to recommend it. There are challenges and there are books for which life is just too short - this is the latter - strictly for the masochists!”⁵³

“I found the writing in the ‘shadow tongue’ to be most distracting and to my mind detracted from whatever story was being told. Quite frankly don't see the point of it and I would suggest academic arrogance by the author.”⁵⁴

Initially, Kingsnorth could not interest a mainstream publisher in his book, which perhaps bears out the idea of it being unlikely to find a wide readership, so it was a route for the brave, not a novelist like me who wants her work to be accessible and widely available. It is also not a route taken by the majority of historical novelists. However, other novels where the language used is not archaic, but is nevertheless a little strange, do work for me.

Barry Unsworth’s *Morality Play* is a good example of a novel that uses quite straightforward English but in a somewhat strange way, which is not so overt as to be off-putting. In the following passage, I wonder if “open-breeched...” is a genuine mediaeval expression or Unsworth’s invention. “As people say” suggests the former, but either way, it certainly has an appropriate “whiff of strangeness”.

I am only a poor scholar, open-breeched to the winds of heaven as people say... (p.1)

⁵² Review by Amazon Customer (2014), Amazon Customer Reviews, *The Wake*, <<http://www.amazon.co.uk/product-reviews/1783520981/>> [accessed 9th October 2015] – one of 64 5* reviews.

⁵³ Review by twistedsister (2014), Amazon Customer Reviews, *The Wake*, <<http://www.amazon.co.uk/product-reviews/1783520981/>> [accessed 9th October 2015] – one of 51 1* reviews.

⁵⁴ Review by Doug Mowat (2014), Amazon Customer Reviews, *The Wake*, <<http://www.amazon.co.uk/product-reviews/1783520981/>> [accessed 9th October 2015] – one of 51 1* reviews.

Throughout Unsworth's novel, voices are slightly strange, not really archaic but just a little odd. In this example, the words lend a mystical, otherworldly impression to the narrative. The sentence beginning "What is accident..." has a proverb-like quality that makes it seem mysterious.

And it seemed to me that some errant light touched these [castle] roofs... There was a guidance in it... What is accident to the ignorant the wise see as design. (p.24)

Another example of a novel with what seems to be suitably strange language is *Hodd* by Adam Thorpe. In writing *Hodd*, Thorpe said he read a lot of obscure documents in order to find the voice to convey the strangeness of the time *as if it was normal*. He did not attempt to make the dialogue orally "realistic" – I suppose in a way that would be totally familiar to modern readers – but devised 'something altogether stranger, tenser and, ultimately unknowable.'⁵⁵ The language is indeed distinctly strange, although it is perhaps the mindset rather than the words that carry the strangeness.

Yet I was intent already on retrieving my harp, as precious to me as one of my own limbs – though the source of my foulest sin so...one of the many stains, indeed, that the angel-sentries at the gates will smell upon my risen soul. Though the sweet savour of the trees of Paradise...be all about in the sacred air. (p.21)

Nevertheless, it is perhaps worth noting that, although many consider Adam Thorpe a master of historical language, of making his historical worlds seem authentic, even so some of the language he uses is somewhat impenetrable and, judging by reviews, not all readers are willing to persevere with it. As one Amazon reviewer declares: 'Clever as the book is, it is a shame the author hasn't made his tales more digestible and entertaining.'⁵⁶ As I have already said, if its language is difficult to grasp, a novel might not be an enjoyable read and therefore an unappealing choice. There is a need to 'broker a compromise between then and now', as Hilary Mantel says.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Adam Thorpe, author's website, Fiction, *Hodd* <www.adamthorpe.net/Fiction/Hodd.html> [accessed 18th March 2014].

⁵⁶ Review by allesteer 'A' (2009), Amazon Customer Reviews, *Ulverton*, <<http://www.amazon.co.uk/product-reviews/009957344X/>> [accessed 25th May 2014].

⁵⁷ Quoted in Brayfield and Sprott, p.135. Adapted from Hilary Mantel's article 'The Elusive Art of Making the Dead Speak', *Wall Street Journal*, April 27th 2012.

Many writers do successfully broker that compromise. Karen Maitland is one. Some of her novels' storylines are distinctly strange, but her language is essentially modern English. Even when the narrator is speaking of something mystical or strange, the language remains accessible.

Company of Liars, p.107

Narigorm was right, of course, and before the new moon rose as sharp as death's scythe on the land, our company was once again on the road. I knew I couldn't blame the children; how could she have brought it about? She merely spoke what she read in the runes. Could she help it if the runes foretold ill fortune?

Bernard Cornwell too can write of outlandish thoughts but use modern language, maybe with the occasional slight archaism: "this night" rather than "tonight".

1356, p.19

The monk gazed at [the naked woman's dead body]...wondering why the shape of a woman's back was so arousing, and then he was ashamed that he had thought such a thing. He crossed himself again. The devil, he thought, was everywhere this night, but especially here in this burning city beneath the fire-touched clouds of hell.

My experience of reading historical fiction indicates that few writers take either the archaic approach of Candace Robb/Emma Champion, or provide the degree of strangeness of Unsworth and Thorpe, still less Kingsnorth. Most simply use standard English, with a few "mediaevalisms", and rely on the story itself and the images it presents to provide the alterity, and this is what I have also attempted to do with *The Nature of Things*.

5 CONCLUSIONS

When I embarked on this PhD project, I had not read Henry James' claim that writing *authentic* historical fiction was impossible. Even so, I did have some concerns about my ability to write an authentic-seeming historical novel, particularly in relation to portraying characters' thought-worlds and voices. However, I knew that a great number of such novels had been written, read and enjoyed, and thought that if I could determine what made them authentic or otherwise, it would help me to write the sort of historical novel I wanted to write.

To do this, I have written *The Nature of Things*, my second historical novel set in the mediaeval period, and also looked critically at other novels, to assess their handling of mindset and voice, and their sense of authenticity and alterity. This investigative technique has enabled me to examine both how other authors have addressed the "problems" of historical fiction, and also my own approaches to them in the light of what I discovered. The investigation, although essentially a subjective assessment of my own view of the authenticity or otherwise of those particular historical novels, has also been useful in helping me to identify what works and does not work (for me), and therefore to write my novel in a way that emulates the approach of those novelists I most admire.

During the four years or so that I have undertaken the creative and critical research for this project, some aspects of the novel have remained more or less constant from the start, whereas others have been subject to much deliberation and change of heart. Some of these choices and changes were informed simply by the creative act of developing the novel, and discussion with my supervisors; others were informed by my reading of other historical fiction, as well as commentaries on historical fiction, all of which helped to clarify or contradict my ideas.

The aspects of the novel that have been most influenced by the research process, and subject to both choices and changes, are: genre; structure, size and focus; language, voice and style; mediaevalness and mindset; authenticity and alterity.

Genre

If it was always clear that I was writing an historical novel, it was less clear what “genre” of historical fiction it was. It was not a medieval mystery, nor crime, nor romance nor adventure (although mystery, crime, romance and adventure all do occur); it was not alternative history or alternative biography; nor fantasy. All of these categories or historical fiction are represented in the set of novels that I read as part of my critical research. But my novel was not much like any of those novels and did not obviously fit any of the common categories of historical fiction.

At first, because the novel focused on catastrophic events of the fourteenth century, I thought of it as a “disaster” novel, its title *The Seven Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. This might suggest a “thriller”, but the novel was never that.

During the novel’s writing and rewriting, I found that the premise behind it changing, away from “disaster” to “renewal”. With the change in focus came a change in the novel’s title, to *The Nature of Things*, and it became clear that the novel was essentially about the people rather the events: the characters were the novel’s main driver rather than the plot. What it was, perhaps, was a “relationship” novel, set in the fourteenth century. I also thought it was some akin to the social realism novels of the nineteenth century, although I knew of course that they were not really “historical” novels, that their pasts were often not much removed from their authors’ own times. I knew also that my novel was not “social realism” in the strict sense of the term. But I felt I needed to be able both to account for the novel’s existence, and to classify it, if only for the sake of future approaches to agents and publishers, who would demand to know the answers.

From the start I wanted to experiment to some extent in writing this novel, certainly with structure and style, and maybe also with voice. Of those novels I had read, both for my critical research and beyond, the closest my novel seemed to come were *The Clerkenwell Tales* and *Ulverton*, novels that I thought of as “literary”, if only because of their somewhat unusual shape and style. If my novel did not fit into any of the usual genres, perhaps it too could be classed as “literary”, with its seven-part “novella” structure, the mix of first person and third person narratives, the concept of the “narrative metaphors” linking the background events with the narrators’ personal

dilemmas, together with the addition of biblical quotations, garden book extracts, stories and letters.

Structure, size and focus

I wanted my PhD novel to be more ambitious than anything I had written before, to be innovative, perhaps structurally “risky”, or to fly in the face of the accepted styles of historical novel genres. The seven-part structure was clear from the start and, despite many vacillations and vicissitudes, *The Nature of Things* kept the structure I planned for it. I did look at other novels for different ideas on structure, David Mitchell’s *One Day* for its snapshots of events, Annie Proulx’s *Accordion Crimes* for its separate yet linked stories, Adam Thorpe’s *Ulverton* for its scope and different narrative styles, Peter Ackroyd’s *The Clerkenwell Tales* for its multi-narrator structure. But in fact all of these were more of a confirmation that what I had in mind was, if not like them, nevertheless not outrageous.

The major vacillations arose about half way through the project, when I felt that my concept was too far-reaching, the writing too challenging, even unachievable. Early on, having written only one of the seven parts, I realised that I was writing too much, perhaps getting too involved in the characters’ lives. Having written two further parts, I became quite concerned about the viability of the project, including the worry that the novel was going to be “too long” for the PhD regulations.

Extrapolating from what I had already written it was clear that the novel was going to be much longer than many novels submitted for a creative writing PhD, although not inconsistent with the lengths of most contemporary historical novels, including some of those in my critical research list, including Ariana Franklin’s *Mistress of the Art of Death*, Karen Maitland’s *Company of Liars*, and Elizabeth Chadwick’s *The Scarlet Lion*.

To counter my concerns, my supervisors encouraged me to consider reducing the scope of the novel, covering a shorter period of time, using fewer main characters, including fewer scenes and incidents, without losing the richness of the story. At one point, I agreed to seriously consider recasting the novel with just four main characters, but in the end I could not let go of what I considered an innovative concept, which seemed fundamental to my novel, and continued to write within the

original structure. Eventually, I found other ways of reducing the size of the novel, but not its scope or cast of characters. These included cutting backstory, starting stories later than originally planned, and reducing overlap. At the end of the project, having written the novel I wanted to write, I made my case to the university and it was accepted.

Even as I was drafting and redrafting the parts of the novel, ideas for enriching it continued to arise. For example, as the tone of the novel changed its focus from “disaster” to “continuity”, the garden theme, which was already in place as early as 2010, developed into a far more important thread than it had been originally. The idea of having a gardening book running as a thread throughout the novel, a bit like the accordion in *Accordion Crimes*, came much later, and it was not until the whole novel was written, and it was in its third (or perhaps more) complete redraft, that the garden theme as a constant began to take proper shape, and confirmed the spirit of the novel as one of hope rather than merely adversity. Given the change in spirit, I have considered removing the “apocalyptic” part titles, but have not done so, because of my wish to maintain the “narrative metaphor” concept, linking the titles with the narrators’ dilemmas.

Language, voice and style

My previous novels (one historical, two contemporary) were written in the third person past tense but, for my PhD novel, I wanted both to try a different technique and to use a more intimate voice for my main narrators. Before I began writing, I had been drawn to the structure of the three first person present tense narrators in Philippa Gregory’s *The Boleyn Inheritance* and felt that the intimacy of the style would also work well for my novel. However, I was not sure about using the present tense: early on I tried writing a small section of Part 1 in different tenses, and although the present tense did seem more “immediate”, I was somewhat uncomfortable with using it. Partly I wondered if I could sustain the first person present over such a potentially long novel, but also I had often read complaints by both readers and professionals who hated the first person present tense and wondered if I would damn my book simply because of its voice/tense combination.

For example, a Goodreads forum on the topic of the present tense in historical fiction elicited much opprobrium for its use, especially when allied to the first person, some

declaring it ‘pretentious sounding’, another saying ‘it...feels like lying to me (for how could all this be happening in the now and the narrator tells it at the same time’. Yet others loved it, and many commented that, if a novel was well written, the tense and voice invariably went unnoticed.⁵⁸

In an opinion piece decrying the ubiquitous use of the present tense in the Man Booker Prize novels of 2010 as merely “fashionable”, Philip Hensher said: ‘Many professionals simply loathe it... A London literary agent told me this week that she is seriously considering putting a note on her website for aspiring writers – “No novels in the present tense”’.⁵⁹ That sort of comment is enough to put any writer off using the present tense.

So, when I started writing in earnest, I used the past tense and wrote four parts before I again questioned my decision. The past tense really did not work for part 5, because at the end of her story the narrator is being strangled, and the past tense would tell the reader that she survived, whereas present tense leaves that unknowable. I knew that a similar argument was given for the use of the present tense in the young adult novel, *The Hunger Games*, where the writer, Suzanne Collins, wanted to maintain the suspense of whether the main first person character would survive.⁶⁰

Despite this understanding, I still felt I had to justify any wholesale change to the present tense. One consideration related to voice and tense was why my characters were speaking, what the *raison d’être* for the narrative was. I had already somewhat disregarded novelist Elizabeth Crook’s advice that an historical novelist should never use the first person without good reason. ‘I put down three books recently because I was annoyed with the first person viewpoint, which came across as self-absorbed.

⁵⁸ Goodreads [Historical Fictionistas](#) discussion: Present tense in historical fiction?

<<http://www.goodreads.com/topic/show/1698244-present-tense-in-historical-fiction>> [accessed 7th October 2015].

⁵⁹ *The Telegraph*, Books, Opinion: Philip Hensher <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/7991553/Opinion-Philip-Hensher.html>>, Sept 2010 [accessed 7th October 2015].

⁶⁰ Mary Johnson: exploring the inner universe, blog <<http://mjohnsonstories.net/book-reviews-and-other-thou/the-real-weakness-of-first.html>> [accessed 9th October 2015].

...[you must] be sure...why your character needs to tell his story and why he deserves an audience.’⁶¹

With *The Boleyn Inheritance*, I had not thought about the *raison d’être* that the voice/tense implied, but just enjoyed the intimacy of it. With my own novel, at first I had imagined the characters were somehow recounting their (past tense) stories to a chronicler. But the idea of having a more “real-time” narrative grew after I read Karen Maitland’s *The Owl Killers*, written in the first person *past* tense, but having a sense of being narrated *in real time*. I realised that I did not after all want my characters to be recalling the past, but rather to be telling what is taking place *now*, as if they have each invited the reader to walk beside them as they experience what is happening to them, or to be inside their head so the reader can experience it too, so they can *be* those characters.

To give myself confidence, I briefly looked into which well-regarded novels had been written wholly or partly in the first person, present tense, and discovered Rose Tremain’s *Music and Silence* (partly), Audrey Niffenegger’s *The Time Traveler’s Wife*, Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Robert Harris’s *An Officer and a Spy*, Philippa Gregory’s *The Lady of the Rivers* (partly). I convinced myself that the style would work for my novel too.

I tried rewriting one part in the present tense, and it did seem more immediate and engaging, which was what I wanted to achieve – capturing the characters’ voices in an intimate way that enabled readers to feel they were inside their heads. I concluded that the novel as a whole would after all benefit from the greater intimacy of the present tense, “as if replicating the immediacy of experience”.⁶² So I rewrote all the parts already written, and then wrote the remaining three parts in the present tense.

In the end, it was I who had to decide whether or not the voice and tense I was using really “worked”. As I or my supervisors or colleagues read it, nobody commented that the style was peculiar or grating. Some readers – those who declare they hate the first person and/or present tense – would say it did not work, but presumably that

⁶¹ *Seven Rules for Writing Historical Fiction* by Elizabeth Crook,

<http://www.elizabethcrookbooks.com/articles/historical_fiction.htm> [accessed 17th April 2014].

⁶² John Mullan, *How Novels Work*, p.72

would not make it ‘wrong’? I had to cast my disquiet aside and accept that the style I had chosen was right for the job I had given it.

Nonetheless, aware of the potential sense of claustrophobia of the first person present style, as I wrote the novel’s fifth part, I started to experiment with interweaving some third person passages with the first person narratives, to give other characters a voice and bring a different perspective to the story. Feeling it worked, I then did the same throughout the novel. Late on, my supervisors questioned the purpose of these passages: who was their narrator, what were they trying to show, were they vignettes intended to contrast with the main narrative? They felt they did not differentiate sufficiently from the first person narratives, written as they were in the third person but still in the present tense. I tried different tenses, but the past did not seem to work, as the events being narrated were not in the past. I also attempted using the second person for more of a contrast, but the way in which this style addresses the reader did not feel right. In the end I felt that the third person present was right, and that the passages simply provided the different perspectives I was after.

At my MPhil to PhD upgrade, it was suggested that trying to replicate the “tapestry” effect of a mediaeval manuscript might bring enrichment to the novel. I had already begun to include the third person passages, bringing more variety of language style, but I also decided to introduce different textual forms as “word pictures” to balance the regular narrative: texts, poems, letters and literary extracts.

At first, I simply experimented with these ideas but, when they seemed to work, I found myself engaged in considerably more creative research. John Ball’s letters and fourteenth century poems were relatively easy to find, as were passages from *The Decameron* and *The Travels of Marco Polo*, though I decided in all cases to retranslate them in my own words, which took many hours. Harder to track down were the Bible quotations, which needed to be pertinent, and the gardening book extracts, which had to be gleaned from several real mediaeval books, and again reinterpreted. Hardest of all were the soldiers’ tales for part 4, which proved elusive and, in the end, had to be invented. All this took a surprisingly long time and required much rewriting, but I was satisfied that the novel had been enriched by my efforts.

Another aspect of language that concerned me was the matter of using modern or “archaic” English, particularly for dialogue. My critical research – reading other historical fiction and commentaries by other writers – showed me that it was perfectly acceptable to write in broadly modern English, with maybe a touch of otherness and a few “mediaeval” words for flavour. I discovered that, for me, trying to use a more “authentic”, or mediaeval-seeming, style of language would not work and was anyway not what most novelists did. It was true that the novels I admired most – *The Clerkenwell Tales*, Adam Thorpe’s *Hodd* and Barry Unsworth’s *Morality Play* – had language that was strange but not distractingly so, giving them an air of mediaeval mystery and richness. But theirs was a style I felt incapable of emulating, and I was satisfied to follow others, like Bernard Cornwell, Elizabeth Chadwick and Susannah Gregory.

Mediaevalness, mindset

One of the concerns I had when I embarked on the PhD was my ability to portray the mindsets of my mediaeval characters with sufficient authenticity. My critical research revealed that the characters in nearly all the novels I had read had quite authentic-seeming mediaeval thought-worlds, including religious sensitivities, superstitions (and to some extent belief in the supernatural), social attitudes, and generally strange (to us) ideas. A few felt rather modern – in, for example, *Mistress of the Art of Death*, Ken Follett’s *World without End*, and Brenda Vantrease’s *The Illuminator*, whereas some novels had thoroughly “mediaeval” characters – in, for example, *The Clerkenwell Tales*, *Hodd*, *Morality Play* and Susanna Gregory’s *A Vein of Deceit*, many of their characters seem so much of their time that they would seem incongruous in the present day.

Seeking confirmation of my own approach, I felt that my characters’ mindsets were at least comparable to the majority “authentic-seeming mediaeval thought-worlds”. I wished I could make my characters as “thoroughly mediaeval” as those in the novels I most admired, but again I felt unable to emulate those writers’ work and decided that my characters were as authentic as I needed them to be.

Authenticity and alterity

One of my principal reasons for embarking on this PhD project was to explore how to achieve “authenticity” in an historical novel. At my upgrade, it seemed that I was not achieving quite as much authenticity in either the settings or the characters’ mind-sets as I had hoped. I was advised to try to include more mediaeval elements and more “alterity”, dreams, visions, superstitions, magic, weird monsters, strange ideas, all of which were natural to the medieval thought-world. I did already have some of those elements in my novel, but I was conscious that they did not necessarily impart quite the sense of “otherness” that was needed.

I added dreams, monsters, a love potion, a magic spell, then later much more superstition, around, for example, relics, sex and conception, childbirth, and the reasons for natural disasters. But I did feel sometimes that I was *looking for* elements of alterity to add, rather than letting them arise organically from the story, and did not pursue alterity beyond what seemed within the “naturalness” I was seeking for the novel.

In fact, my critical research revealed that surprisingly few of the novels had very much in the way of alterity, by which I originally meant something *more than* just the usual religious outlook and superstition, not necessarily something “fantastical”, but sufficiently different to give the reader a sense of “strangeness” about the culture and sensitivities of the time.

The Clerkenwell Tales, *Hodd*, *Morality Play* and Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* all had a powerful sense of mystery and “strangeness” that was missing from many of the other novels, yet did not detract from a feeling of normality – none of these novels seemed to be “fantasy”. In *Company of Liars*, on the other hand, its strange characters and mysterious beings seemed to bring a somewhat magical or fantastical air to the novel. Yet, in most novels, a relative lack of alterity did not necessarily detract from their “mediaevalness” – *A Vein of Deceit*, *The Scarlet Lion*, Bernard Knight’s *A Plague of Heretics*, and Bernard Cornwell’s *Harlequin* are examples, and I feel confident that the choices I made in terms of strangeness fitted well with the style of novel I had written.

It is true that, of those I have reviewed, the two novels I probably admire *most* for their sense of mediaeval authenticity and alterity – *Morality Play* and *Hodd* – are

nevertheless works that I feel I could not emulate for the strangeness (and cleverness) of their writing. Perhaps too I would not want to, for they are not necessarily very easy reads, and I have always wanted to write novels that readers *want* to read.

The novels I felt able and wished to emulate were rather those that seemed to take a more naturalistic approach. The works of Susanna Gregory, Bernard Cornwell and Elizabeth Chadwick are, in their very different ways, closer to how I felt I wanted to write *The Nature of Things*. For the pictures of mediaeval life that these novelists draw all seem both authentic and naturalistic, certainly not devoid of alterity, but with a balance that makes the strangeness seem normal.

I confirmed my feeling that going further down the alterity, or “myth and magic”, path would not have been right for my novel. For, although such strangeness might have been a normal part of mediaeval people’s ordinary experience, our contemporary view is different. Magic and the supernatural are beyond our ordinary experience. They appear in fantasy novels and films but are accepted as enjoyable yet “unrealistic”, their cultural language different from a depiction of normal life. In writing a *naturalistic* historical novel, I was not just writing about the past, but negotiating how certain aspects of the past, however authentic to the period, would be understood by modern readers. It was a matter of balance.

It was this balance between naturalness and alterity, which I felt would bring the sense of authenticity that I was seeking, that I hoped to achieve in *The Nature of Things*. I feel satisfied that I have done so.

The Nature of Things

Carolyn Hughes

Prologue



Many years before the beginning of the century of which this story speaks, an enlightened English monk resolved to write a book. In a monastery somewhere in the north of England, the monk was the authority on growing plants of every kind: vegetables and flowers, fruits and herbs, and even trees. He conceived a plan to write down everything he knew, the appearance and characteristics of different plants, how to give them life, to nurture them, and propagate them once their own life had run its course. The purpose of his book was, it seemed, the delight and, more importantly, the education of his brothers.

What was unusual (and what made him so enlightened) was that the monk chose to write the book in English, even though the brothers would be content, or even prefer, to read it in the Latin that was the accustomed medium for such a learned work. Why English, then? Because, in truth, the monk cherished a secret and unstated ambition to reach an audience *beyond* the monastery's northern walls.

The name of the scholarly gardening monk was lost in the miasma of the passing years, but his book – anonymous of its author's name – survived, yet not within the monastery walls. Somehow, *The Nature of Growing Things: Plants, Herbs and Trees* found its way into a London bookshop (who knows how such a book succeeded in escaping the sequestered walls and travelling so great a distance from its origins, but succeed it did), and at length into the hands of a petty knight, perhaps just as the monk had always hoped it might. For such a very unusual book, the bookseller demanded an immoderate price, but the gentleman had recently made a most satisfactory deal with a Flemish merchant, and felt inclined to treat himself, for he was both very fond of gardening and eager to attain the status of an *educated* man.

But, in truth, the gentleman could not read, despite his desire to do so, and had to content himself with looking at the colourful and, indeed, most finely executed paintings of flowers and herbs that the monk had added to complement his texts. The gentleman's much-loved daughter sat with him often as he perused the pages, entranced by the paintings' delicate beauty, for she loved flowers, and enjoyed pointing out the ones she knew – the periwinkle and the lily, the columbine and rose.

Her brother, an earnest youth with ambitions for the clerical life – much to his father's eager, if somewhat envious, satisfaction – had already learned to read and daily practised his newfound skills on all manner of religious texts. But now there was a new book in the house, he pored over its words, astonished by the pleasure he found in the monk's meticulous guidance on cultivating roses and growing curative herbs. And, when his sister begged him to relate to *her* the monk's advice, they sat together while he read the words out loud, time and time and time again.

The girl and boy delighted in the monk's creation and, as they grew, put into practice what they had learned, first in their father's garden and later in their own, following carefully the old monk's guidance. And they observed the turning of the wheel of life, death and renewal that is played out in every garden, be it a monastic herbary or a manor's orchard, a humble peasant plot or a castle's pleasure park.

And what pertains to plants, pertains also to the kingdom of animals, and to man himself, for, after death there always is new life: the seeds of plants, the young of beasts, the sons of men.

But will new life *always* follow after death? Even in a century such as this?

For this will be as no other has ever been. The ravening wolves of famine will stalk poverty's straying sheep; the snarling hounds of war will goad the braying donkeys of dissent; death's black-winged ravens will pull at the entrails of plague's helpless victims.

When *so many* misfortunes and disasters come to pass, be they God-inspired or shaped by man himself, will new life still come after?

1: Poverty

William Beneyt

1300

I.

Standing here, up on Portesdon hill, I marvel at the wondrous sight spread out before me: green downland flecked with the flowers of early summer – pink rockroses and yellow vetch, purple orchids and bright blue rampions; and myriad butterflies – brown, blue and white – hovering among the open petals. Beyond the flowery meadow, the manor's sheep are grazing, this year's lambs still young enough and eager to spring and caper, while their mothers, slow and lazy in the summer sun, champ at the tussocky grass. It uplifts my soul to see such splendour – and I long to share it.

But there is no one here for me to share it with.

In the parsonage garden, alongside cabbages and onions and peas, and the herbs I grow to add savour to my food and make remedies for injuries and ailments, I do cultivate a few flowers – columbines, periwinkles and lilies – for their beauty and my education. I learned how to grow them from a book my father once brought home, *The Nature of Growing Things: Flowers, Herbs and Trees*. I never knew why or how Father acquired such a book; he never told me and I regret now I never asked him. However, when I returned from university and was waiting to take up my first living, he gave the book to me.

'At least someone in the family can read it,' he said, for – surprisingly perhaps, given his standing in Sussex society – Father could not read, and neither could my mother. But he could not suppress a heavy sigh. 'Though it is a pity you are not making better use of your expensive education.'

I knew I was a disappointment to him, for he had hopes of an illustrious future for me, as secretary to an eminent bishop or great lord. But, though I knew well enough that most parish priests did not have, or need, an education such as mine, nonetheless I wanted to minister to the poor. Serving a bishop or a lord would not do.

Anyway, when I left Sussex and came here to Southamptonshire, I packed *The Nature of Growing Things* into my saddlebag and thought little more about it – until my desire to make

a garden prompted me to read it again, and my eyes were opened once more to the wonderful possibilities a garden can afford its creator.

Yet growing flowers is undoubtedly an uncommon thing to do here in Swivelton.

The gardeners up at the manor do, though I cannot think Sir Philip has much interest in them. But, in the village, they have no time for beauty or education: every last square foot of soil must be planted with something that can be eaten. Yet, these days, the village gardens are no longer large enough to provide all the onions and cabbages and turnips that are needed, for there are so many mouths to feed.



But not all of Swivelton is struggling.

Beneath the great oak in the centre of the green huddles a small group of men deep in conversation. The four men are among the richer and more respected of the village, including the bailiff, Nicholas Foreman, a large man, richly clad, and Walter Dyer, a dealer in cloth, grey-headed but wide of girth. All four heads are close together and from time to time one of their voices is raised, in elation or in anger, I cannot tell.

Their wives stand some little distance away, not party to the men's conversation, but their faces are alight. It seems they have plenty of their own to speak of. Mistress Foreman, a wearer of fanciful headdresses, likes to make her opinions heard. Mistress Dyer, more plainly dressed but in the latest fashion – or so I understand – is not as voluble as her friend, seeming to smile and nod more often than she speaks.

Crossing the green, on my way back to the parsonage, I pass close by the women and offer them a greeting. All four bob their heads and smile.

But, as I walk away, I turn my head, thinking I hear my name called out, and see Mistress Dyer and her friends looking in my direction, then bursting into merry laughter. Feeling my face flush, I hurry on my way.

II.

This alehouse seems a small outpost of the Devil's kingdom – a place I must steel myself to come to, not to join my fellow villagers in their drinking, gambling and whoring, but to save their souls from their manifold sins. On dark November evenings such as this, the place appears more diabolical than usual.

My senses are shutting down, as here they often do.

I can see little through the gloom afforded by the few guttering tallow candles the landlord allows, and from the fog spewing from a fire giving out much smoke but hardly any heat.

I can hear little above the arguing and blaspheming, the belching and moaning.

And I can smell little but the stench of sour ale, rancid tallow and sulphurous farts, the rankness of the rushes soaked with urine and vomit, and the foul fumes from the hearth.

Most of those around me seem insensitive to the foulness of the air, absorbed only by their pots of ale, their strident arguments, their vicious games of knuckles, or the women lolling at their sides. Whereas I am struggling to remain sentient, my eyes, ears and nose all refusing to cooperate.

How I long to escape, back to the comfort of my parsonage. But this evening – as nigh on every evening – my place has to be here, in Jakys Coupere's disagreeable alehouse, among my straying flock.

I was taught to believe the souls of those who sin are rightly committed to the pits of Hell and, since I came two years ago to my first living in this rustic and, I thought, ungodly village, my primary task has been to try and talk my parishioners out of the worst of their excesses and turn them to a more righteous path.

It is an uphill struggle!

Of course those willing to listen to me do not engage in such excesses, but those who seem reluctant to stop their sinning fervently resist my persuasion, despite their terror at what awaits them in the next life. In truth, I have long since despaired of saving those who refuse to heed my words, directing my efforts at their children, whom I can perhaps steer away from the first steps to sin.

But the problem is not entirely of their own making. In the twenty-five years since I was born, the numbers of people in Swivelton – in England as a whole, I hear – have steadily increased, as clement weather brought good harvests year in year out and, as a consequence, the births of more, and yet more, children. So more people now live in Swivelton than there is land to support them or work for them to do. Many in the village – old and young, but mostly young – are idle, spending what little they have on drinking and whoring, trying to get more by thieving, or frittering their lives away in raucous games and fighting.

Tonight the alehouse is full to bursting. It is a large building, popular with the less worthy in the village, but a ramshackle place, with crumbling walls and a roof of rotting, gap-ridden

thatch. Jakys Coupere, as dissolute as his patrons, barely bothers to keep the building in any sort of good repair.

A short while ago I saw old Dan Miller, drunk beyond feeling, as usual, topple from his flimsy bench onto the thick layer of stinking rushes. No one else appeared to notice: none of the drinkers sitting nearby got up to look at the inebriated old man lying in an undoubtedly noisome heap, or bothered to try to set him back onto his bench.

Seeing Dan's demise, I rose from my stool, intending to go over and restore him to his seat or even take him home to his miserable hovel. But suddenly young Robert Payne and two of his friends were standing before me.

'We've come,' said Robert, grimacing.

They were willing to talk to me after all, so I sat down again, reluctant to forego the chance to counsel them. Poor Dan's plight soon slipped from my mind.

Lads like these are my especial quarry: my mission to persuade them that ale is not the answer to their woes. For, despite the decency of their families, these boys daily run wild and ale is the fuel that fires their misdeeds. Their parents' holdings, though sometimes sizeable, are yet too small to support all the children that have, uncommonly, survived. So those like Robert and his friends have no work to occupy them, other than the casual labour to be had at the high points of the farming year. Instead, they create mischief – and sometimes worse than mere mischief.

They are not wicked but, in the eyes of their victims, and of the bailiff, and, more seriously, of Sir Philip le Strange, their lord, they are dangerous miscreants, whose behaviour must be checked, with whatever degree of firmness is deemed appropriate.

But now, Robert and his two companions are sitting opposite me, apparently listening to my words, promising to spend less time here and more time helping their parents. They are humouring me. But I have to keep on trying – I cannot let them lose faith in themselves, still less their faith in God.

It is only when poor Dan is already alight that I notice him again. In that same moment, others notice too and before long the gloomy building is a tumult of screaming, staggering people, all rushing for the door.

I suppose that, in his fall, Dan knocked one of the candles to the floor, where it smouldered unnoticed in the filthy rushes, hidden by his prone, insensible body, until hot enough to ignite. Old Dan's vile clothing, rank with grease and alcohol and piss, would serve well as a wick. And now he has awoken to find himself alight. The flames have caught the

flimsy wooden bench from which he fell and, from there, are leaping up the decrepit wattle walls, whose daub has mostly dropped away.

In moments, one side of the room is ablaze.

‘Go,’ I say to Robert and his friends. ‘Make for the door.’

But I cannot abandon Dan, and push my way through the tide of panicking people towards the old man’s burning body. As I reach him, I can see I am too late – his filthy rags are already burned away, the skin on his legs blistering, his red, shiny face twisted in a ghastly grimace. I cannot stay to give Dan the last rites – I too must flee, for the flames have taken hold of two sides of the building, threatening to spread to the front wall, and the door. I utter a quick prayer for Dan’s soul and turn to join the press of bodies pushing forward to escape.

‘Be calm!’ I cry. ‘God is with us!’ But my feeble voice is lost amid the hubbub. Drunken men howl and thrash their arms across the faces of their friends. Women scream and weep.

‘Sweet Mary and Joseph,’ cries one, ‘let me get home to my little ones!’

I am still feet from the door when it is overwhelmed. People trip, are trampled underfoot and, behind me, above where Dan’s body is melting away, the roof is collapsing, sending showers of sparks and tongues of fire onto the clothes of those still at the back of the throng. Then, on the other side of the building, which the flames have not yet reached, half a dozen near-naked men and women, descending from the upper floor with anguished cries, join the struggle to escape. Their terror threatens my efforts to be calm and the bitter nausea of panic surges into my throat.

As I near the door, I turn my head once more to look on what is truly a vision of Hell. I have seen demonic visions such as this in church wall paintings, put there to terrify and teach. And I am no less susceptible to their lesson than is the smallest child.

Yet, fearful as I am that I am about to die here in this infernal hellhole, I must not weep or wail. It is my job to pray to the Lord God for deliverance, my own and that of my flock.

And suddenly – God indeed be praised! – the whole wall at the front of the building gives way under the weight of bodies pressing against it, and those at the front of the throng burst out into the night. Moments later those of us still on our feet are gulping in the cold, damp night air in painful wrenching gasps.

A crowd of villagers has run to join us survivors of the blaze. Some have brought buckets of water but they are of no avail, for the flames are engulfing the remainder of the walls and roof, and smoke billows in huge black evil-smelling clouds into the night sky. The flames

are too furious and hot for anyone to go close enough to douse them. Nor even to try to rescue those still trapped inside – though we know that many are, for we can hear their pitiable screams, and many of those outside are wailing for their missing kin and dying friends.

Then quite abruptly the screaming and the wailing cease, and silence descends upon the watching crowd as, with the roar of a storm wind and the crash of a hundred trees falling in the forest, the building collapses in on itself, sending sparks and flaming debris flying, and people fleeing in all directions.

III.

The survivors of the alehouse blaze stood and watched the building burn. They did not know the fire had spread to the cot and stables built behind the inn, where Matthew Spencer looked after the horses of those few travellers who broke their journey here.

When the landlord offered him the job, Matthew took it despite his loathing of the man. He believed him indolent and dissolute, letting his inn be used for immoral doings. But the job was a boon to Matthew's growing family, particularly when the cot meant they could leave their decrepit hovel and useless scrap of land.

When the fire broke out, Matthew and his sons were in the stables cleaning tack. His wife, Anne, and their young daughter, Amice, were in the back room, brewing. When he smelled the burning, Matthew ran outside to see what was afoot and, finding flames licking at the roof, raced back indoors, yelling to his boys to run.

Then Matthew went back for his wife and daughter but, quick as he was, he had no chance to save them. He heard their cries for help, and then their screams as the flimsy reed-thatched roof collapsed.

Now, a pale watery sun is beginning to rise and cast an eerie light upon the charred, still smoking, timbers of the inn, the smouldering rubble. There is little sound above the movement of

the timbers as they settle and subside. Those who keened and wailed throughout the night have gone, to continue their lament at home.

But Matthew Spencer is still there, crouched amid the wreckage of his home. Two blackened bundles at his feet are, perhaps, the remains of his beloved wife and child. Squatting upon his heels, he rocks back and forth.

His eyes are now dried of tears, but inside his breast smoulders a fierce and bitter wrath. A wrath none of his neighbours would think possible in such a temperate man.

IV.

I was powerless to help those trapped inside the burning inn: naught I could do to ease their passage from this life to the next.

The blaze took the lives of nineteen men and women, and I spent the remainder of the night upon my knees, praying God would take pity on their sinful souls. But I feared salvation would not be theirs, who died in the acts of sinning, with no chance to confess and save their souls.

As I remain kneeling upon the chancel's hard stone floor, the cold seeps through my cassock and up into my knees. I shiver as it creeps up through my body and chills my heart. I am glad at least that the discomfort will keep me vigilant and alert...

Jakys Coupere's alehouse stands before me and my heart lifts up with joy, for its rotting walls prevail, its decaying thatch still keeping out the weather. God be praised!

I reach out to the door. The flimsy oak is hot against my hand, but I push at it unconcerned. Yet, as I do, the door dissolves and I am falling through... Not onto a floor of stinking rushes, but a boundless heap of naked bodies, skin glistening, mouths rent wide in soundless wailing. And, floundering in this ghastly swarm, faces – Dan Miller, little Amice Spencer, Hawise Hammelee – rise up and lurch towards me.

The roaring flames, the howls, the screams... The heat, the press of bodies, the stench of sweat and fear...

Am I in...?

I wake abruptly, prostrate on the chancel floor, my face and neck both slippery with sweat. My limbs are an agony, and I have to haul myself to my feet, bleary-eyed and stiff. I would return to the parsonage to calm myself but, as I turn from the altar, I find Matthew Spencer leaning against a pillar in the nave. His face is grey, his grimy cheeks furrowed with dried tears. His clothes are ashy and in places singed. The poor man is shaking, with cold or shock I cannot tell. Taking his arm, I draw him to the chancel steps and bid him sit.

‘What has happened, Matthew?’

Matthew is a devout and honest man, who never drinks or gambles, devoting himself entirely to his family. But he will not look at me, wiping his tunic’s filthy sleeve across his face. Many moments pass before he speaks, his voice so quiet I strain to hear him. He relates the horror of last night, then shakes his head, wiping his face again upon his sleeve.

‘I should’ve tried again,’ he says. ‘I shouldn’t have left my Anne and little Amice to die so.’ Then he can staunch his grief no longer.

Wretched soul. I urge him not to blame himself, but he turns to me, his face ablaze.

‘Blame myself?’ he says, his voice rising. ‘It’s not *me* I blame, but that whoreson Coupere!’



I am being watched. They are hiding behind the great bole of the ancient yew tree that has dominated Saint Nicholas’s churchyard for a thousand years.

I call out. ‘Do you want to talk to me, children? Do not be afraid.’

A girl of about ten emerges and then her little brother, keeping himself behind her grubby skirts. They stand beside the tree, their hands clasped tight together, staring across at me. They are the only children of Hawise and Nathaniel Hammelee, and grief wells up inside me as I recall their mother’s face appearing in my troubled dream. I beckon them forward with as encouraging a smile as I can muster.

Young Emma takes a step towards me, but little Francis pulls on her hand. I can see, even from a distance, that he is crying. Emma, though, is not. She speaks sharply to her brother and, tugging her hand out of his, comes over to me.

She may be dry-eyed, but her dirty face has streaks of cleaner skin.

‘What is wrong, Emma?’ I say.

‘It’s Ma and Pa,’ she says, her voice a whisper. ‘They’re dead in the alehouse.’

I crouch down. ‘Are you sure?’

She shrugs. ‘They’re not come home.’

Her parents work in Jakys Coupere’s alehouse, Hawise as a tapster and Nathaniel a handyman, Jakys’ only defence against the building’s mounting decay, and a poor defence at that, for Nathaniel’s skills are meagre. Every evening they leave Emma in charge of her little brother, so they can earn the paltry income their two jobs provide.

‘I was worried,’ says Emma. ‘They’ve never not come home afore.’

She begins to weep again.

‘Soon as it got light, I woke Francie, and we went to find them. When we got there, I saw Master Coupere, sitting on the ground, his face hidden by his hood. When he looked up, it was red and shiny and his clothes were black and smelled all smoky. I asked him about Ma and Pa. He said he didn’t know, then he jumped up and ran off bawling like a baby.’

She is shaking now and I put my arm around her shoulders. ‘Did you find someone who did know?’

She shrugs. ‘Master Webb said loads o’ people died, but they don’t know who. But if Ma and Pa haven’t come home...’

Little Francis creeps over and tucks himself underneath his sister’s arm.

‘What’ll happen to us?’ she says, her eyes big.

‘You have no uncle, no aunt?’

She shakes her head.

So what will happen to them? Most families in this village have more than enough children of their own. Can I think of anyone who might take them in? If I cannot, I shall have to ask Sir Philip – a prospect I embrace with little enthusiasm and even less expectation.

V.

The horror of the blaze has passed, the communal grieving run its course. But they have been traded for more violent emotions, driven by blame and a desire for revenge. Complaints about Jakys Coupere are muttered in the marketplace, questions asked about why the bailiff

had not already acted against the poor condition of Jakys's premises. Others say it is high time the bailiff brought him to book for his scandalous neglect, and Jack Webb, the beadle, has agreed to petition Sir Philip for Jakys to be brought before the hallmote.

But all this complaining is of no avail, for Jakys Coupere has disappeared.

In the marketplace, opinions on why and where to fall eagerly from many lips.

'He's gone to drown himself,' says one man – 'or hang himself' interrupts another – 'for shame at letting that alehouse get such a death trap.'

Another grins, and licks his lips. 'Or mebbe Devil's come for him already, and even now he's burning in the infernal fiery pits.'

This suggestion finds great favour with the crowd, who cheer. 'Serve him right!'

But a woman shakes her head. 'I reckon he's just scared of what'll happen if we catch him.'

I agree with her. Jakys may be a rogue but he is no fool. He would have seen the way the wind was blowing, and figured his chances of a fair hearing bleak.

But his flight poses no deterrent to Robert Payne and his two friends, who have decided to take up the cudgel of retribution. Robert leaps onto the stocks to raise himself above the crowd.

'We'll go after him,' he says, 'Martin, Ralph and me. We'll find Jakys Coupere and bring him back to face justice.' The crowd cheer, urging them on, but I am troubled about their notion of justice.

Jack Webb is standing at the edge of the crowd, observing the unfolding mayhem. I wish he would intervene, say it is *his* job, as the voice of law in Swivelton, to bring felons before his lord, but he says nothing. Perhaps he is acting on Sir Philip's orders.

VI.

Alys Dyer is kneeling at her prie-dieu, her delicate hands, white-knuckled, clasped upon its sloping shelf. She is trying to pray, but cannot find the words for weeping.

Alys tasked her memory to recall the names of the men her husband Walter said he was to meet. She made enquiries and learned they died also in the alehouse fire.

Her friend, Beatrice Foreman, the bailiff's wife, knit her brow; her headdress quivered. 'Why, Alys, do you speak of such men as these?'

Alys's answer was a whisper, revealing only that her husband met them the night of the fire.

Beatrice clicked her tongue; her headdress wobbled. 'Are you certain, dear? Such rogues?'

Which was what poor Alys feared. Walter was a rich man, but never seemed to think he had enough. He was well respected in the village, but she knew he was forever scheming. Suppose he was engaged in some bad business, and then had died unshriven?

She begins to shiver as well as weep. An image slips into her mind, from the painting on the wall in Saint Nicholas's church, a painting that alarmed her as a child and still makes her tremble: a naked man, fat moneybags suspended from his neck and coins pouring from his gaping mouth, squats over licking flames, horned devils prodding him with forks.

Her mother said it was the punishment for greed. Which young Alys thought a bit unfair: it was only a new kirtle she had asked for earlier that morning. Surely that was not a sin?

VII.

When Mistress Dyer knocks upon my parsonage door, it is a week or so after the alehouse conflagration. It is a miserably cold and dark December day, and the woman on my doorstep is so bundled up in her thick cloak and hood that at first I do not know her.

'Who is it needs my help, mistress?' I say, and the woman plucks at her hood and draws it back just enough so I can see her face.

I am a young man, quite innocent of women. For ten years, I have devoted my heart to God and my life to his service. Never before have I looked upon a woman and felt anything but the tenderness of a priest for a member of his flock, the compassion of a pastor for a soul in need of guidance. But in this moment of my first private meeting with Alys Dyer, the

darkness of the day seems to diminish, and the face I see before me, despite its sadness, is like a candle bringing light into the gloom.

I compose myself, and open the door a little wider.

‘Come in from the cold, Mistress Dyer,’ I say and step back as she glides past me, the fabric of her woollen cloak ice-cold and damp as it brushes against my hand.

I am modest in the management of my parsonage: the hearth is barely alight and I have allowed myself but two candles this dark morning to brighten the dimness of the room. I wear two or three shirts beneath my cassock and a thick woollen cloak above it but, when I see how Mistress Dyer is shivering, I bid her take a seat close to the hearth, while I poke the feeble embers into life and feed them with a few well-chosen logs.

As I kneel at my task, I glance at Mistress Dyer, and am discomfited to find her watching me. I manage a smile, which she returns, if feebly. She is young to be a widow – I guess her middle twenties. Her husband – who was more than twice her age – was a respected elder of Swivelton, though I had heard rumours that his business dealings were not all entirely honest.

I stand up and brush the ashes from my cassock. Then, fetching a stool, I sit down facing, but not too close to, my visitor.

‘Are you a little warmer, Mistress Dyer?’

She nods. ‘Thank you, Master William.’ She reaches up with both hands and, lifting her black hood carefully over her headdress, lets it fall back to her shoulders. ‘There,’ she says, smiling.

That fleeting smile makes me a little light-headed. The barbet and cap that she is wearing allow a few strands of her hair to show. In the gloom I cannot tell its colour, though I think it fair rather than dark. Her eyes too are merely grey in the dim light of the room, but I can see warmth in them that somehow belies the grief I assume she must be suffering.

‘May the Lord watch over Master Dyer on his journey into the next life,’ I say, and she nods again but says nothing.

‘Do you wish us to pray together?’ I say.

She shakes her head, then changes her mind. ‘I don’t know how best to pray for my poor Walter’s soul.’

Her gaze drops down to her hands, clasped together in her lap, and, letting her fingers part again, she gently strokes her wedding ring. 'I hoped you could advise me, Master William.'

When she looks up again, I see a moistness along her lower lids that glistens faintly in the candlelight.

I make myself withdraw my gaze, and steady my thoughts. 'Yes, of course I can.'

She raises two fingers to her cheek and gently wipes away some tears. 'But Walter died unshriven,' she says, in a voice so small I can hardly hear her words. Then suddenly she cries out. 'Oh, Master William, I'm so afraid for Walter's soul! Do you think it's languishing already in the fiery depths?'

I shake my head and give my customary reply, though, in Walter's case, I wish heartily I had more conviction in the truth of my words. 'Your husband was a God-fearing man,' I say. 'God will assuredly know him for a friend? He surely is in Purgatory, being purified of any Earthly...' I hesitate, wanting to find the right word, '...imperfections, awaiting his onward passage into Paradise.'

She nods, yet seems somehow unconvinced.

'But you, Mistress Dyer,' I go on, 'can speed Walter's passage into Paradise, by your prayers and your own actions.'

'I can?'

'Indeed you can. Come, let us pray together now.'

'Here?'

'Why not?'

Slipping off the stool, I sink down onto my knees. Mistress Dyer does the same and I recite the words of a prayer that I hope will bring her comfort.

'Remember, O Lord, the God of spirits and of all flesh, those whom we remember, men of the true faith. Give them rest there in thy kingdom, in the delight of Paradise, from whence pain and sorrow have fled away, where the light of thy countenance visits them and always shines upon them.'

I say the words but in truth I find my mind distracted. For Mistress Dyer is kneeling closer to me than I am sure she had intended. I look up to see her head is bowed, her eyelids tightly shut. I say the words, but do not close my eyes again.

VIII.

Jack Webb's request that Jakys Coupere be brought to justice is not the only petition to be brought before Sir Philip le Strange, for many widows and orphans of the fire have begged their lord for succour. But no villager has received so much as a groat – indeed none has even been granted a hearing.

Yet Sir Philip seems willing enough to give me an audience. I want to press the cases of those I feel are most in need of help, Matthew Spencer and little Emma Hammelee and her brother among them, though I am pessimistic about the outcome of my appeal.

His lordship is, as always, slouched in the great oaken chair standing upon a dais at one end of the grand hall. He is drumming his fingers on the chair's richly carved arms, as his steward orders me to kneel.

Sir Philip is not a noble man – or at least not in his bearing. His embroidered cotehardie and golden adornments are opulent, but inside them he seems small. Yet it is Philip's face that detracts most from his lordly mien, for it is very long, his nose uncommonly sharp, his dark eyes prominent and widely spaced, his mottled beard poorly clipped and straggling over the neck of his crimson velvet hood. When I look at Philip, I am reminded of drawings I once saw upon a map, of *cynocephali*, dog-headed men, who some say live at the far edges of the Earth.

As I kneel, awaiting Philip's signal for me to rise, I try not to let the image undermine my purpose. At Philip's cough, I lift my face to speak, and see his wide mouth is open, his yellowing teeth protruding, his thin lips twisted in a contemptuous grin.

'Well, priest,' he says, gesturing me to stand. 'Don't tell me you have come to plead for your *flock*?' He almost spits out the word.

My face grows hot, but I remain composed. 'So many have died, my lord—'

But Sir Philip interrupts, barking his disdain.

'Perhaps the deaths are a reprieve,' he says, his black eyes glinting, 'a small respite from the interminable rise in numbers.'

He throws his head back and guffaws. Philip's cronies, who always attend his audiences in a baying pack, laugh too, and he looks at them, nodding with satisfaction.

'But many are suffering grievously, my lord,' I say. 'The families of the dead, left behind to cope, some without a man, some without the mother of their children, some even without their home—'

He holds up his hand. ‘Stop, priest!’ he cries. ‘Sanctimonious whingeing! These dogs’ – I almost choke – ‘have brought their demise upon themselves. It’s not my concern...’ He pauses and lets his mouth stretch wide into a tooth-filled grin. ‘But if you want to give succour to these malcontents, you go ahead.’

I am shocked and angered by the inaccuracy and injustice of his words but, if I am to keep my living and my opportunity to help these people, I cannot contradict him. I bite my tongue and withdraw, to consider how to fight their battles in some other way.

IX.

My anticipation of Mistress Dyer’s visits grows steadily more eager, and now our meetings are no longer merely half an hour of quiet prayer.

At first, she asked me many questions, of the nature of Purgatory and Paradise and how long I thought Walter would likely have to wait to stand before Saint Peter and the gates of Heaven. Then she spoke of her life with Walter, whom she deeply loved, despite him being old enough to be her father – or even grandfather.

‘Though,’ she cast her eyes down and lowered her voice, ‘I’m disconsolate I never bore him a child.’

I could see her words were earnestly meant.

It was not so long, however, before I realised that her joyful reminiscences of Walter had ceased and now, although she still prays daily for her husband’s soul, she no longer appears overtly to regret his passing.

For my part, I find myself impatient for our meetings, and do not always wait for her to come, but go looking for her on the pretext of having found the answer to one of her many questions. Perhaps I know, yet refuse to acknowledge, it is not just my priestly wisdom I wish to share with her. I pray daily for guidance and for strength, but find myself confused by the silence that is God’s only answer.



The week before Christmas, I pay my customary visit to my sister and her family. It is a long ride – twenty miles or so to the east, in Sussex, but I am very fond of Marjory, even though – or perhaps because – she, as a girl, defied our parents by refusing the wealthy gentleman they had chosen for her, and marrying Geoffrey Tyler, the man she loved.

As I trudge up the little path leading to the cottage door, I look up to see my sister waiting for me, a broad smile on her face, a basket of produce balanced on her ample hip.

She gestures to the basket. 'I've been rooting in our store. See how good these onions are.' She takes a fine, firm onion and holds it out to me. 'And these are from the garden, cabbages, leeks, all still in fine fettle, no mind how hard the ground is.'

She grins and I grin back.

'You have always been the consummate gardener, Marjory.'

She laughs. 'Perhaps. But anyway, little brother, come in from the cold.'

Geoffrey shakes his head ruefully when I tell him of the troubles back in Swivelton.

'It seems to me,' he says, 'our lord, Sir Giles, is very different from your Sir Philip. We've little unrest here. Certainly, in the good years, some families had more children, and more of them survived. And some young men've found there's too little land for them to farm. But they're not left idle. His lordship can't abide sloth. One way or another, work's found for all.'

It seems such a contrast to the turmoil we have at home.



It was not my intention to mention Alys to my sister. But I cannot help myself: Alys is such a bright thread in the dark weaving of my despondency.

I tell Marjory about the fire and its victims.

'I worry about the children. I have said they can stay at the parsonage for a while, until I find someone to take them in.'

'No one wants them?' says Marjory.

I shake my head but then, unthinking, voice my latest reflections upon the matter. 'Though there is a lady, recently widowed, who might be willing, for she has no children of her own.'

So now I have casually introduced her and, instantly, Marjory's interest is aroused. I meant to speak of Alys and her loss in just the same manner that I spoke of Matthew's and the children's. But of course it is not the same. Despite my fear that neither God nor my flock would approve of our liaison, I have not discouraged Mistress Dyer from visiting me, as I should.

But it is a mistake to relate any of this to my sister.

Her eyes widen and her mouth stretches into a broad grin, and I realise, naïvely and too late, that I should have kept Alys to myself.

‘So is this Mistress Dyer pretty?’ says Marjory, her head tilted at an angle that is almost coquettish. I feel a warmth creeping up my neck and across my cheeks, and cannot think how to answer.

‘Ha, ha! So she *is!*’ cries my sister and, when I deny I have even noticed Mistress Dyer’s face, she waggles her finger at me.

‘So, what cause have you to blush, little brother? I reckon this Mistress Dyer is rather more to you than a mere member of your flock.’

At which I beg her to stop. ‘Please, sister, I am a priest,’ I say, my face almost certainly as scarlet as if I was sitting right beside the blazing fire.

But Marjory’s spirit is on the loose – her spirit of mischief, not unkind, but gently mocking my calling, which she has always considered, as she puts it, a “shocking waste of a good man”.

‘So,’ she says, her face aglow, ‘my saintly little brother has discovered the pleasures of the flesh.’

‘No!’ I cry, my head pounding. ‘No, sister, I have *not*. I am a priest. It is not permitted.’

Marjory shakes her head. ‘But lots of priests take wives, Will, whatever the Church might say. So why deny yourself?’

‘Because I have dedicated myself to God.’

‘Oh, my dear little brother,’ she says, taking my hand, as she used to when I was a child. ‘I love God too. But I also love Geoffrey, and I love my children. Why deprive yourself, Will, of the chance of normal, human love?’

I shake my head. I have betrayed my feelings for Alys without meaning to, perhaps without even truly recognising them. But Marjory can see the truth, and in her candid manner, she makes her views quite plain.

‘Does Alys care for you, Will?’

I shrug. ‘I cannot ask her.’

‘But if you show her your feelings, then surely she’ll respond?’

‘I cannot–’

Marjory holds up her hand to stay my protest. 'You *can*, Will. Take her into your bed. Love her. You'll be richly rewarded.'

X.

On Alys Dyer's wedding night, the sight of Walter's sagging flesh disgusted her. Yet she – a girl of thirteen – soon found him anything but feeble, and each day longed for night to come. But now Walter had gone, she spent her nights alone in their great bed, in an agony of yearning for the delicious pleasure he once gave her.

Yet, now she has accepted her husband's passing – though naturally she still prays for him every day – Alys finds herself yearning for another. He is tall and slender, an elegant man, she thinks, with a pale complexion that suggests years of learning, and soft white hands unused to toil. He is not handsome, but his blue eyes look kind and his mouth turns up a little at the corners. She longs to reach up and touch the light brown curls that encircle his small tonsure and softly skim his cassock's neck.

It is still dark when she finds herself awake. She can hear the church bell chiming – for matins or prime, she is not sure. Her eyes are open wide, though they cannot penetrate the blackness. She longs to fall asleep again: to dream. She shivers. Icy cold, she wraps herself inside her sheet and blankets, folding them tightly round till she can hardly move.

But she has accidentally trapped one hand between the cool flesh of her thighs. She cannot stop herself thinking of the light brown curls, and soft white hands. And now Alys lets her fingers brush over where she imagines *his* might stroke her. Soon she is in a turmoil of desire: heart racing, neck throbbing, her chemise all damp and crumpled.

Suddenly aghast, she fights her way out of the confining blankets then, sitting on the bed's edge, breathing hard, wipes her clammy face and neck with a corner of the sheet.

XI.

I was troubled by my visit to my sister, shocked that she could so readily discover what I scarcely knew myself. But I could not accept her resolution. I respected my sister's opinions and did not want to spurn her advice. But this time I was certain she was wrong.

My certainty meant I had no choice but to tell Alys we could no longer meet alone. My heart ached as I rehearsed the conversation in my mind, but I could not permit myself to abandon my commitment to my benefice, still less renounce the vows I had made to God.

Alys was waiting for me when I returned home and, smiling happily, told me how much she had missed me. I was sick with misery at what I had to tell her. Her lovely eyes, only moments before so brightly shining, filled with tears and I saw her swallow hard before she answered.

'You must do as you think best,' she said, the words catching in her throat. 'It's not for me to turn you from your chosen path.'

She put out her hand and laid it on my arm.

Every day I recall the gentle weight of that touch and an ache presses in my chest. How much I long for her to touch me once again.

Every day I pray to God to help me deny these feelings, but He continues to perplex me with His silence.

XII.

When Robert Payne, Ralph Strong and Martin Rolfe return, on Saint Stephen's Day, with Jakys Coupere as their hostage, bound hand and foot with rope, such uproar follows that, as an officer of the Church and a man of peace, I am surely obliged to confront it, and wonder if, perhaps, this is God's way of showing me wherein my commitments lie.

Yet I feel powerless to counter the rage, when all I have to offer is to encourage my flock to look towards Paradise, while knowing that, for some, Paradise is surely unattainable, their misery on Earth resulting only in an endless wandering in Purgatory or even a descent into the fiery depths.

While training to become a priest, I found myself persuaded that all village people are lazy, untrustworthy and prone to superstition. I was assured they spent their time drinking ale

and playing games rather than attending church, and I had little experience then to tell me otherwise. But now I know only *some* villagers do those things, not all – not even most. *Most* indeed are honest, hard working and properly pious, and it is beyond their natures to be as aggrieved and violent as they are now.

Jakys is led onto the village green, paraded like a prize ox being offered for sale at the fair. But there is nothing noble in the spectacle before us. The hunters and their quarry have been at large for weeks, in weather that would test the endurance of the hardiest of men. The three lads seem in fair fettle – I suppose they found themselves sufficient food and shelter for the duration of their exploit.

But Jakys is thin, dirty and dishevelled. No one enquires about his manifestly desperate condition – indeed, it seems that no one cares. For the attention is all on his captors: the crowd that quickly gathers is cheerful, clapping the lads' shoulders and declaring their approval. Then Matthew Spencer pushes his way to the front of the mob and hurls abuse at his former master, accusing him of criminal neglect. The mood turns ugly, and many call for "justice".

I am not then bold enough to say I think their complaint against Jakys unjustified. Instead I pick up my cassock skirts and run to the beadle's cot. As good fortune would have it, Jack Webb is entertaining his superior officer, the bailiff, Nicholas Foreman – a man for whom I bear a most unchristian loathing, but who is now the very man to exert his authority upon the disorder brewing only yards away.

When we arrive back on the green, events have progressed more quickly than even I had feared, for someone has found a rope and Matthew Spencer – I cannot believe it of him – has made a noose and already has it around the wretched captive's neck, intending, I realise with horror, to drag him to the great oak in the centre of the green. But the bailiff and the beadle do their duty as Sir Philip's law enforcers and plunge into the mob, demanding loudly that the rope be removed.

Despite their hostility, and the excitement fuelling their rage, the protesters respond. Or, at least, when Master Webb brandishes his cudgel in their faces, they complain, but nonetheless retreat. But, when the bailiff draws his sword and, holding it aloft, runs forward, yelling at Matthew to let Jakys Coupere go, the crowd surges forward, encircling Matthew and his terrified captive, trying to defend them from Master Foreman's meddling.

But Nicholas Foreman is not a man to brook resistance, and Jack is sufficiently committed to support the man who recommended him to his post. They fight their way through the howling mob with such speed that, taking Matthew by surprise, Jack fells him

with a single truncheon blow, as Nicholas grabs hold of Jakys and drags him away. Jakys is weeping with relief, but it is not long before one form of capture is traded for another, as the beadle binds his hands and marches him away to the manor dungeons.

‘For his own protection,’ I overhear Jack say to the bailiff, and Master Foreman nods.

‘At least he’ll have some sort of trial,’ he says, ‘instead of being strung up from a tree.’

But incarceration is a miserable sort of protection, and I fear Jakys might be dead before the chance of any sort of trial, let alone a fair one.

The excitement over, the mob disperses. Matthew’s insensible body is hauled away by the bailiff’s henchmen and put into the village lockup for the night.

The three hunters ride all evening on a wave of adulation, in one or other of the village inns, drinking the ale that others eagerly buy for them. I perceive how self-assured they have become, so much so I hear them crowing about the high regard in which “everyone” now holds them. That might well be true of the villagers. But it is not Sir Philip’s view.



I thought Sir Philip might consider Matthew Spencer also warranted some sort of trial but, the next morning, he is released. I meet him on the village green and find him angry and frustrated.

‘That Jakys just got away with it,’ he says, rocking from foot to foot.

‘I am not sure of that,’ I say. ‘I imagine being confined in Sir Philip’s dungeons is punishment in itself.’

He grunts. ‘But it’s not enough! He must go before the King’s Assize. They’d find him guilty, right enough.’

I recoil at the prospect of Jakys facing King Edward’s justices. ‘Surely Jakys should be tried here in the manor court, the hallmote, for he has not committed any capital crime.’

Matthew shakes his head vehemently. ‘No!’ he cries, his eyes wild. ‘He’ll just get away with it then. It’s *burning* he deserves!’

I am shocked by the violence of his words. But it is clear I will not change Matthew’s mind today.

XIII.

Nobody else would want to enter Matthew Spencer's decrepit novel – it stinks – but it is all he has.

He has settled his two sons down to sleep – at least he still has them.

He sits down by the feeble fire. He wonders how he can keep them fed. Soon his desolation explodes once more into rage. Muttering, he says over and over to himself what he said to that smug priest: it is *burning* Jakys Coupere deserves.

Matthew does not understand – how could he? – why that villain should not suffer the same way his darlings had. He breaks into weeping as he thinks again of how they died.

He does not see his boys, crouching on the edge of the loft, wide-eyed and shivering, staring down at their mumbling father. But they do not go to comfort him. Instead they clasp each other and go back to hiding beneath the blanket.

When he goes outside to piss, Matthew finds a ragged piece of fustian tucked inside his breeches. He looks at it, confused a moment, but then remembers he had hold of Jakys's tunic when the beadle knocked him down. The tunic tore and Matthew still had a scrap of it clutched in his fist when he regained his senses. Without thinking, he stuffed it into his breeches.

Now he knows why he did.

His old Ma knew how to hurt people. When he was a lad, he watched her from his hiding place, listening to her mutterings. She filled a jar with pins and something her victim owned: a trinket or a scrap of clothing. Then she pissed into the jar, stoppered it and hid it beneath the hearth. What happened then? He is not quite sure, but thinks that, when the fire was lit and heated up the jar, the victim's skin would prick all over, his guts burn with searing pain.

It is not exactly what he wants, but it would be a start. Some witch-folk make wax dolls of their victims and stab them with pins. He wonders if he made a Jakys doll and threw it on the fire, would

the bastard burn? That would be more like it, but he would surely have to say some spell or incantation and Matthew does not know such words.

The jar of pins and fustian will have to do.

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XIV.

The Feast of Epiphany is usually a night for celebration, but this Twelfth Night there is no mumming, and the wassail is maudlin more than merry. Usually the younger lads play tricks upon their neighbours, but this year the pranks are scarcely jokes. A favourite is to steal clothes from the houses of the rich and use them to dress straw figures that they then set alight, though it defies understanding that, these days, anyone – even a child – should think setting a fire is any sort of jape.

A few young men – the sons of freemen, at liberty to leave without their lord's consent – have chosen this time of Epiphany to accept their lack of opportunity here in Swivelton and seek their fortunes in the towns. It is clear from the faces of the parents who come to church to pray for their children's future, they have let them go with relieved yet troubled hearts.

Those left behind – mostly the sons of villeins and cottars, bound to Sir Philip whether he wants them or not – rampage around the village, stealing and fighting. It is a curious situation: Sir Philip does not need or want the services of these lads, for he has hands aplenty to do his bidding, and yet he seems unwilling to let them go. Instead of giving them his blessing to seek work somewhere else, he simply sends his henchmen in to quell the riots.

Yet, far from subduing the unrest, they exacerbate it.

One particularly cold but bright afternoon, a noisy mob of rioters – having drunk themselves into an inebriated frenzy inside the alehouse that has replaced Jakys Coupere's as the most popular and disreputable in Swivelton – emerges blinking from the cave-like gloom onto the village green. They find themselves face-to-face with a cordon of Sir Philip's henchmen, well armed and protected with leather breastplates. The young men's mood at once turns ugly, and the swords and cudgels of the lord's men are met with knives and axes and even pitchforks. Hand-to-hand fighting ensues, right there in the centre of the village –

only yards from Saint Nicholas's and my parsonage – and I watch with mounting horror as several of the lads are cut down.

There is a moment when, so fearful am I of the jeopardy in which these young members of my flock have found themselves, I take the golden crucifix from the altar and, holding it aloft, run into their midst, pleading for the fighting to end. But it is a foolish thing to do, and I am berated by none other than the bailiff, Nicholas Foreman, who seems to take excessive pleasure in responding to his lord's demand for action and is always in the van of any fighting, riding his black mare like a destrier, as if he is engaging battle against the Scots.

'You've no business here, priest!' he says, yelling at me from the saddle. 'Go back to your church and pray for these wretches' benighted souls.' And, to my shame, I take him at his word and begin my retreat.

But, moments later, young Martin Rolfe, his hood awry, his fair hair a wild and clammy tangle, is advancing upon the bailiff, screaming obscenities and wielding a pitchfork, attempting an assault against Master Foreman's unprotected leg. Martin's drunkenness undoubtedly has dulled his reactions, whereas Nicholas is fully alert to danger and wheels the mare away, so the pitchfork tines miss their mark but graze the horse's flank. The mare whinnies in distress and the bailiff, furious for his beloved horse, wheels again and, catching Martin off his guard, runs him through the belly with his sword.

I cry out against the slaughter, but Master Foreman comes at me again and leans down from his saddle until his face is uncomfortably close to mine.

'I told you to go pray, priest,' he says, his tone uncompromising.

'But Martin was just a *lad*,' I say, my voice a feeble whine.

He shakes his head. 'Not a lad, priest, but a troublemaker. Sir Philip's lost patience with these curs.' He sits upright once more. 'I counsel you again, Master William, not to meddle. Do the job you're paid to do, and leave us to ours.' Then he rides away to rejoin the affray, skirting the bleeding corpse that had been Martin Rolfe.

Master Foreman thinks my job is to spend hours upon my knees before the altar. I do not believe it is all God requires of me but, for now at least, what else can I do but pray for the violence to end, the wounded to be healed and the souls of the dead – of poor young Martin Rolfe – to be shown mercy?

Yet it is mercy here on Earth that is required. Are not Saint Matthew's words quite clear?

Blessed are the merciful...

...if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father shall

also forgive you. But if you do not forgive..., then neither shall your Father...

I am certain neither Sir Philip nor Nicholas Foreman would recognise how much the blessed Saint Matthew's words might apply to them, or how far they might benefit from heeding them. But I do not have the courage to draw them to their attention.



My mind and heart are still distracted, my eyes closed, deep in conversation with the Lord, when I sense someone approaching from behind. Opening my eyes, I look around to find the considerable frame of Agatha, the blacksmith's wife, looming over me, a stern, yet distraught, expression upon her face. Mistress Strong is as burly as her husband, with brawny arms and a mass of black wiry hair that refuses to be tamed by the smoke-blackened wimple she daily struggles to keep pinned around her head. Yet, despite her ill-favoured appearance, she is a good woman, her heart as large as her girth, ever willing to speak out against injustice, sometimes to the discomfiture of her tough, but less assertive, husband.

I rise to my feet, a little unsteady, for the stone steps are hard upon the knees. Mistress Strong is not alone.

'Mistress Strong,' I say, venturing a smile to soften the flinty glare. 'How can I help?'

'Oh, Master William,' she says, her sternness moderating into anxiety. 'You 'ave to do something.'

Her companions, a crowd of other goodwives from the village, cry 'Speak for us, Master William!' and 'Save our lads from slaughter!' in a cacophony that echoes around the empty nave.

I raise my hands to call for quiet. Then, addressing myself to Agatha, I ask what they want of me.

'It can't go on, Master William,' says Agatha, 'this violence 'gainst our lads. That bailiff murdered young Martin. An' it could've been my Ralph. You can be sure the bailiff was doing Sir Philip's bidding. He's got it in for them!'

I nod but say nothing, wanting to choose my words carefully.

'You know Martin weren't a bad lad, Master William,' Agatha goes on, 'none of them are.' I nod again, though I am not convinced all of these women's sons are beyond reproach. 'It's lack of work's the problem,' she continues. 'No work, no money – an' our lord and

master don't do nothing to help. And then the fire, and nothing done about that rogue Jakys Coupere.'

I know what these goodwives want of me – to intercede with Sir Philip on their behalf, to plead that poverty, not depravity, as well as a strong sense of injustice, is driving the hostility of Swivelton's youth, and to beg him to offer them relief instead of violence.

Yet I cannot give them what they ask of me. I will not admit it to these women, but I am afraid of Sir Philip le Strange. My previous conversation with him took my breath away: he displayed such prodigious indifference to his tenants' plight, so wholly inaccurate a perception of their needs. I was in no position then to rebut his views, and nothing has changed to make me think he will be any more likely to listen to me now.

Yet how can I refuse to help these despairing mothers?

'I cannot promise to persuade Sir Philip,' I say at length. 'He did not listen to me last time, though I will try once more.' I smile reassuringly, but my stomach is churning with unease.

The women thank me and leave, and I fall to my knees once more and pray. 'If, Lord, this is what you require of me, give me strength of purpose and powers of persuasion.'

I also pray for the resolve to commit myself fully to my responsibilities as priest of this manor, and rector of all three churches on Sir Philip's Southamptonshire estates, the curates in the other churches under my direction. I was so full of enthusiasm for the task the bishop and his lordship gave me, but I often feel myself inadequate to the undertaking. I can trot out the usual words of comfort to my troubled parishioners, and I can put calluses on my knees in relentless offerings of prayer for their deliverance, but I seem unable to bring them practical respite from the misfortunes that beset them.

I should seek advice from the archdeacon – even from the bishop himself – but I am fearful of exposing my inadequacies before such devout and virtuous men.

In truth, I am a poor specimen of the priesthood. Not only because of my inability to give my flock the comfort I so want to provide. Almost more serious a flaw to my efficacy as a servant of the Church is my powerlessness – perhaps my unwillingness – to put the vision of Alys Dyer from my mind.

Yet I know well the truth of what the vision means.

*You have heard that it used to be said, do not commit adultery.
But I say to you, whoever looks on a woman to lust after her, has
already committed adultery with her in his heart.*



Despite my reluctance, I do what the village mothers asked of me and apply once more for an audience with Sir Philip. This time I will simply beg him to desist from attacking the rioters, appeal to his sense of Christian compassion and charity.

It is, predictably, a hopeless, not to say foolhardy, entreaty.

Philip laughs at me. ‘What a fool you are, priest. You speak to me of compassion? Why should I have compassion for these miscreants, these idlers, these...these *dogs*?’

I wish he would not use that word. And when he begins to splutter, rage rapidly overwhelming his dignity, the image of a maddened dog head slips unbidden into my mind, threatening to distract me from my purpose.

‘My lord, they’re not idle through choice,’ I say. ‘They want to work—’

He holds up his hand. ‘No more!’ he says, shouting. ‘I demand order on my manor, not this continual mayhem. And how I achieve it is my affair, not yours. You, priest, are risking your benefice with your persistent defending of these troublemakers. You’d be better employed getting them to see the error of their ways. That is my advice to you. Else,’ he waves his hand at me in a gesture of dismissal, ‘I might have to ask the Bishop to find me a more cooperative replacement.’

It is clear I have shot my last bolt with Sir Philip: I will not be able to approach him again, for he values neither my opinions nor my abilities. If I want to help the villagers, I shall have to find another way.

As a first step, I summon a gathering of the mothers, to ask them to counsel their husbands and instruct their sons, to persuade them of the necessity to stop the rioting. Agatha Strong agrees, but the other women are not convinced.

‘My man don’t listen to what I say,’ says one.

‘Instruct my lad!’ says another, casting her eyes to heaven. ‘He’s as likely to give me a thrashing as do what I say. And his Da’ll join in.’

I sigh and Mistress Strong seems to notice my despondency.

‘Come on, sisters, don’t let Master William think us unhelpful. He’s done his best with his lordship, but Sir Philip just ain’t listening. So now we have to help ourselves.’

The other women grumble, saying there is nothing they can do, but I follow Agatha’s lead. ‘I fear, if we do not, there will only be more deaths, for Sir Philip will not rest until this disorder is suppressed.’

Agatha hurrahs my words but her friends are unimpressed. When they leave me once more to my prayers, I am sure they think me ineffectual – a man with God-given authority over good and evil, yet who cannot subdue a man whose authority is merely worldly.

But they do not understand how limited my powers really are.

XV.

Despite the uproar Jakys Coupere's capture caused just after Christmas, it is not until April that Sir Philip decides to summon a special court to try his case. Vast as it is, the manor's great hall is thronged with the villagers come to witness Jakys' demise. The crowd is buzzing with anticipation, for there seems to be a general assumption – though I think it most unjust – that Jakys will be tried for murder and found guilty. The man is undoubtedly a rogue, and perhaps a negligent one, but hardly more so than many of those here calling for his neck. And I know what many do not, that Jakys Coupere is now a pathetic shade of a man.

I have ventured often into the dungeons to offer him what comfort I could. He was in bad enough health when he first came here but before long he began to complain of feeling worse.

'I dunno what's amiss, Master William,' he said, groaning and clutching at his belly. 'Sometimes I get such a pain in my gut – fierce, fiery pain.'

'It is hardly surprising, Jakys,' I said. 'This place is enough to make the strongest man sick.'

He nodded. 'An' I get such a tingling in my legs,' he went on, 'it drives me mad. All this sitting around...' He tried to grin.

I agreed. 'Inevitable, I am afraid. But, for the pain, I will ask Sybil Kemp for a herbal remedy.'

Jakys shrugged, but nodded his thanks.

A few days before the court, Jakys was in a dismal mood. Sybil's remedy brought him no relief – indeed now he clutched his belly all the time. He also greatly feared the outcome of his trial, believing the whole village to be against him.

'They think it's all my doing. All of it! But there were none of that rioting before the fire, were there, Master William?'

‘Resentment against Sir Philip had been simmering a while,’ I said. ‘The fire, and his lordship’s refusal to help those affected by it, simply brought the simmer to a boil.’

He shrugged. ‘Maybe...’

‘Anyway, I do not believe Sir Philip shares the general view.’

Jakys grunted and added his spittle to the rank and filthy straw. ‘That bastard! He’ll not shift to save my neck.’

But neither the villagers’ nor Sir Philip’s opinions are tested. For, when the gaoler goes down to bring Jakys up from the dungeons, the hapless prisoner has a seizure on the threshold of his cell, and moments later he is dead, or so the gaoler says when, red-faced, he rushes into the hall and reports the matter to the waiting throng.

I think I see relief upon Sir Philip’s face, though he is forced to pacify the crowd whose craving for justice for their lost relatives has thus been thwarted.

For myself, I am sad Jakys died without receiving final absolution. After all the time we have spent together, I thought I would be with him on his last journey, but it was not to be.

XVI.

Squatting by his feeble fire, Matthew Spencer mutters to himself, then gets up and takes a restless turn about the meagre cottage. His sons keep out of his way, preferring to avoid their father’s wild eyes and flailing arms.

He wanted his day in court: to see Jakys Coupere stand quaking before his accusers and hear him declared guilty. He wanted him to hang at least – though hanging was better than he deserved. But now he had escaped justice – escaped vengeance.

And was it his own fault? Was it the witch bottle that did it? He squats down again and, wrapping his arms around his head, rocks back and forth, keening. He had not planned to kill, just make him suffer, like he made his beloved Anne.

He lets out such a wail of grief his two boys look out from their hiding place and stare down at him, unpitied and longing to be gone.

XVII.

The death of Martin Rolfe has had two effects. First, widespread disbelief that Sir Philip would go so far as to murder a child – for he was only fourteen – though many say it was the bailiff who committed the murder, rather than his lordship. Second, outrage at the refusal of their lord to help his tenants in their time of need was made yet worse by his decision to attack them.

As a consequence, not only young men are taking to the streets in strident protest against their lord, but their fathers too, and even mothers. This time, though, Sir Philip keeps his henchmen inside the manor house, thinking perhaps, if he ignores it, the dissent will fade away. I suppose he is doing what I asked of him, but if he – and indeed I – think it a good strategy, we are wrong, for the rioters take it as another sign of his indifference, and their anger is overlaid with desperation.

As the thieving and brawling continue, Sir Philip apparently loses patience and sends his men to rampage around the village, determined to catch the troublemakers. They make two arrests but, instead of being thrown into the dungeons to await a trial, the two young men are hanged.

The villagers are beside themselves with rage, believing the bailiff has contrived the hangings – with Sir Philip's, albeit perhaps reluctant, permission. But the shock of the executions, and the fear they were presumably intended to spawn, curb the rioting entirely – or almost.

XVIII.

It is a fine, warm summer morning, early, when I am still reciting the daily offices. I always savour the silence of the church in the early morning – it is the part of prayer I love the best.

I am still on my knees, eyes closed, when I hear the church door open and the sound of agitated women advancing down the nave. I sigh, thinking it is the council of mothers come to make more demands of me but, when I rise, I find the bailiff's wife, Beatrice, before me, with her daughter Matilda. Beatrice's back is stiff, her face purple, her fashionably excessive headdress wobbling. She might have been a comely maiden but, in her middle age, Mistress Foreman's girth has spread, and her cheeks are puffed out, giving her the appearance of a bloated sow, though I try to push the undignified image from my mind.

‘Mistress Foreman,’ I say, keeping my voice low, in respect for where we are.

But Mistress Foreman makes no attempt to match her tone to mine: her words burst out in a reverberating torrent of fury and frustration.

Matilda offers a striking contrast to her mother: small and slight, she turns her pale face towards the floor. It seems she has been the victim of an intimate attack, yet she is refusing to say who did it, and it is her mother’s demand that I should extract the information from her daughter, so the culprit can be brought to justice.

‘Master Foreman is outraged,’ says Beatrice, her headdress quivering precariously, ‘and declares he’ll not rest until he finds who did this heinous crime.’

I sigh deeply. ‘Mistress Foreman, what your daughter tells me in confession remains between her and me and, of course, Almighty God. I could not divulge the name to you or Master Foreman, even if Matilda disclosed it to me.’

The headdress wobbles again and beads of perspiration break out on Beatrice’s forehead. ‘Then you must simply *speak* to her, Master William!’ she cries. ‘Speak to her sternly!’

I shrug. It makes little practical difference whether I “speak” to Matilda or hear her confession. Nonetheless, I turn to the girl and speak in a gentle tone that I hope will encourage her from her reticence.

‘If we speak of it alone, Matilda, will you tell me the name of your attacker?’

She shakes her head. ‘I cannot, Master William,’ she says, tears welling in her already red-rimmed eyes, ‘for I truly don’t know who it was.’

I have neither the authority nor the inclination to speak any more “sternly”, and Mistress Foreman flounces away, dragging her unfortunate daughter behind her.

XIX.

The old crone’s hovel is low and dark and gives off strange and noxious smells. Alys Dyer hovers on the threshold. Maybe she should leave. But then Sybil Kemp is at the door and grasps her arm. She bids Alys enter, pulling her inside.

The old hag cocks her head and strokes her stubbled chin. She grins.

‘You got an itch down there for a man who don’t want you?’

She cackles, poking with her blackened fingers at the front of Alys's skirt.

Feeling a blush rise to her cheeks, Alys denies the allegation. But in her unease she lets slip her lover's hesitation.

Sybil crows and rubs her bony hands together. 'Priest, is he?' Alys gasps and, once more not thinking, asks how it is she knows.

Sybil Kemp just taps her nose. Then, humming to herself, she takes jars down from a shelf and puts a pinch of this, a scoop of that into a mortar, and crushes it all to powder with a dirty pestle. Then she tips the greyish dust into a little vial and bids Alys put it in his wine.

Alys Dyer takes the vial but her lips are pursed. She had hoped there might just be a charm she could recite.

The old woman shakes her head. 'Potion's best. Goes straight to the heart of the matter, if you get my meaning. '

Alys nods then and hands Sybil a coin. This was not what she had wanted but she would surely find a way.

XX.

With the summer sun, I have thrown myself anew into the management of my glebe, encouraging my flock to attend their church more often, and officiating at those happy events that punctuate the church's year: betrothals, marriages and baptisms. Though it is true a baby's birth is, these days, a rather less untarnished blessing than once it was, as parents worry they will not be able to feed the new arrival once he has progressed beyond his mother's milk.

Yet, while I am merrily involving myself in the joys that love has brought the members of my flock, I am wilfully ignoring its place in my own life. Time and time again I tell myself God's love is all I need, all I desire. But, at night, as I lay alone in the great bed that was – incongruously – provided in the solar of my parsonage, I am powerless to prevent the face of Alys Dyer floating before my eyes. In daytime I am busy enough to keep her from my mind, but, at night, she is ever by my side, touching me lightly on my cheek and breathing her soft,

sweet breath into my ear. Sometimes I awake in an agony of loneliness, my body aching – and worse – with suppressed desire.

Every morning I kneel at my *prie-dieu* to beg God to take this temptation from me, but He is, as always, quite silent on the matter of Mistress Dyer.

But I cannot deny the truth.

The works of the flesh are manifest: fornication, uncleanness, unchastity, lechery...

And I also know the answer to my weakness.

Be guided by the Spirit, and you will not succumb to your lustful desires. For what our human nature wants is opposed to what the Spirit wants, and what the Spirit wants is opposed to what our human nature wants...

One morning after Mass, Alys asks to speak to me in private. I have heard she has a suitor, a wealthy freeman from a nearby manor, and, assuming she wants to tell me of her plans to marry, I prevaricate, unsure I can bear such a conversation. But her eyes grow large and pleading and I cannot deny her.

We sit together in the parsonage hall, she enveloped in a fine green woollen cloak with a hood that almost wholly obscures her face. She keeps her face averted as she begins to speak, and I feel both a tightening in my breast and a dryness in my throat, as I wait to hear what painful words my beloved Alys has to say to me.

‘Dear William,’ she says, and my heart leaps unbidden at the endearment, ‘I think you may know what I’ve come to tell you.’

I incline my head, my heart thumping, but then she shakes her head.

‘And yet, I suspect you really do *not* know.’

I am puzzled at this seeming riddle but gesture to her to continue.

She smiles a little. ‘I’ve a great dilemma, William. For I’m being courted by a gentleman, a man who can offer me a comfortable life – and he’s offered to accept Emma and Francis into his household too.’

I nod once again, my throat constricted with the certainty I have lost her to her generous-hearted suitor.

But Alys shakes her head again. ‘And yet,’ she says once more, ‘I’ve not accepted my suitor’s troth.’ She pauses, and looks boldly into my eyes. ‘And why do you think that is, dear William?’

I take a great gulp of air. ‘I do not know,’ I say, my voice a whisper.

Alys fixes her soft grey eyes on mine and sighs. ‘Because it’s you I love,’ she says, but then purses her lips. ‘And I can scarce believe I’ve had to be so forthright as to *say* it!’

I feel light-headed at her declaration and yet ashamed she thinks I have forced her into making it. Yet still I stay silent, while she closes her eyes for a moment, then opens them and sighs again.

‘So what’s to be done? I’ve declared my love for you, William, but you’ve given me no answer. What am I to think? I’m in a difficult position – I cannot simply remain a widow, you know that well enough. And if you will not – cannot – marry me, what am I to do?’ She throws her hands into the air with such passion that her hood flies backwards and flops down around her neck, revealing her pale russet hair wonderfully unbraided and awry.

This fervour is a side of Alys I have not seen before: I always thought her modest of demeanour. To come and speak to me so boldly is a remarkable thing for her to do, and I am so astonished by it, I cannot think how to answer.

Impatient, I suppose, Alys clicks her tongue and dives into her scrip.

‘I’d like a drink,’ she says, holding up a flask. ‘It’s wine. Walter so loved his wine but I can’t drink it on my own.’

I am not sure I should be drinking wine at this time of the day, but I smile agreement and get up to fetch the cups.

‘No, William, dear,’ she says, ‘you sit down. I’ll go.’

She skips off to the buttery with her flask. I can hear her opening the cupboard to take out the cups and then pouring out the wine. When she comes back, her eyes are shining. She smiles.

‘I hope you like it. It was Walter’s favourite.’

As I sip the wine, I feel a little giddy but, knowing I must answer her, compose myself and find a few, albeit inadequate, words.

‘I too am in a difficult position.’ It sounds like prevarication. ‘I do not know how to resolve the conflict in my heart.’

Alys smiles, and nods as if she understands. Putting out her hand, she rests it lightly upon mine.

‘You’re a good priest, William, but nonetheless a man...’

She lifts up her hand and places it against my chest, ‘...with all that any man requires.’

I gently take her hand away and shake my head. ‘But I’m avowed to chastity, and you know the Church demands it of me.’

She then puts down her cup and, placing her hands chastely in her lap, casts down her eyes upon them.

‘But few agree to that demand in practice,’ she says, her voice a whisper, ‘or so I understand.’

‘Then they are willing to lead their loved ones into sin,’ I say, a dizzy righteousness swelling in my breast.

Alys lifts up her face to me again. ‘William, you well know my devotion to the Lord, and the obedience I bear towards our Mother Church. But, in this matter, I believe the Church is wrong. For God made us, man and woman, to live and love together, and – should He will it – to multiply according to His holy laws. This surely is His plan for us?’

‘Priests are different–’ I begin, but Alys leans forward and places two fingers on my lips.

She shakes her head. ‘Priests are *men*. Why should they think themselves not subject to God’s holy plan?’

I am dumbfounded by her words. That anyone should harbour thoughts so contrary to the teaching of the Church is bewildering enough, but that a woman such as Alys should do so seems almost beyond belief. I might – I surely should – think her words profane, but I know her devoutness and obedience to the Church are as strong as those of any member of my flock. Yet she is asking me to set aside what I have learned, what I have struggled to hold fast to all this past year.

‘You are forcing me to choose,’ I say, ‘between my calling and–’

‘No, Will, I am not. I’d not ask you – I have no right – to surrender your vocation, but merely to permit yourself to be the man I know you want to be, the man whom I so love and who, I know, loves me.’

Her words send my head spinning, and I leap suddenly to my feet. ‘I must pray.’

Alys springs up too, and grasps me by the arm. ‘No, Will!’ she cries. ‘You’ve prayed enough. You know your heart already.’

I shake my head, still fighting what I know is true, but Alys wraps her arms around me, and lays her head against my chest. ‘My love,’ she says.

I did not know until that moment that the top of Alys’s lovely russet head stands just below my chin. I lower my face and knowing, once I have done so, the bond between us will be sealed, I kiss her hair.

The bond is sealed, but the nature of it remains unsettled. I feel yet unable to make a public denial of the rules of clergy by taking Alys as my wife, and yet I cannot shake off the conviction that I am sinning – and forcing her to sin – when we share my bed without the sanctity of marriage. Alys, for her part, is patiently risking her mortal soul for the sake of our nights of joyful – and guilty – pleasure.

...once more amidst the numberless naked bodies, skin glistening, mouths rent wide in soundless wailing... And hot... Pressed among a host of men and women, slick flesh against slick flesh... Squeezed tight together like skinned rabbits inside a gigantic cauldron... Flames licking at the sides... Blood-red demons... So hot, so very hot...

A voice cries ‘Will!’ I know it! Please, God, don’t let her be here too. I try to turn my head, pressed on all sides by the others. I can see her! Her lovely body crushed on every side by those of other men... Her sweet face twisted in her agony and shame... Forgive me...

To my dishonour, and despite the terror of my dreams, I allow the months to pass and my desire for Alys, and hers for me, to be expressed entirely in secret. Alys spends only her nights by my side, for, as a widow with no children of her own or other relatives, her husband’s house is hers, and she has no cause to leave it – except, as she has said, inasmuch as it is considered improper for a woman to live without a man.

We – or I at least – let the situation drift.

1302

XXI.

A man has come to Swivelton, saying he is Walter Dyer’s younger brother, Hubert, and

claiming Alys's house and land as his. Shocked, Alys goes to Sir Philip to plead her case, saying her husband never told her he had a brother, or any relatives at all. His lordship's only option is to hold a special court to hear the young man's claim and, unhappily for Alys, some of the elders called to bear witness to the rival petitions declare they recognise the man. His claim is therefore just.

Poor Alys is in an agony of anxiety, for now she has no home, neither for herself nor the Hammelee children I pressed upon her a year ago. The court and her formerly unheard of brother-in-law give her just one week to remove her belongings, and find another place to live. I think this heartless, and say so to the beadle.

'I agree with you, Master William,' Jack says, 'but this Hubert Dyer thinks it generous to give his sister-in-law a week to shift.' He shakes his head. 'It don't seem right to me, pushing Mistress Dyer out of a house that's been rightfully hers for more than a year. How come this Hubert didn't claim the house when first his brother died?'

'Indeed,' I say, 'but nobody has questioned him about it.'

'And no one will,' says the beadle. 'The bailiff'd rather have a man on the property than a woman.'

I know he is right, and it seems fruitless to question the decision, so I leave it, and turn my attention to helping Alys. Not that it takes much effort to determine what I have to do.

When Alys moves into the parsonage, together with the Hammelee children, I make it known in the village she has come to be my housekeeper. I have struggled along with a run of somewhat inadequate servants and cooks, and it is plausible enough that I should choose to bring order to my household while helping Mistress Dyer out of her predicament. Though those who know about her wealthy suitor – and there are certainly some who do – must wonder why the respectable widow of a village elder would choose servitude for a priest over the comfortable life of a freeman's wife.

But if they do, none say so.



We walk together up on Portesdon, among the abundant flowers and myriad butterflies of early summer. As we walk, skylarks rise suddenly from their nests, climbing high into the air, warbling their lovely lilting song, and occasionally a partridge squawks from its hiding place beneath the spiny blackthorn. In the distance – not, in truth, so very far away, though I have never stood beside it – shimmers the green-blue sea, and often we see ships out there, their swelling sails gleaming white in the sun, as they ride the gently bucking waves carrying

them to France, or Spain, or maybe even farther beyond.

How this place uplifts my soul and, for a while at least, my joy diverts me from my worldly concerns. And at last I have someone to share my joy, for Alys's eyes are shining at the sights and sounds she has not seen before.

But she can open my eyes too.

Although the hangings quelled the unrest, nothing has actually changed in Swivelton – in truth, it is worse. The rich are even richer, the poor yet more impoverished. And I still struggle to bring *practical* respite to my suffering flock, imagining all I can do is pray, and offer them the chance of Paradise once their onerous time in this world is done.

But Alys shows me that I could do more.

She and I are lying face-to-face together on our bed, clad chastely, I in my shirt, she in a chemise – though I reach out often to trace the outline of her lovely body with my fingers, and she responds with a modest smile and a quivering sigh. We often spend an hour or so this way, talking quietly together, sharing our thoughts and our daily concerns, before I can resist no longer and slide her shift above her slender thighs and stroke her belly's smooth, cool skin.

'Well, if you really must *do* something,' she says, tilting her head, 'why not take on more labourers to farm the glebe? Spread the work more thinly.'

I nod. 'Why did I not think of it myself? Maybe I could persuade other landowners to do the same?'

She smiles. 'And why not share out what we have, the crops from your fields, the food from our garden? Surely we have much more than we need?'

I cannot help but grin. It is such a simple idea, I feel almost ashamed I had not considered it already. For, as so often, I know there are words in the scriptures to guide me.

'Do you know Proverbs twenty-two?' I say, but Alys shrugs. 'Let me see, how does it go?'

I think a moment and then recite.

He that has a generous eye shall be blessed, for he shares his bread with the poor.

Alys smiles again and nods.

‘Then there is Saint Luke,’ I say, happy at last to have an answer to my worries. ‘I know this well.’

He said unto them, he who has two coats, let him give to him who has none; and he that has food, let him do likewise.

‘Well, there you are,’ says Alys, ‘it must be right.’

Dear Alys! Once more she is a candle lighting up my gloom.

As I lay there full of admiration for her wisdom, it occurs to me I could even *give back* some of what the villagers give me for, with all the tithes and offerings they are obliged to donate, I do indeed have far more than I need. But I do not say this now to Alys. Instead I lift her lovely body up a little and turn it so that she is lying on her back. Then, straddling her, I draw up my shirt and bend down to kiss her mouth.



After the stresses and strains of harvest, I decide to give Alys a little break from the hectic activity by taking her to visit my sister and her family. She is nervous but I assure her Marjory will welcome her, whether we are wed or not.

Marjory is, as I predicted, delighted to discover I have at last heeded her advice. She grins broadly as we stand before her, nodding her approval, then clasps Alys to her breast and calls her “sister”.

I have not been to Sussex for nearly two years, since the visit I made soon after the alehouse fire. I did not know it then but Marjory was carrying a child, and it is only now I discover that her longing for a daughter, after four boys, was fulfilled. And here she is: the most delightful, spirited little Agnes.

In truth I never took much interest in Marjory’s children until they were grown enough to hold a conversation, but I find this tiny child, who can walk and almost talk, the most enchanting of people.

Alys can barely keep her eyes off the little girl. ‘Oh, Will, how much I wish I could give you a child like her.’

I take her chin in my hand and lower my lips to hers. ‘My love,’ I say, dropping tender kisses on her mouth. ‘I too wish it, but perhaps it is not God’s will.’

She nods, and leans her cheek against my breast. ‘Perhaps,’ she says, in a whisper, ‘it’s the penance He’s demanding for our sin?’

1305

XXII.

Four years ago Sir Philip's brutal response to his tenants' desperate rebellion subdued the worst of it – for a while at least. But now a fresh group of youths – still children when their older brothers caused the earlier mayhem – are beginning to run a little wilder, brawling nightly in the alehouses and, more gravely, stealing from their neighbours, both food to feed their families and anything that can be sold for cash.

For months, this bad behaviour has been ignored, or at least endured, even by the victims of the thefts, as the understandable acts of those who have nothing, or little, to lose. But this forbearance is not to last, for the troublemakers, instead of accepting their good fortune at being excused their offences, appear to take it as a sign they can continue without scruple.

Yet lawlessness is not, it seems, a problem only for our little Southamptonshire manor. For it is abroad that King Edward has finally lost patience with the violence and public disorder that have been plaguing towns and villages alike throughout the whole of England. He has decided to take steps to combat what he considers a growing canker in his realm: specially appointed commissions are to travel the length and breadth of the country, tasked with hearing whatever cases of disorder the local authorities care to bring before them.

The enmity between Sir Philip and myself has eased a little in the past few years, though I still cannot like the man – for all I grieve at my lack of Christian feeling for him. Yet I am grateful that, despite his relentless unconcern for his tenants' plight, he does at least, from time to time, include me among his counsellors.

'So what's your opinion,' says Sir Philip, 'of the King's new trailbaston commissions? Should we bring our little band of miscreants before them?'

I fear the punishments meted out by these commissioners might be even harsher than those Sir Philip's stringent edicts might impose. But I agree something must be done to suppress what is as yet a moderate level of disorder, before it intensifies into something harder to control.

'What I fail to understand,' he continues, sounding less condemnatory than I believe he truly feels, 'is why these young louts' parents do nothing to chastise them, to curb their wild behaviour.'

‘I can only imagine, my lord,’ I say, ‘they have too little time to spare’, which I suspect is only half the truth. I think – but would not say so here – perhaps the other half lies in those parents’ likely *approval* of their sons’ behaviour, especially when it brings a little extra food to fill their families’ empty bellies, or money to buy some, otherwise unaffordable, necessity.

‘Then it is up to you,’ he says, warming to his theme. ‘It is surely your job to chastise these members of your flock, these *little lambs*,’ he grins at this improbable epithet, ‘and turn them from their wickedness and back to the light of innocence?’

I find his unaccustomed piety nauseating and yet I am affronted by his implicit accusation.

‘It has ever been my wish, my lord,’ I say, cautioning myself to keep my tone both steady and respectful, ‘and indeed my express intent, to guide all my flock towards the path of righteousness. And I have always considered it my special duty to devote myself to the young, most especially those already straying from the path.’

Sir Philip grins, but he is not laughing. ‘It would seem, then, your efforts are bearing little fruit,’ he says then smirks. ‘Perhaps, these days, your devotions are elsewhere?’

I cannot know, but guess at once, to what he is referring, and I am sure my face betrays the guilt I have not yet overcome.

‘Ha ha!’ he says, truly laughing now. ‘I see I’ve hit the mark. The lovely Mistress Dyer is proving a distraction to our chaste and honest priest.’ As he says it, he looks around at his assembled henchmen, seeking their approval of his taunt.

I lower my eyes, mortified that, once again, Sir Philip has made me look a fool among his cronies and, now, an outed fool, exposed as a fornicator and transgressor of the Church’s laws. To respond with any dignity to his lordship’s scandalous – yet so uncomfortably accurate – allegation, I will myself to keep my tremulous voice both low and calm.

‘Mistress Dyer is my housekeeper,’ I say, quietly but most firmly, although my cheeks are aflame and beads of perspiration are breaking out upon my brow. Then, trying to ignore the derisive sniggers bursting forth from both Sir Philip and his other so-called counsellors, I look up. ‘But if your lordship considers me remiss in my duties, then I humbly beg your pardon, and offer assurance I shall henceforth be more heedful of the failings of my flock.’

After that humiliating encounter, I return to my nightly vigils in the alehouses, seeking out the young men at the centre of the troubles. I am not surprised when Sir Philip invites the trailbaston to Swivelton. He intends to present as many of the troublemakers as he – or Nicholas Foreman – can round up.

I have just a month to convince them to give up their rioting and avoid a trial that likely would go ill for them.

XXIII.

When I asked some of the wealthier landowners to join me in sharing out the fieldwork and labouring more widely, a few agreed to try it, though the wealthiest show no interest in helping their poor neighbours. Instead they make their problems worse, by persuading those who struggle with their meagre holdings to give them up entirely in exchange for cash. The amount they give is paltry but, for men who do not know from day to day how they will feed their families, perhaps it seems a king's ransom, well worth the sacrifice of unproductive land. It is only when the cash is spent, and they have nothing left except the sweat of their own brow and those of their wives and children, that they realise how bad a bargain it truly was.



The warm, dry summers of recent years continued the run of good harvests. But, this year, the sun's heat is not warm but oppressive, the hay crop has failed and beasts are dying in the fields from lack of fodder. Tempers are fraying and, despite my efforts with the village youths, the very heat seems to spur them to even more ill-tempered brawling. The trailbaston commission is due to arrive in a few days, but I have failed to keep all the lads out of the bailiff's clutches. Four of them, arrested on the village green one particularly hot and humid evening, were thrown into the dungeons to await the king's commission.

On the day the commissioners arrive, there is a fifth prisoner in the dungeons, put there just the day before by Nicholas Foreman himself. When the hapless young man is brought up into the manor hall, along with the four other lads, the bailiff's face cracks into the broadest yet grimmest of grins.

Sir Philip's hall is overflowing again as, it seems, the whole village has turned out to witness the judgements to be passed. The atmosphere in the room is as heated as the air outside, but opinion is divided on what should happen to the accused. A considerable body of people, mostly the lads' relatives, are, unsurprisingly, adamant they are merely mischievous, deserving nothing more than a reprimand and perhaps a day in the stocks. But there is another group, just as sizeable, made up largely, I suppose, of victims of their "mischief" – shopkeepers and tradesmen, and some of the better-off villeins – who have

suffered not only thefts but also violence against their property and sometimes against their persons.

All five lads are accused of theft, of arson and of assaults upon some of the most important men in Swivelton. Witnesses queue up to testify against them, and many others – the young men’s supporters – then put the case for their defence. The justices hear them all with gravity and patience, and then give Nicholas Foreman leave to make an additional charge against Robert Payne.

At the front of the watching crowd, Beatrice Foreman and Matilda sit together on a small bench, while Nicholas, clad in his rich black cotehardie, his legs planted wide, confident before the justices’ bench, levels his accusation against young Robert.

‘This...this cur,’ he cries, ‘defiled my daughter’s innocent body, brought dishonour to me and to my name.’

His claim causes considerable commotion among the listening crowd who, it seems, knew nothing of it until now. But I recall the meeting years ago when Matilda’s mother brought her before me, expecting me to uncover the culprit’s name. Had poor Matilda offered up the name at last? Or had her father bullied the knowledge from her, so he could obtain the retribution he yet so craved?

The chief commissioner fixes him with a hawk like stare.

‘But, Master Foreman,’ he says, ‘you say this offence was committed four years ago. Yet, as I understand it, your daughter did not raise the hue and cry against her attacker, and neither, I believe, did you?’

Nicholas, deflated by the admonition, grimly shakes his head.

‘So the proper legal procedure was not followed,’ continues the judge, casting weary sidelong glances at his fellows on the bench, who nod and shrug. ‘Moreover, you appear to bring no evidence against the accused, merely an assertion of his guilt. How can we even begin to try this case?’

The bailiff’s face flushes red and then darkens to purple as the futility of his belated allegation dawns on him. Beatrice cries out and looks about to swoon, and Matilda’s eyes fly open and I can see her lips trembling, but then she lowers her gaze and her shoulders heave.

Robert Payne, however, looks relieved. Yet I fear he has no reason for sanguinity. For it is not rape these commissioners have come to try but crimes of public disorder – violence, arson and theft. Of course rape is violence, but it is commonplace for courts to dismiss such cases as incapable of proof, merely the word of victim against perpetrator and, besides, the

passage of time since her assault and failure to follow the rules have robbed Matilda, and her father, of any chance of redress.

But if the justices are indifferent to Matilda's defilement, they seem very keen to bring in guilty verdicts on the five young men before them, to make an example of them – to justify the commission the king has granted them.

The lads' supporters at first are dazed at the sentence the commissioners impose, but rapidly their stupor turns to wrath and Sir Philip's hall becomes a place of bedlam. Robert's mother collapses and is comforted by Agatha Strong, who cradles her in her beefy arms and dabs at her blanching cheeks with a corner of her cloak. The other mothers wail in despair, and their fathers shout their protests and appeal for mercy.

The aggrieved witnesses, on the other hand, are grinning and patting each other on the back. Nicholas Foreman, despite his demeaning failure to obtain reprisal for Matilda's shame, joins them in rejoicing that the disorder in the village will now be at an end.

Though in truth I doubt that will be the consequence of throttling five lads to death.

The commissioners stand firm and yield neither to the protests nor the pleas, but I then make a supplication of my own, to which they do concede, permitting the lads a night to bid farewell to their families and make their confessions to their priest, before they face the gallows.



The lads are held in separate cells in the manor's gloomy dungeon, and I spend an hour or more with each of them, relieving their families for a while from the heart-breaking exchange of memories and expressions of anguish and affection.

But I sit out the night with Robert Payne, for his father died a year ago and his mother is too frail and too distraught to make more than one brief visit. Agatha Strong comes with her, supporting her as she keens and cries and, when Mistress Payne can no longer bear the torment, helps her to climb the narrow steps back up into the daylight.

I squat down close to Robert on the dank earth floor, trying to ignore the scrabbling and squeaking only feet away. The cell is distractingly cold, despite the warmth of the evening air above, and I wrap the two blankets I have brought with me around Robert's shaking shoulders. I have brought a lantern too and, although its light is feeble, we can at least each see the other's face.

Robert's chin is trembling, his eyes fixed and staring. He seems to be finding it hard to breathe. For a while I say nothing, waiting for him to be calm enough to speak. When at length he does, his voice is a strangled whisper.

'I'm so afraid, Master William, of what's to come, in the morning, and the time beyond.'

I nod and put my hand on his shoulder. 'Perhaps talking – and prayer – will allay your fears?'

He shrugs, then claws at his cheeks and rocks back and forth, moaning. Then, after a seeming struggle with himself, he turns to me.

'When we robbed the rich,' he says, 'it seemed fair enough. They 'ad plenty and we got nothing. Why shouldn't they share it?'

I resist voicing platitudes about the sins of stealing and envy – they will not help Robert now. Besides, despite myself, I have always had some sympathy with his cause.

'Then when we brought Jakys Coupere back,' he goes on, 'everyone said how fine we were for hunting down the rogue and returning him for trial. For once in our lives, we felt good about ourselves.'

I recall how high a wave of admiration those three lads rode. Their former low opinion of themselves was transformed into a confidence at times so overweening that, for a while, they believed the whole village was behind them in any havoc they cared to commit. As the violence worsened, and Robert's friend Martin was slain by the bailiff, they did appear to have the village on their side. But it did not last, and Robert's next act of criminality – though I did not know then the act was his – was his assault on Matilda Foreman.

And it is Matilda's rape that is weighing down his soul. If the king's commissioners cared little about Matilda's plight, Robert cares a great deal.

'I don't know why we did it,' he says. 'We were drunk, on ale and excitement. We wanted to get back at her father for murdering Martin, but it weren't right to take it out on her.'

He cries and I put my arm around his shoulder, urging him to confess, so God may see the true contrition in his heart.

'But, Master William, I've no time left. How can I make penance for my sins when in a few hours I'll be twitching at the end of a rope?'

I shake my head. 'Fear not, Robert, we will pray together. As long as you are truly contrite, I can absolve you of your sins, and you can be reconciled with God.'

I take from my scrip some passages I have copied from the Bible, translated in English, for just such situations as this. ‘Listen, Robert, to these words from the Blessed Saint Luke.’

I say unto you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner that repents, than over ninety and nine just persons who need no repentance.

‘Do you understand?’

He nods, but his entire body is trembling and I know it is not from cold. I rest my back against the hard stone wall and offer him the cradle of my arms and breast – the comfort a father might have given – and Robert, now a frightened child, leans against me, sobbing. We sit thus for a long while, and the floor’s dampness seeps into my cassock and chills my bones. But, as long as Robert needs my comfort, I will provide it.

At length his sobbing ceases and he sits up again. ‘Can we pray now, Master William?’

By the time the gaoler comes to take Robert up into the light, he is calm – or at least no longer weeping. I have anointed him with holy oil, to give him strength for his last journey on Earth and his passage into the next world, and he has knelt in prayer with me for most of the night. Robert is as ready for his death as I believe he would ever be. I walk with him to the gallows and confer on him, and on the other lads, a final benediction.

But I cannot abide to watch them die and walk away, leaving the great crowd that has gathered in the manor’s bailey to bear witness to their executions.

1310

XXIV.

The winter has been so cold, even the river in the valley froze, and the children enjoyed their icy games. But, pretty as it looks outside, with the white mantle on the fields and icicles hanging from every branch, it has been hard to find much pleasure in it.

For it has been months since my beloved Alys first fell sick. Day in, day out, she heaves and retches, and, despite my efforts to keep the parsonage warm, she complains daily of a freezing chill inside her.

This should be a happy time, the time we have both prayed for. But the first thrilling realisation that God had freed Alys from her burden has since been overwhelmed by this new – much more arduous – penance.

How many days of joy did we have? The morning Alys announced her wonderful condition, I took her in my arms and whirled her round, us both laughing with delight that God had at last relented. But were there perhaps three days then before the sickness started?

I was alarmed but Alys just patted my arm and kissed my cheek. ‘Every woman is sick at first,’ she said. ‘It’ll pass.’

But it has not passed. Yet five months have.

Emma has sought advice from other women in the village and has come home with recipes for cures. We pick mint and balm and camomile from the garden, and make them into medicaments and potions for Alys. But nothing works. Emma is grief-stricken that Alys – whom she and her brother Francis have gladly come to call their mother – gains no strength from her ministrations, or from mine, either corporeal or spiritual.

One evening, when we are sitting alone together by the fire, Emma begins to weep.

‘I am as distressed as you,’ I say, taking her hand. ‘We must be strong.’

She shakes her head. ‘It’s not that,’ she says. ‘I’m so afraid...’

I squeeze her hand. ‘Tell me, child.’

She hesitates for long moments, sobbing. And when she looks up at me, her cheeks glisten in the firelight.

‘I’m so afraid,’ she says again, ‘that she has tried to force God’s hand—’

‘Whatever do you mean?’

Her shoulders shake. ‘She paid a visit to Sybil Kemp,’ she says in a whisper. ‘Months ago – soon after Michaelmas.’

I want to cry out, but hold back for Emma’s sake.

‘Maybe God’s angry with her?’ she says.

‘And with me...’ I say, a painful tightness in my chest. Suddenly, the room seems to be spinning, and I find it hard to catch my breath.

XXV.

In the late evening gloom, Matthew Spencer crouches by the simple grave, holding his head between his hands and keening quietly, rocking back and forth. The grave lies beneath an ancient yew, whose dense dark leaves drip onto his hoodless head. But he does not seem to notice.

In the grave lie the few remains of his wife and little daughter, burned to death so many years ago. Matthew comes here often, to sit with them. He is now quite alone, for his two sons fled the manor as soon as they were grown, pitilessly abandoning their obstinately vengeful father to shift for himself as best he could.

But he is not shifting well at all.

He lost his crumbling hovel in October, when the river rose sharply one night and swept it all away. For a while he slept inside the church, and the priest gave him a little pottage and bread each day. But Matthew has no work: no one will employ him, for he is careless, and also these days a thief, so they do not trust him with their precious crops or beasts.

So now damp hedgerows and rain-filled ditches are his home and he eats only what he can scavenge from the dank woods and frozen fields. The only one in Swivelton who cares is Master William, but the unhappy wretch spurns his help, deeming him the root cause of his ruin.

XXVI.

I cannot believe that Alys might not recover, our longed-for child lost. Leaving her to Emma's devoted care, I spend hours on my knees in the icy chancel, begging God to spare her.

I fear greatly that, despite the absolution I would give her if the time comes for her to leave this world, she will be yet a sinner in God's eyes because of the immoral life I compelled her to accept when I resisted making her my wife. As I kneel before the altar, the chill creeping up from the stone floor and into my bones, I try to stop asking God for

remedies, and just listen for His answers. And, at length, whether it is His answer or my own, I realise there is no reason for maintaining my resistance, if indeed there ever was.

I read again Saint Paul's first letter to the men of Corinth.

Let each man have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. Let the husband render unto the wife her due, and the wife unto the husband.



Emma helps me to dress Alys in her finest gown and best woollen cloak, and I carry my bride up to the church, where Master Benedict, the curate from another of the churches in my benefice, awaits us.

It is already dusk. It has been a fine spring day, but the sun's gentle warmth has gone and the air is cool. At the porch, I lower Alys gently to her feet and wrap my arm firmly around her waist to help her stand. I can feel her trembling against me.

'Can you manage this, Alys dear?' I say.

She nods, a smile quivering on her lips. 'I want to, Will, and so I can. Just hold me fast.'

Master Benedict is much older than I, a man of modest education, whose grasp of the complexities of the priestly vocation seems limited. But he understands the Church's basic sacraments, and holy matrimony is a service he has performed so many times I daresay he could recite it in his sleep.

As I respond in the recitation of my vows, I am forced to wipe my sleeve across my face, as tears well up and threaten to spill and tumble down my cheeks.

'For richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health...' I say, and take a deep breath before continuing, '...till death us do part, if holy church ordains it...'

Master Benedict then turns to Alys and bids her give her vows, and my heart aches at how strong a voice she manages to draw from her feeble throat as she declares her commitment to me. I tremble with remorse at my failure to give my beloved Alys what she has so long deserved of me.

Then the curate blesses our rings and I push mine gently onto Alys's finger, and she, quivering with the effort, takes my hand and eases her ring onto my finger, repeating the words in a quiet yet clear voice. When she has finished, she raises her shining face to mine and I return her smile with a grateful kiss.



Sir Philip is not entirely sanguine about my marriage. When news of it reaches his ears – though I am perplexed at how he heard of it, for only Emma and Francis were privy to my plans – he summons me to the manor house.

‘So, Master William,’ he says, stroking his greying beard in a languorous fashion and slouching in his oaken chair. ‘You’ve decided at last to make an honest woman of the lovely Mistress Dyer?’

I flush at his insinuation. ‘I should have done so years ago, my lord.’

‘Ha!’ he bays, and seems to bare his teeth in a mocking grimace. ‘Yet instead you’ve dithered around until the poor cow is near ready to meet her Maker.’

I gulp at his bluntness. ‘As I am sure you know, my lord, it is against the Church’s teaching for priests to marry—’

‘And also for them to fornicate,’ he says, his eyes laughing at my discomfiture. ‘You were willing enough to screw the lady, but not to marry her.’

I squirm with humiliation but, for once, this audience with Sir Philip is private so, at least, I am spared the greater shame of being laughed at by his cronies.

‘So you’re hoping, I suppose,’ he continues, ‘I’ll turn a blind eye to your defiance of the Church, that I’ll not tell the Bishop of your immoral behaviour, and allow you to continue in your benefice as if you were a pure unblemished saint?’

Once more I stand before this dog head, with the prospect that my career is at an end. Yet I have given twelve years of loyal service to Sir Philip, and had not thought he would much care whether or not I kept strictly to the Church’s laws. And, of course, I am right. Nothing gives Sir Philip le Strange more pleasure than to watch his subordinates writhe and grovel, and this audience with me is a game, allowing him to taunt a man whose livelihood he has the power to ruin, a man who – I am not unwilling to assert – is his superior in learning, and certainly in compassion.

I blanch at Sir Philip’s words, and cannot reply.

‘Lost for words, William?’ he says and, throwing his head back, laughs heartily. But then he shakes his head. ‘Fear not. May God give you both contentment for however long you have left together.’



Alys leaves me on Midsummer's Day, taking with her the child got after all, perhaps, *without* God's grace. So I am alone again, but I will not seek another wife, nor even any companion. Alys was my only love – and my greatest hope is that we will meet again in Paradise. But, in the long dark hours of my lonely nights, I wrestle with my fear that God will refuse to receive either of us into Paradise, but force us to wander endlessly in Purgatory, each searching for the other.

1313

XXVII.

I am approaching the church, preparing to read the daily office for Lauds. My heart is always lifted by this quiet early morning time, when the birds – blackbird and robin, finch and thrush – begin to sing their lovely songs and memories of Alys flood joyfully into my head.

But my peace and happiness are distracted when I see movement, a figure darting low between the graves. I step off the church path and strike out across the grass to find out who is prowling here so early in the morning.

The skulking man does not notice my approach but, in the far corner of the churchyard, he stops and crouches down beside the grave beneath the dripping yew. Only when I am standing right beside him does he look up with a jolt and stare at me with dim distracted eyes.

'Matthew?' I say, leaning forward to touch him lightly on the shoulder. 'It has been a year or more.'

Matthew flinches and draws back, scowling, but I am not deterred.

'Do you need my help, Matthew?'

Matthew then cackles recognition and hawks some spittle towards my feet.

'You? Help me?' he says, his voice hoarse and unsteady. 'You let him get away! Denied me my chance to get revenge... To get justice for them...' He points trembling fingers at the grave.

Then, hauling himself to his feet, he staggers towards me, his arms flailing.

I back away a little, but hold out my hand to the despairing man.

‘Matthew,’ I say, keeping my voice low and calm, ‘it was not my will Jakys died before the trial, but God’s. It is not for us to judge him now.’

Matthew bats away my proffered hand. ‘But we could’ve brought him to justice,’ he cries, ‘if you hadn’t interfered, you meddling priest!’

Then he fumbles beneath his filthy shirt and, with surprising energy, lunges forward, a rusty knife grasped in his hand. But I step back again and Matthew, stumbling against the yew’s protruding roots, falls headlong onto the soft, mossy earth and the knife flies from his fingers.

I go forward yet again, intending to retrieve the knife, but Matthew snarls at me to keep away. And, this time, I accept his rebuff.

‘I’ll keep you in my prayers,’ I say and, as Matthew scrambles to his feet once more and reels away, turn back towards the church.



Ever since I lost my beloved Alys, I have been to Sussex often, to see my sister of course but, much more, to spend time with my enchanting niece.

Curiously, Agnes looks much like Alys, with her pale auburn hair, her freckled cheeks and sweet snub nose. Also like Alys, she has an inner beauty that gives her strength and character. Marjory is sure that, in time, she will make some prosperous yeoman a capable and cherished wife. But Agnes has ambitions for more than being the wife of a farmer, however prosperous he may be. I think I alone am privy to her girlish dreams and, though I fear she will be disappointed, I cannot but admire the spirit that inspires her.

Marjory holds to the view that gardens are meant for growing food but, over the many years since I started cultivating my own parsonage garden, I have encouraged her to follow my example and set aside a small corner of her abundant vegetable plot for flowers, grown simply for their beauty and their scent. And it is there where Agnes and I often sit and talk, on a seat under the shade of a young pear tree.

Marjory’s flower garden is tiny but, in its creation, she followed the ideas of the *hortus conclusus* – the pleasure garden – that, as children, we discovered together in the gardening book our father brought home from his travels. A few years later, when Marjory at length succumbed to my encouragement, I brought *The Nature of Growing Things* back to Sussex and together we pored over the pages, deciding what flowers she would grow, whether she would have a little lawn, and what tree she should grow for shade.

Young Agnes knows about books.

She has been working at the manor house since she was ten, as occasional maid to Lady Margaret, and has seen their books, for Sir Giles is a well-read man and a great collector.

Agnes's eyes are shining as she tells me what she has seen. 'Lady Margaret shows me her books,' she says. 'She says some people can read them. Which is obvious, really, else why'd they bother having them?'

I shrug. 'Well, some people, mostly very rich men, do have books just because they are beautiful, or because they make them seem more educated than they really are.' I grin to myself: Sir Philip is undoubtedly one of those sorts of men. But then I smile at Agnes. 'I have a special book,' I say. 'Has your mother ever told you of it?' She shakes her head. 'It was our father's and it is about gardening.'

Agnes pulls a face. 'That doesn't sound very exciting. Lady Margaret's got books with stories in them, about knights and ladies – she says they're called romances – and she's read bits of them to me. That's the kind of book I want to read.'

I laugh. 'Well, I do not have any books like that,' I say, and Agnes pouts again. 'But I could show you the gardening book, if you like.'

Despite her lack of interest, she does want to see my book, and when I bring it some weeks later, she sits mesmerised with it on her lap, tracing the words with her fingertips.

'I want to learn to read,' she says.

I shake my head. 'But how, Agnes? You must know that few village folk ever learn to read, and those who do are lads, destined to train for clerical work, like your brother Edwin.'

'But that's not fair!' she cries, and stamps her foot soundlessly on the soft green turf. 'I'll become a nun, then. *They* learn to read.'

'Oh, no, Agnes,' I say, mildly alarmed at her fervour. 'The contemplative life would not suit you at all.'

She frowns. 'Why not? What's wrong with me?'

I pat her arm. 'Nothing, Agnes, nothing at all. I just think you would not like the restrictions of a convent. Your life would be ordered, your day measured out by prayer. Your reading would be only the Bible and religious tracts. Certainly no romances!'

She pouts again and, unusually, is silent for several moments, staring into her lap. Then she looks up, and her face is all smiles again.

‘Well,’ she says, ‘*you* can teach me to read, Uncle William. You can teach me to read your boring old gardening book.’

1314

XXVIII.

‘Ah, William,’ says Sir Philip, as I join him for his daily stroll around the manor’s gardens. He no longer insists on berating me from his lofty oaken throne.

We make slow progress on our walk. Surprisingly, though, he does not mind the rain, provided it is not so heavy that it penetrates his thickest cloak. He takes his stroll at an unhurried pace, on stiffening legs, stopping every so often to frown and comment on the somewhat unkempt state of the garden. I still find myself from time to time absurdly wondering if he will lift a leg and water a bush, and wish I could stop myself having such outlandish thoughts.

He stops when we reach the herbarium and, unbalancing slightly as he raises his arm, he points with his stick at the waterlogged beds. I nod and frown at the unhappy plants, especially those – thyme, hyssop, lavender – whose origins I know are mostly drier, warmer climes than here.

‘Will it ever cease, this rain?’ he says. ‘What thinks the man of God?’

‘I suppose it must stop one day,’ I say, though I have no reason to believe it will.

Sir Philip chuckles grimly. ‘I hear it is divine vengeance. God’s retribution for men’s sins.’

I shrug. ‘I have heard that too, but I do not believe it. God loves all of his creation – why would he want to destroy it?’

Sir Philip shakes his head and sighs. ‘You have not changed, William, have you? You are still the naïve young priest who came here, what was it, fifteen years ago? You were full of compassion for the miscreants and idlers who were causing mayhem on my manor. I never understood what it was you saw in them.’

‘We are all God’s children, my lord, and compassion must be given to all,’ I say. ‘I believed that then, and I believe it now. It is true that accidents of birth give each of us

different chances in God's world, but the disparities between us are of no import to God – He loves all of us equally.'

Sir Philip stares at me, astonished. 'So do you not accept the certitude of the three orders of men? The hierarchy that God Himself ordained for our benefit – those of us who fight, those like you who pray, and the rest that labour?'

I smile secretly to myself, thinking that the only fighting Sir Philip has ever done is against his tenants – to my knowledge he has never fought in the king's army, though he has financed the military exploits of a couple of his more bellicose retainers. Nonetheless, I nod.

'Of course I acknowledge our society is structured in that way,' I say, thinking that to acknowledge something is not the same as accepting it, 'but that does not mean I consider it just, nor even truly the will of God.'

Sir Philip chuckles again, though this time his eyes are smiling. 'I warrant you have never said that to the Bishop.'

I grin. 'No, nor will I.' And I realise for the first time how imprudent I have been to give voice to my private views in Sir Philip's company. But it seems he recognises, and discounts, my indiscretion.

'And neither will I,' he says, and actually places his hand upon my arm. 'You are a good man, William Boneyt – a fool at times, but a good man for all that. I have always known it.'

I am both surprised and moved by Sir Philip's tribute, yet sufficiently attentive to accept it with good grace, for his lordship gives praise rarely. But, in truth, I feel this moment may mark a turning point in our association.



I never cease to wonder at the spirit and resilience of my fellow men and women. Some survive simply because their will to live is so strong they refuse to give up in any circumstances, however difficult. Some endure because they know it is their duty to care for their families or their neighbours, come what may. Yet others are resigned because they believe, whatever life is like in this world, they can look forward to the next one, where all their troubles will be at an end.

Agatha Strong is old now – one of the oldest people in the village – and a widow, but she is well named, for she is still stout of spirit and ever ready to speak her mind. She has not seen her son Ralph since he left Swivelton more than ten years ago, ostensibly to look for work. Agatha is sad to be alone, to have no grandchildren to dandle on her knee, but she

refuses to be bowed down. A few days ago, her cottage roof gave way under the deluge of unremitting rain and she was forced to leave her home of forty years. She shelters in the church now, but is too proud to take the food I offer unless, as she puts it, she can earn it. I suggest she helps Emma in my kitchen, and both Emma and Agatha are glad of the proposal.

Agatha sings as she sits by the fire, stirring a veritable cauldron of pottage that will feed the needy when they come to the parsonage door, their hands holding out expectant bowls. Seeing her, you might think Agatha the happiest of women and perhaps she is, for she is one who draws comfort from knowing that whatever happens is the will of God.

‘He knows what He’s doing,’ she says. ‘An’ if He thinks time’s come for this world to end, well, so be it, for what comes after’ll be a better one. Isn’t that right, Master William?’ She wave her stirring spoon in the air.

I cannot disagree, for that is what I preach.

‘It is true,’ I say, ‘that death is but the beginning of the great journey all of us must make, when our souls and bodies are separated until the time arrives when all the dead are raised up again to live in Paradise forever.’

But I have no wish to dampen Agatha’s spirits, so I refrain from saying how very long I believe it will surely be before that glorious resurrection comes.



2: Famine

Agnes Tyler

1314

I.

It just rains and rains and rains.

Last month it was so wet, most of the hay was too spoiled to cut and was left in the fields to rot. The little bit that could take the scythe was carted to the barns still damp. So it's rotting too.

We've scarcely seen the sun since then, despite it being summer. Sometimes it peeks out from the clouds, but it's always a pale, feeble-looking thing, never warm enough to dry out the boggy fields.

It's making Pa ill humoured. In the spring, each time he tried to plough his fields, the horses sank up to their knees and the ploughshare got so claggy it wouldn't cut a proper furrow. And now the hay crop's mostly lost and he's fearful the wheat and rye and barley will be the same. Like last year. For *still* the fields are sodden underfoot, the poor crops standing in a chilly bog, scarcely growing. Yet Pa and my brothers still go out to try and save them being choked by thistles, docks and nettles.

What a sight they are, when they stumble home each evening, filthy and bad-tempered. Ma bids me help my brothers take off their boots and muddy clothes, while she attends to Pa, but they're tetchy and ungrateful.

Ma mutters and shakes her head. 'It's as well you've got clean shirts and hose,' she says. 'Many of our neighbours'll not be as blessed.'

Pa nods. 'You're right, my love,' he says, turning to my brothers. 'Be grateful we can afford more than one shirt and,' he smiles at Ma, 'that your Ma's so willing to keep washing them.'

Ma pulls a weak grin. 'It's not washing them that's hard, but drying.' She waves her hand towards the wooden rack standing before the fire, hung with three shirts and three pairs of

hose, not yet dried out after yesterday's laundering. I fetch three more shirts from the chest, all very old and threadbare – rags, really – but clean enough, and dry, and even John grins at me as he pulls his over his head.

‘The rain can't last forever,’ he says, but Pa rakes his fingers through his hair.

‘It's not so many years ago,’ he says, ‘do you remember, Marjory, the year after Edwin was born? *That* year was wet and so were the next two.’

Ma nods, her face a pout. She's twisting the edge of her apron between her fingers.

‘I remember,’ continues Pa, ‘my Da telling me of a run of bad harvests, when he were about your age.’ He nods towards Alan. ‘*Three years*’ bad harvests, they had.’ Pa raises his eyebrows and shakes his head. ‘That was from the rain. “Years without a summer”, Da said they were.’

‘Sounds like this year,’ says Alan, pulling a long face.

John kicks at the leg of the table. ‘So what'll we do if it rains for three years this time?’

Pa shrugs. ‘What they did then – what we did last year. Keep enough grain back for next year's seed, and take damn good care of whatever's left.’

I'm watching Ma: she's sort of hunched down by the fire, like she's wrapping herself up against the cold. Yet it's warm in here. Her face is ruddy enough, from the heat of the fire, but it's lost its usual glow. She's not the old happy Ma she used to be.

‘But what's certain,’ Pa's saying, ‘is, if this harvest's as bad as the last, everyone in Broadham'll have to live with a lot less bread, and...’ he looks at Alan and John, ‘...no ale at all.’

John's eyes fly open wide. ‘No ale?’ he says, squawking like a crow.

Pa shakes his head. ‘Barley can't be wasted making ale. Every last grain must be used for bread. It'll be water to drink from now on.’ He gives a grim smile.

I want to smile too, for John's face has crumpled like a little lad's who's lost his favourite toy. But then he jumps up so suddenly the stool flips over, landing with a crack against the hearthstones, and has to be rescued from the fire.

‘I'm not drinking water!’ he squawks again. Then he heaves open the swollen door and dives out into the night.

II.

On cool, damp summer evenings, you can see the young men of Broadham gathered on the green. They are there with two intents: the first to drink as much as they can afford, the second to catch a girl and take her somewhere quiet. For some of the lads – the younger ones – the first is an essential preparation for the second. For others, such as the carpenter – not only older, but so handsome and well made that most village girls would happily go with him – ale is never needed for a satisfactory evening.

John Tyler, one of the younger lads, is fretting, retelling his father's assertion that soon there will be no ale. The others scoff at such a notion. And when John airs his father's further claim that soon they will all be drinking water, the scoffers nearly choke on the contents of their mazers. Everyone knows that water makes you sick.

John thinks it will not do much for his courage either. The carpenter, Tom Wodeman, grins and slaps him on the back. 'You just need more practice, lad!'

But John hates having to do it in a barn. On summer nights, you might expect to take your girl into the fields, but these days the grass is always sodden, and even the keenest girls refuse to get their kirtles wet. 'I'm always scared someone'll come and catch us at it – puts me right off.'

But Tom Wodeman shakes his head and laughs. 'Nah, the risk of getting caught is more than half the fun!'

III.

The rest of us are in our beds by the time John comes back. I'm still awake and hear him climbing up the ladder, swearing under his breath as he misses his footing on the broken middle rung. I suppose he's been enjoying a last few cups of ale while it's still being brewed. I daresay Ma'll make him drink that horrible cabbage juice and vinegar concoction in the morning. Poor John!

Poor *all* of us.



The reeve, Ralph Bordeman, keeps putting off the start of this year's harvest, hoping the rain'll stop and the sun shine long enough to ripen and dry out the grain. But yesterday evening he sent a message round saying it had to be tomorrow, rain or no.

Pa always rises first. This morning, I hear him open the door and go outside, and it isn't long before he's back. He climbs part way up the ladder.

'Come on, you three, up,' he says. 'Rain's stopped. We need to go and get on with it.'

Even John takes notice and rolls off the pallet he shares with Alan. Pulling on his shirt and hose, he slides down the ladder in a show of vigour, landing with a thump next to Ma and making her squeal.

'Will you *not* do that,' she cries. 'I'll manage the day a great deal better without you making me jump out of my skin.'

After Alan's gone down too, I throw off my blanket and pull my kirtle over my head. I climb carefully down the ladder and, taking my place on the bench, gnaw at the hard bread Ma gives me, my eyes still half closed with sleep.

It's still quite dark, with no sign yet of any sun rising from behind the trees, when the five of us troop out towards the fields. We squelch along the muddy track, taking care not to miss our footing and slip into a rain-filled rut. As we walk, our neighbours join us, family by family, carrying their scythes and sickles.

'Bit too early, this,' says one, grinning, and everyone chuckles.

'Who thinks the crop's likely already ruined?' says another, and is met with a deal of grunting.

'Some was still standing a few days ago,' says Pa. 'Perhaps that'll at least be worth the cutting.'

We arrive at the first field and stand waiting for the hayward to organise us into teams. Everyone looks melancholy, staring across great swathes of flattened wheat. Ma shakes her head at the prospect of the coming day.

'Back-breaking,' she says, 'bent over all day long, your sickle arm so sore and heavy, you think it's going to drop off.'

Cutting is a woman's job here in Broadham, though Pa says it's not so on every manor. The men gather up the cut stalks into sheaves and bind them together with a straw rope into hefty bundles. Usually the bundles are stacked upright and left in the field to dry for a few days before being carted off to the barns.

'But, this year,' says Pa, 'I think they'll cart them at once and spread them out in the barns to dry.'

'Will that work?' I say, remembering what happened last year.

He shrugs. 'We have to try. There's little enough to harvest. We can't risk losing *any* of it.'

The hayward puts me to helping Ma. It's hard enough to cut the stalks of the standing crop, but the flattened ones must be held upright and that's the job I do. When at last the cry goes up for dinner, I ease myself upright, stretching my arms up over my head, and rocking from side to side to ease the stiffness in my back.

'I feel like an old woman,' I say to Ma.

She grins and nods, wiping her sleeve across her glistening red face. 'You'll get used to it.'

I take my straw hat from my head. Despite the lack of sun, I'm hot. My long hair, pinned up into a coil around my head to keep it from my eyes, is damp, and my chemise is sticking to my skin. I'm looking forward to a good long drink. We trudge across the muddy field to a stand of trees bordering its edge, where trestles are laid out with food: a small coarse loaf each, hunks of cheese, even a few slices of roasted meat, as well as some weak ale to slake our thirst. I think again of Pa's prediction and wonder whether next year we'll all be drinking water.

Everyone's trying to find somewhere to sit to eat their dinner. Some don't seem to mind sitting on the grass, but Ma and me don't want to get our kirtles wet. We walk along the line of trees until we find a fallen trunk just big enough for us both to perch. Soon other women join us and find the ground beneath the trees is drier than the grass. After a while, my brothers come over too, with some of the other lads. Flopping down upon the ground, they wolf down their bread and cheese, and refill their cups with ale from a flagon they've brought with them.

Among them is Thomas Wodeman. I only know him by sight and by his reputation. My friend Mariota once blushed scarlet when she told me what she'd heard about him. I put my hat back on, so I can sneak a peek in his direction from underneath the brim. He's years

older than me, of course – he'd think me still a child – but I must admit he's very handsome, with his thick black hair and smiling eyes. He seems to laugh a lot, and to keep my brothers and his other friends amused with whatever tales he's telling them.

I find myself wishing I could hear as well as see him.

IV.

When the sun does consent to steal from behind the clouds, it's such a rare event I rush outside to soak up its feeble warmth, leaning against a bright patch of wall and basking like an early morning adder. Eyes closed, I turn my face towards the sun's pale glow, searching for its comfort.

It's strange how, before, the weather always simply happened – sometimes it rained and sometimes it was sunny, sometimes we couldn't get warm enough no matter how many clothes we wore and sometimes we longed to strip them off and plunge into the village pond (though of course us girls'd never actually do it). But, whatever weather came, it just *was*. If the summer heat became a burden, by the autumn the cooling rain would come again and we'd have relief. And, if it rained too long and hard, we only had to be a little patient, and the sun would shine once more and the puddles dry out.

But, since it started, this never-stopping rain, it's not only the older folk who talk endlessly about it. For the rain's denying us younger ones our usual summer evening fun – playing hide-and-seek and hoodman-blind in the meadows, climbing trees in the woods, and scrumping cherries in the orchards. Or even just sitting with our friends, watching the village lads wrestle and race around the village green, then, when they turn to their horrid cock-fighting games, running off to play somewhere on our own. But none of this is any fun when the tracks are ankle deep in mud, the grass soaks through your kirtle and the air's so chill you can hardly go outside without a cloak.

Pa's roaming around the house again, not saying much, his face long and grey. It's hardly surprising, when the harvest was worse even than he'd feared.

'All the barns together – the manor's and all the farmers' – aren't enough,' he says, 'to feed the village till next harvest. And there's none left over for us to sell.'

He goes over and puts his arm around Ma's shoulder. 'We must make what little we have last longer. Everyone must.'

'At least we still have onions and cabbages in the yard,' I say, 'and the hens—'

But Ma shakes her head. 'I doubt they'll live much longer if this rain doesn't stop.' She sighs and slumps down on a stool by the fire. 'Hens don't like the wet.'

Ma sends me to collect the eggs, saying she's too busy. But I know that's not the reason. It used to be the highlight of Ma's day to walk down through her thriving garden to the hen house Pa built just this side of the orchard, calling to the silly birds and fussing over them like children. But now she's afraid of what she'll find.

Ma's garden is in better shape than many of the fields, for our croft's on higher ground and Uncle William told me our soil's the sort that lets rain drain away. Which I suppose is why our vegetables still grow, despite the lack of sun. But the hens' run is quite different – a horrible claggy bog made worse by their paddling and pecking.

This morning, as I get close, I can't hear their usual squawking as they lay, or even the gentle clucking as they root around for grains and grubs. I run the last few yards, my heart beating with alarm. Then I see the run is empty. But it isn't silent after all: a low warbling's coming from inside the house. Squelching across the boggy run, I lift the henhouse lid.

Yesterday, Ma had six left of the two dozen hens she had at the start of summer, for we'd eaten two and sold the rest to needy neighbours. But now just four are huddled, shivering, on the perch just underneath the roof, and their warbling is not the usual bubble of contentment but more an unhappy whimper. And who could blame them, for on the floor beneath them lie their two sisters – dead and cold, their pretty russet feathers dull and dirty. As I lift the bodies out, I'm sure the others are protesting.

I check the egg box and am not surprised to find it empty. I trudge back to the house with my sad burden, and Ma simply nods when I hand them to her.

'It's the wet,' she says, wiping her sleeve across her face. 'Hens can't abide it.'

1315

V.

A young woman kneels before the oak chest that contains her adopted father's few possessions. Her brother, still a boy, crouches at her side, and her father's ancient servant, frail now in her body if

not her mind, sits on her dead employer's favoured chair, her bony frame well cushioned and supported.

The girl, Emma Beneyt – born Hammelee – hesitates to unclasp the lock and lift the lid. But her brother, Francis, urges her on, knowing they soon must leave their home, once his lordship finds another priest.

She nods but tears glisten on her eyelashes. She brushes them away against her sleeve, protesting at the unfairness of it all, but her brother shrugs. 'We've no choice, Em. That madman saw to that.'

His sister feels sorry for the man. 'You heard Father's last words to us, Frankie, "forgive him, for he knew not what he did".' But the boy feels no pity, and doubts he can ever forgive the man for murdering his second father.

Emma, despite her grief, still urges compassion. 'We must uphold the example Father taught us.' And the old servant, Agatha Strong, gives a little cough and declares heartfelt agreement.

Delving deep inside the chest, Emma heaves out a large linen-wrapped parcel. Her brother does not recognise it. While she lays the parcel on the floor and carefully unfolds the fabric, he brings a candle closer. And, when the light illuminates the cover of a book, Agatha lets out a cheerful cry. 'I know that. How the master loved that book!'

Then Emma knows it too, recalling her father, William, taking it to show his little niece, who was itching to learn to read. She raises her eyebrows and grins. But then she claps her hand to her mouth. 'Oh, my goodness, Francie, we haven't yet told Agnes, nor her mother – Father's own sister! How *could* we have forgotten!'

Grief is writ large upon her face once more, but Francis, maybe a boy yet more pragmatic, reminds her of the horrors that have so suddenly overwhelmed their once happy lives: their father's murder, the inquest and the burial, and the most recent affront, eviction from their home.

VI.

Ma and me are weeding in the garden when two people – a young woman and a boy about my age – ride into our yard.

Ma looks up at the sound of horses' hooves, then back at me, her face confused. 'I wonder who they can be?'

We never have visits from people we don't know. Ma wipes her muddy hands on her apron and bids me do the same, as we hurry to the yard.

'Welcome!' says Ma to the woman, and smiles. 'Are you lost, or seeking shelter?'

The young woman climbs down stiffly from the palfrey and shakes her head.

'Neither, Mistress Tyler,' she says. 'My brother Francis and me have come on purpose to bring you news.' She looks down at her feet for a moment. 'Sad news, I'm afraid.'

Ma insists on Uncle William's adopted children staying two nights with us. We spend long hours talking and sharing memories of the man we all loved so well.

We haven't seen him for two years – he said he couldn't leave his flock in such difficult times – but I always thought I'd see him again. I'm trying to be brave for Ma – she's distraught he should've died the way he did.

'Such a waste of a good man,' she says, wiping her eyes on the edge of her apron.

Emma nods. 'The coroner said it was a dreadful mischance. Pa tried to help poor Matthew, but the man had lost his wits entirely and didn't understand what he was doing.'

The day my new cousins return home to Swivelton, Emma fetches her battered scrip – I recognise it as Uncle's – and reaches inside.

'I've something for you, Agnes,' she says, pulling out a linen-wrapped parcel I've seen before.

Many times Uncle William brought *The Nature of Growing Things* to show me, and together we spent some merry hours, me trying to learn to read. But then the rains began to fall, and kept on falling, and my beloved teacher didn't come again.

I take the book carefully onto my lap, open it and run my fingers along the precious words. Tears come. 'Can I really have it?' I say to Emma.

She nods. 'I know Father would've wanted it. Besides, Frankie and me can't read.'

I'm overwhelmed to have this precious book entrusted to my charge.

Later, I open the book with great care. I haven't read anything for a long while and find it hard to make out the words. Ma comes over and stands at my shoulder.

'Can you read it at all, Ma?'

She shakes her head. 'I've forgotten it all. But it's not so long ago for you.'

I shrug. 'It's still hard.'

Ma sits down by my side. 'Try. Just a little bit.'

I choose a passage I think I've read before.

The garden should be planted with fragrant herbs, rue, sage and fennel, parsley, marjoram and mint, and all kinds of flowers, violet and lily, rose and gillyflower...

I stumble a little over some of the words but Ma smiles. 'Well done,' she says. 'Keep trying.'

But it's hard to imagine I'll ever have time now to read the book properly. Anyway, what does it matter? If I ever thought reading could make a difference to my life – and I did once – I know now I was a fool. My life's surely going to be just like Ma's – in a few years I'll marry some villein's son and become a farming wife, weeding the garden and feeding chickens, milking cows and making cheese, washing clothes and sweeping out soiled rushes.

Though, the way things are, maybe I needn't fret. With folk thinking the world's coming to an end, maybe I don't have *any* sort of future?



When, one day after dinner, a feeble glow emerges from the clouds, Ma and me put on our cloaks and take a stroll outside. Then, when the sun sees fit to stay a little, we sit together for a while beneath Ma's little pear tree.

'Have you noticed, Agnes,' she says, looking up into the leafy branches, 'that this tree has no fruit?'

I nod. 'It's been so wet. You said flowers need sun to become fruit, and there's not been enough.'

'They need insects too, but they can't fly in all this rain.'

I agree, then shrug. 'But aren't you planning to dig up the flowers?'

Ma nods. 'Flowers are a folly. Folk need beans and onions. I don't want to dig them up, but it's our Christian duty to help our neighbours.'

'It's a shame,' I say. Though in truth the garden brings little joy these days, for the plants are struggling to grow in the cold and claggy earth.

We sit in silence, gazing at the beds where yellow primroses and creamy honeysuckle, blue periwinkle and purple iris should all be in flower.

'Bless those lovely blooms that have defied the rain,' says Ma, pointing to a few brave flowers open in search of sun and honeybees.

'But if the bees can't fly...' I say, and she pulls a wry smile.

I remember when Uncle William and me used to lie face down upon the grass up on the downs and bring our eyes close to the purse-petals of a vetch, or the spidery cluster of a rampion, or the strange bee-like flower of an orchid. Then we'd sit up and, in silent stillness, watch the orchids, waiting for a real bee to land upon the imitation and pick up a scattering of yellow on its furry back, and then fly on to the next bee-flower. It all seemed so wondrous. And now it seems so long ago.

Only a few days later, Ma and me are in the yard, digging up the primroses and honeysuckle, the periwinkle and the irises, and all the other flowering plants, except for the pear tree and the three rose bushes that stand beside the bed of onions. Ma says little as we dig deep into the earth and, hacking through the nurturing roots, wrench each plant cruelly from its bed. Even I, who up till now cared little enough for plants and flowers, feel wretched at my part in their destruction.

But it has to be – flowers don't fill empty bellies.

When the ground's been cleared, we dig it once again, turning it over in the hope that, with even a feeble sun, the soil might dry out a little and warm up enough to receive the seed Ma's carefully saved. We leave it for a day or two – days mercifully dry and almost warm – and then we sow: onions and leeks, turnips and cabbages, peas and beans. Ma's face is downcast as she carefully places each seed in straight and well-spaced drills.

'The ground's still cold,' she says, shaking her head.

'But warmer than it was,' I say, trying to be cheerful. 'Surely God'll bless your garden, Ma, and won't deny the seeds their chance to grow?'

She smiles. 'You're right, Agnes. We must place our faith in His Divine Providence.'

Two weeks later, little shoots are poking up above the soggy earth. Now all we have to do is guard them from torrential rain and biting winds, and Sir Giles's doves, and pray the sun shines often – and warmly – enough for them to thrive.

VII.

For weeks, Ma's sent me daily into the village with a basket of whatever she has available to sell – a few vegetables, sometimes a little cheese and butter – though she insists I accept only the smallest of coins in payment. She's constantly sowing seed, in the hope of winning yet another crop of onions or cabbage but, in truth, the weather's against her, the rewards for all her efforts becoming daily yet more pitiful. As the days pass, my basket's becoming lighter, for Ma's unable to refill the bare patches in the garden and our stocks are running low.

Yet I still go, to those families suffering the most: those with no land left, no kin to help them, no money to buy bread. I wish it was bread I was taking but we've none to spare.

I heave open the outer door a crack and peep outside, hoping – as I do every day – it's not raining. I sigh to see it is and, picking up my heavy wooden pattens, tie them over my shoes. I fasten my winter cloak around my shoulders – it's too warm, but the thick wool's a better shield against the wet than my flimsy summer cape. Then I pull on one of the sheepskin hoods Ma's laboured to make us all. It made her fingers bleed stitching through the skins, and Pa complained at the waste of fleeces.

'But if it carries on raining like this, Geoffrey,' said Ma, sucking at her fingertips, 'we'll likely take a chill from the daily soaking. They at least give some protection to our heads.'

Every day, when each one of us goes out, we come back soaked through again and cold, no matter that it's summer. Never mind wash day – these days it's every day Ma sets the racks around the fire, our cloaks and shirts and kirtles draped across them, steaming and stinking, until they're just about – but never fully – dry enough to wear again.

It's true the fleece hood keeps my head dry, though I hate the sheepy smell and scratchy itch of the unwashed, oily wool so near my face. But it's never long before I forget the smell and itch entirely, as I struggle to keep my footing in my awkward pattens and not slide into the ditches – raging torrents now instead of useful dykes.

I head downhill towards a cluster of cottar cottages at the edge of the village, near the river. I visited these families only a week ago and they were struggling then to have any life beyond survival. Their cottages are already ruined, with gaps in the walls where the daub's

so weakened by the rain it's washed away, leaving the rotten timber struts uncovered. And their roofs give little shelter now, where the rain's punched holes in the mouldy thatch. So what few things these poor folk have are stacked up in a corner to keep dry.

Reaching the Fletcheres' cottage, I wait a moment outside the door. I can hear the baby crying, but there's no other sound. I knock and call out my name.

'Come in, Agnes,' calls back a voice I know is Maud's.

I lift the latch, leaning hard against the door to shove it open. I slip off my hood and step inside, heaving the door closed behind me. The cottage has no window, and to my eyes it's deep dark inside, apart from the feeble flickering light of a low fire. But, after a few moments, I can see the family's hunched round the fire – Maud, her baby daughter, three months old, on her lap, her husband Arthur, and her other children, Ann and Arnold, nestling against her old mother Joan. The baby whimpers, but the other little ones are silent, their heads sunk into their shoulders as they huddle underneath a blanket. Maud gets unsteadily to her feet, cradling the baby in one arm, and comes over to me.

'I've brought what I can, Maud,' I say, 'though it isn't much – I'm sorry.'

Maud gives me a weak grin and shakes her head. 'Mistress Tyler's so kind, Agnes. Anything at all's better than the nothing we don't get for ourselves.'

She cocks her head briefly towards her husband. 'We seem to have given up,' she says loudly. 'We could be out hunting a cony, or even gathering grubs.'

Arthur spits into the fire and whips his head round to glare at his wife. 'Grubs, woman?' he says, his voice raised. 'We're not bleeding badgers.'

Maud shrugs. 'Don't mind his mouth, Agnes.' Then she sighs. 'I'll go look myself later.'

A slight queasiness rises in my throat – though Ma and me search the forest and hedgerows for wild herbs and fruits to bulk out our meals, we've not yet had the need to dig for grubs and insects.

The baby starts to grizzle and Maud jiggles the hollow-eyed bundle up and down. Then she whispers to me. 'I'm going to lose her,' she says, choking back a sob. 'Milk's dried up.'

I nod, thinking our cows've still got milk, but Ma's already said she's not willing to give it up. I look down at the wailing scrap and my heart tightens.

Maud hauls open the cottage door and, taking my elbow, draws me outside. We stand close to the wall under the scant shelter of the dripping eaves. She points to my basket.

‘What d’you have, Agnes?’ she says. Her face is so grey and grooved she looks older than her mother, though I know she’s not above five years more than me.

‘Just what I usually have, Maud,’ I say, ‘onions, cabbage, nothing more. Even Ma can’t coax much else to grow.’

Though she always follows the guidance in the garden book.

Porray greens put forth new leaves five or six times a year...

Sow cabbages in the waning of the moon, always in damp weather in the evening else at early morn. Be careful to water only the stem and earth and not the leaves...

I’d smile if I weren’t so despondent – it’s hardly just “damp weather” when we sow, and the leaves get a daily drenching. Yet, despite the rain’s thoughtless lack of care about the leaves, the cabbages and greens do somehow survive.

I lift aside the piece of blanket covering my basket and show her the undersized onions and yellow-leaved cabbages. Taking out two onions and a small cabbage, Maud puts them in the pocket of her apron. Then she looks up at me, tears in her eyes.

‘I can’t pay you, Agnes,’ she says, her voice the merest whisper. I feel a warmth rush to my face, remembering Ma telling me never to ask for much, but Pa insisting I must always ask for something. What can I do if Maud has nothing to give? I can’t demand back what she’s already taken – can I? I’m sure my face is pink, and I can see she’s noticed. Her hand goes to her pocket.

‘I’ll put them back,’ she says, but I shake my head.

‘No, Maud, keep them. Ma won’t mind.’

‘I’ll make a pottage. Maybe a few worms or grubs’ll make it tasty.’ She sniggers and, for an instant, she’s the cheerful Maud I remember. But the light’s gone entirely from her eyes.

I give her a little smile. ‘Maybe.’

‘If they’re good enough for badgers,’ she says, ‘they’re good enough for us,’ and pats me on the arm.

Maud turns to go inside and, covering up my basket and pulling my hood over my head, I step out into the driving rain. But, as we turn, there’s a deafening roar behind us and, spinning round again, we see the hill behind the cottage sliding down towards us, a brown torrent of thickly muddy water, bringing with it all the trees and bushes that, moments ago,

were clinging to the hillside. Maud lets out a scream and hurls herself at the door, yelling at her family to run. I drop my basket and look about me in a panic. But I've little time to think, and have no choice but to scramble to a muddy knoll just above the track, as the deluge slams into the cottage, tearing through the flimsy daub-less walls. At that moment, Arthur bursts blaspheming from the house, a wailing child gripped awkwardly under each arm, and wades through the heaving water to join me on the mound. He drops gasping to his knees, and the children fall to the ground, flailing and screaming for their mother.

'Where's Maud?' I ask, yelling above the din of the surging flood.

Arthur shakes his head. 'The old hag!' he yells back, his eyes dark.

'She's trying to save her mother?' I ask but, howling, he roars his answer up to Heaven.

Then the front wall of the cottage collapses with a grinding crash, and the torrent bursts through and surges down the track towards the other buildings, carrying with it now not only trees and bushes but the cottage walls and the family's few possessions – a table and a stool, a straw mattress and a cooking pot, and a confusion of bundles large and small, pitching and tossing in the heaving muddy waters as they're washed away. Then I hear a frantic shrieking and look up to see Maud battling against the flood, scrambling between the tumbling debris to try to reach us.

She's alone.

Flailing her arms, she's screaming at her husband. 'The baby!' she shrieks, pointing wildly at the rushing waters. 'Save the baby.'

Arthur roars and plunges into the water, and I realise one of those tossing bundles must've been the baby and she's already far beyond saving. Suddenly I'm quaking at the poor mite's terror, wrenched from her mother's arms, and I drop weeping to my knees. Yet it's not for me to weep, but to comfort the wailing children who've just seen their tiny sister swept away. I reach out for them and draw them to me.

Then Maud reaches this side of the torrent, and Arthur's already there. Catching her up in his great arms, he clasps her to his chest, and they howl into each other's necks.

VIII.

I go often now with Pa to look over our field strips. As he inspects the damage wrought by the rain and cold, his back stoops like an old man's and he says nothing, his once cheerful face growing ever more pinched and grey. For much of the grain that hasn't rotted altogether

is beaten flat into the mud, the ears mushy and incapable of ripening.

It's obvious now a good deal of the hay we cut in June won't ever dry. I went with Pa this morning to Sir Giles's barns and watched the men drag out great mouldy piles to stop the rot from spreading. Pa stayed behind to help, while I went to do some chores for Ma.

When he comes home, Pa's cheeks are drawn and hollow.

'We've thrown away so much,' he says, removing his hood and raking his fingers through his hair. 'We couldn't save it. If we leave it damp, it might heat up and burst into flames.' He tells again the story of what happened years ago, when hay was stored before it was dry and, catching fire in the night, burned down three barns and the year's entire crop. It was a lesson, he says, well learned.

'But there's not enough to feed the cattle,' says Pa, 'and you know what that means.' Ma and me both nod. 'They'll have to stay outside all winter, and their feet are already rotting.'

'I've seen them, Pa,' I say. 'Poor things! They look so miserable and cold.'

'I fear most for those in calf,' he says. 'If the dams are weak, they'll struggle to deliver.'

'Can we save them, Pa?'

He shrugs. 'One or two'll surely die, either from the wet or lack of fodder.'

They're dying already. For months, I've watched the village cows get weaker, huddled together under the trees, up to their knees in thick mud, their heads turned from the driving rain. For most, there's no relief: with no hay to eat, they must stay outdoors and suffer the endless chilling wet.

Though many are suffering no longer, and have been carted away.

After a while Pa asks where Alan and John are, as if he doesn't know. Despite the rain they're out with their friends – despite the rain, and despite the desperate straits we're in. When Ma answers, Pa sighs and drags his fingers through his hair again.

'They're young men,' he says at length. 'They need...' he shrugs, '...an outlet.'

Ma gasps. 'Geoffrey!' she says, wagging her head at him. 'Not in front of Agnes.'

I smile to myself. Ma must think I know what Pa means – and I do. For, now there's no ale to be had on the manor, I know full well my brothers spend their free time simply chasing girls. Sometimes I think it must be lovely to have lads running after you – to be pretty enough they *want* to. But I wouldn't go into a barn with them, for Ma says those sorts of girls'll never get a husband.

Yet, maybe they'll have some sport, and, the way things are, I wonder if any of us is ever going to have the chance to marry...

I look across at Pa, kneading his forehead with his fingers. The sleeve of his shirt's slipped down and I notice the boniness of his wrists. I think often now how thin Pa seems, and it's not because we have no food. Even when Ma puts it on the table, he eats little of it, saying my brothers and me should have it. My brothers take him at his word, for they're both greedy pigs. But I worry if Pa doesn't eat, he'll grow too weak to work and I can see Ma fears it too, for she presses him to take his share.

1316

IX.

Today's the first time Pa's asked me to join him and my brothers to help sow this year's crop.

I think maybe Ma suggested it.

Pa doesn't just look old: his shirt hangs on his stooping shoulders like it belongs to a man two times his girth, his hose droops in baggy folds around his stick-thin legs. He seems frail too in his mind, forgetful and distracted, telling and retelling the same story, unable to decide much beyond getting up in the morning and going to bed at night. John says he's lost his mind, but Alan clips him around the ear.

'There's nothing wrong with Pa,' he says, his voice thick and rasping, 'an end to all this bloody rain won't cure.'

John's lip quivers and he looks shaken by the fury in Alan's voice. Tears spring to his eyes and he quickly wipes them on his sleeve. 'I didn't mean it,' he says, choking a little on the words.

But Alan does not relent. 'Pa needs us to help him, you little turd, not slag him off!'

Ma appears suddenly at the door, her basket empty apart from some small porray greens that've miraculously survived the winter.

'What're you lads arguing about?' she says, slumping down on the nearest stool.

Alan glares at John, then shakes his head. ‘Nothing, Ma.’ He grins at her. ‘It’s time we’re off – Pa’s gone to get the horses.’

‘Pa wants me to go too today,’ I say.

Ma nods. ‘I know. He needs all your help.’

‘Come on then, sis,’ says Alan, grinning. ‘Boots and hoods.’

He holds out his hand towards me and I’m so glad at last he’s stopped being lazy. John too, really, though he can still be an idiot at times. But they can see as well as me how Pa’s changed. During the long winter months, when we were all cooped up indoors, with nothing to do and little to eat, you’d have been blind not to see how our strong, decisive Pa has been replaced by his feeble, dithering shadow.

I go to Ma and put my hand upon her shoulder. ‘You sure it’s all right?’

She covers my hand with hers and looks up at me. ‘I’ve agreed with Pa.’

She smiles, and there’s a flicker of the old Ma there. Not because anything’s better than it was – it isn’t – but maybe she’s decided, if Pa’s lost his spirit, she can’t be the same. I wonder where she finds the strength to drag herself out of her melancholy, while Pa’s sinking down into his. But the answer’s not so hard to find.

Pa’s not been to church for a year or more, no matter how much Ma tries to coax him into going. He says it’s a waste of time.

‘Every day last year I prayed for a change in the weather,’ he says, ‘but the old bugger just wasn’t listening. So what’s the point?’

Ma’s hands fly to her face, horrified at Pa’s blasphemy, and I too am afraid. Even my brothers shuffle their feet.

‘But, Pa,’ I say, ‘everyone knows God’s sent this weather to test his people. Surely He’ll give us back the sunshine when he’s content that we deserve it. So we must pray and pray to Him for mercy, and show Him that we do.’

‘Hogwash!’ cries Pa, pacing up and down, waving his arms in the air. ‘Prayer’s utter nonsense. What we must do is *plough*–’ and he thumps his fist down on the table, ‘and *sow*–’ he thumps again, ‘and harvest as best we can. And tighten all our *belts*–’ thump, ‘until the weather improves of its own accord.’

I burst into tears, shocked at the force of his denial. Pa seems to notice, for I think his face softens a little, but he says nothing to give me comfort. He just grabs his boots and hood and storms out of the house.

Pa's denial is yet another worry for Ma to bear, but she says she must be strong enough for both. 'I'll not be diverted from the true path. And we must all pray Pa soon recovers his right senses.'



Out in the fields, Pa seems more or less his normal self. The rain's holding off, and the sun's honouring our first ploughing day with a few feeble rays. But, as we approach the field strips Pa wants to plough, he lets out a cry of alarm and points a quivering finger.

'Over there!' he cries. Following his outstretched arm, I can see the surface of the field is shimmering in the sunlight.

'What is it, Pa?' I say. 'Surely it can't be water? Not up here?'

Pa growls. 'Well, you're wrong, daughter. It *can* be water, and it damn well is. Winter-bourne water.'

'I've never seen it like this before,' says John, his forehead furrowed.

Pa shakes his head. 'That's because it never *is* like this. Winter-bournes fill up in winter and dry out in the summer. But with last summer as wet as any winter, the streams just kept on filling.'

With a despairing groan, he wrenches off his sheepskin hood and throws it to the ground. 'Is there no end to this?' he moans. Then, squatting on his bony haunches, he puts his head in his hands.

I stare at my brothers and they stare back at me. Only moments ago, we'd thought the sun had given us its blessing. Pa was almost looking forward to ploughing his first furrow of the year. But now he's rocking back and forth on his heels, like a distressed child, and I feel my heart'll break at the sight of it. I want to crouch down by his side, to comfort him, but Pa's arms are wrapped around his head, shutting us all out.

I jump as Alan taps me on the shoulder. 'You and John stay here. I'm going for a walk.'

'Where?'

He shrugs. 'To another field – maybe it'll not be so wet.'

'Hope so.' I give a feeble smile.

Alan grins back and touches my cheek. 'Look after Pa, sis. I won't be long.'

I crouch down, resting my chin in my hands. John comes over and squats down beside me. 'It's shit, isn't it?' he says.

I snigger. 'I don't think Ma'd like you using that word in front of me.'

John grins. 'Sorry, sis. Didn't think. But it is, isn't it?'

'Yes, it is.' I turn in the direction Alan went, but he's already out of sight. 'I hope the other field's all right.'

John puts his arm round me. Without meaning to, I stiffen slightly.

'Sorry,' he says and takes his arm away.

'No, put it back,' I say. 'I didn't mean to flinch. It's just...well, you know...'

'I'm not much of a brother?'

I pat his arm. 'We all need to be strong now, for Pa.'

We squat there, watching Pa, waiting for Alan to come back. At length Pa stops rocking and unfolds his arms. He stands up slowly, pressing his hand against his back, and turns to face us.

'Where's your brother?' he says, and John tells him.

He nods. 'Might be better over there.'

Not long after, when Alan returns, his face is beaming. 'Others are up there, Pa. We'd better join them.' He grabs the leading reins of the horses, waiting patiently for someone to move them on, and sets off back in the direction he came.

Pa sighs and picks up his discarded hood. 'Don't need this right now,' he says and, grinning, points at the watery sun. John and me nod, pulling ours off too, then I take Pa's arm and we follow Alan and the plough.

X.

It's no surprise how poorly all the seed we sowed has grown. Much of it hasn't so much as poked up from the ground, and the shoots that did have grown up mostly thin and soft. Ma's garden's not much better, and we're having to join our neighbours in the woods, foraging for nuts and fruits, whatever we can find, to eke out the few beans and peas and onions we've managed to keep growing.

Pa eats almost nothing, and even Alan and John are thin, bony about the shoulders. Ma used to be so round and chubby but, like all of us, her clothes are hanging loose upon her

now. I have to tie a cord around my middle and fold my kirtle over to keep the skirt from dragging on the floor.

None of us complain out loud, though I often want to, and at times I just want to cry – when there seems to be some creature gnawing at my belly. But I won't make Ma feel worse than I know she does already. What choices do we have? Ma says we must believe our suffering is God's will. But I don't understand at all why He's making our life so hard, for I don't think me, or Ma, or Pa, or my brothers, or anyone in Broadham, has been so wicked we can possibly deserve such punishment.

Ma tries to comfort me. 'Think of it as part of God's great plan. He's testing us—'

'But *why*, Ma?' I cry. 'Why do we need to be so tested?'

She shrugs. 'Master Anselm says God wants us to understand we're weak and must trust in Him alone.' She wrings her apron for a few moments. 'Which is why I worry so about your Pa,' she says, in a whisper. 'He thinks he's no need of God at all – can manage by himself.'

'But he can't, can he?' I say, thinking of how thin and frail Pa's become. 'So will God think badly of Pa?'

Ma shakes her head. 'I don't know, Agnes,' she says, wiping her face with the edge of her apron. 'He's a loving and merciful God, Master Anselm says, but all the same I'm fearful for Pa's soul.'

When we all go to Mass on Sunday – except of course for Pa, who always disappears just as we're about to leave – I listen carefully to Master Anselm's words. Today, as we stand together with our neighbours in the nave, quaking from both cold and fear, he speaks to us of the end of the world.

Yet he does not try to frighten us, but rather give us hope.

'All you need to know,' he says, gazing down upon us with gentle, tender eyes, 'is that our Lord God is a loving God, a merciful God, who wants only the best for His people on Earth. If these present calamities signify that we are entering the end time – the end of our world – be reassured, my children, that this is God's *plan* for us, a plan we must not question or seek to understand. And a far better world will be ours thereafter! For have we not read that our life on Earth is but a short sojourn, and that death is just the glorious beginning of the great journey that all of us must make, to our final resurrection and life ever after with our Lord God in Heaven.'

Some folk mumble in agreement, but I don't know what to think. Death might be the glorious beginning of a wonderful new life, but I'm not ready yet to die! I'll have been cheated of a proper life here, not having my chance to marry or have children or do anything at all.

I say it to myself, all this, but at once I'm feeling hot and my heart is beating faster, fearful God might've heard me and be angry. A flush creeps up my neck and face and I look round to see if anyone has noticed. But they're all staring up at Master Anselm, so I pull my hood forward to shield my face and hope God too can't see my shame.

When Ma and me get home from church, Pa's still not in the house. Ma frets a while then, clucking like one of our lost hens, takes her basket from the hook on the wall and trudges out into the garden to see what she can find for dinner.

When the church bell rings out for sext – the time when Ma's ready to put dinner on the table – my brothers are back from wherever they've been, but there's still no sign of Pa.

'Go look for him, Alan,' says Ma. 'I'll not have him miss a meal, even if he'll not take much of it.'

Alan nods and gets slowly to his feet again. 'He'll be with the horses, or the pig. Don't worry, Ma, I'll find him.' He struggles to open the heavy swollen door and plods away towards the meadow. Only a few months ago Alan ran everywhere, still full of energy, but that's all changed and everything he does now is slow and sluggish, just like an old man who can't shift himself for aches and pains.

Maybe the rest of us are much the same. I notice every day how weary Ma is looking, and in truth I'm tired myself. Sometimes it's an effort to drag myself off my pallet in the morning, and I wouldn't if I didn't have to help with all the chores.

When Alan comes back, Pa's with him. 'With the pig,' says Alan, grinning, and Pa nods.

'Didn't you hear the sext bell?' says Ma, but Pa just shrugs and sits down at the table.

Ma ladles pottage into a large serving bowl, and puts it down in front of him. 'There's a scrap of that good bacon in there,' she says, 'so eat up, husband.'

He turns to look at her and smiles. 'A little,' he says, picking up his spoon. He dips it into the pottage and, filling it with the gravy, raises it slowly to his mouth and tips it in. 'It's good,' he says and smiles again.

'But you took none of the bacon,' says Ma, standing over him like she used to when we were children. 'Nor any of the turnip.'

‘Let the children have some first,’ says Pa, signalling to us to dip our spoons and take our share.

Alan and John dip eagerly, as always, but I hold back, seeing the anxious look in my mother’s eyes. She notices my glance and nods at me to eat.

‘You too, Ma,’ I say, my voice a little sharp, and, sighing, she sits down next to Pa. Scooping out a spoonful of the pottage, she’s careful to take a little piece of turnip and a tiny scrap of bacon, which she shows to Pa before putting the spoon to her mouth.

Pa nods and does the same but then, with half the bowl of pottage yet to eat, puts down his spoon and gets up from the table. ‘Enough for me,’ he says. ‘You have the rest.’

I think Ma’s going to weep.

‘Oh, Pa,’ I cry, ‘please have some more! There’s plenty for all of us to share.’

He shakes his head. ‘I’ve had my fill.’

‘But you haven’t, Pa, you *haven’t!*’ I cry, and I can feel the tears pricking at my eyes. ‘You *must* need more than that, Pa...’ The tears spill out and trickle down my cheeks. ‘We need you, Pa. You’ll die if you don’t eat, and what’ll we do without you?’

He stands for long moments, staring at me. I’ve never spoken to Pa in such a way before. Then he gives a little nod and, coming back to the table, sits down again. ‘My dearest daughter,’ he says and, putting out his bony hand, takes hold of mine and squeezes it. He takes up his spoon again and eats, insisting each of us takes our turn. When the bowl is almost empty, Ma fetches a small hunk of the coarse bread she’s made from barley mixed with ground up peas and beans, and cuts it into five pieces, three larger and two smaller, and, handing one to each of us, bids us wipe the big bowl clean.

1318

XI.

It’s hard to believe the sun is shining! Not just peeping out from behind the clouds, but blazing in a clear blue sky. I don’t think we’ve seen such a thing for years. Though, in truth, it’s seems much longer than mere years. A lifetime.

How much happier everyone looks. For the sun is not just bright but *hot*. It seems almost like Paradise!

A few days ago, Sir Giles sent a message round to every family saying, this year, we'd make the most of the sunshine and celebrate Midsummer, enjoy ourselves as we always used to do. Some older folk are doubtful, thinking dancing disrespectful to those who've died, and any sort of feasting distasteful after so many years of hunger.

But I'm thrilled!

It's been so exciting these past few days – the first excitement of any kind for so very long – decorating the church with such greenery as we can find, building fires around the village. Sir Giles has promised there *will* be a feast, and music and dancing will surely raise our spirits.

So this Midsummer's Eve, the bone-fires are lit to keep away evil, thanksgiving is offered in church, and now everyone in Broadham is gathering on the wide green in the centre of the village. The grass is still muddy in places, but there are drier patches beneath the stand of trees and everybody's huddled there together in smiling, yet still weary-looking, groups. Lady Margaret must've dug deep into her stores to find flour enough for all the little loaves and meat pies she's provided. In truth it is quite a *little* feast, just enough for each person to taste something, and there's no denying most folk'll go home hungry, the same as any other night.

But, to forget the pain of empty bellies, for this evening at least, everyone's drinking Sir Giles's good red Gascon wine – Pa's surprised his lordship still had some in his cellars – and laughing and telling bawdy stories, while the friendly summer sun warms their backs. Some of the young men have stripped down to their shirts, saying they've not felt this warm for years, and I wish I could take off my woollen kirtle. I try to ignore the trickle of sweat running down inside my chemise, telling myself I should be glad to be so warm again, when only a month ago we still thought the cold was never going to end.

I look across at Ma, dozing with her head against Pa's shoulder, her face all flushed and shiny. Her coif is askew, and damp strands of hair are sticking to her forehead. Pa grins at me, cocking his head down towards her, and I smile back, nodding. Even he looks at ease today, though it won't last. For, despite the sunshine, the grain stores are still empty, the oats and barley struggling to grow. I lie down on the grass, enjoying its coolness against my sweating back. I doze a while then suddenly I'm awake, roused by the sound of music rising above the hum of conversation and bursts of raucous laughter. I sit up and look across to the edge of the green, where our neighbour Alan Cook is standing, his fiddle underneath his

chin, together with Nick Fuller and his pipes and William Webb's tambour, all playing a merry tune. I've not heard them play for such a long time. Is today truly the first day in *years* that folk've thought it fitting to play music? What a joy it is to hear them! Everyone else must think so too, for they're clapping and cheering, and many join in the chorus when Adam the blacksmith jumps up and sings in his strong and lusty voice a ballad we all know. Even Ma, who'd said she thought music and merrymaking unseemly in these terrible times, is joining in the singing, her eyes alight once more and throwing her head back in laughter – for a while at least, the old Ma I remember.

After a few more songs, Alan strikes up a different sort of tune and, with much cheering, folk jump up and, running to where the ground is drier, begin to dance. At first it's just couples – married or betrothed – who join the dance, but it isn't long before young men and lads are going over to the girls sitting with their families or in groups of friends and asking them to dance. My friend Mariota protests shyly when Harry, Nick Fuller's son, comes up to her. I see her blush and shake her head.

'I don't know how,' she says, giggling, but Harry scoffs.

'Don't be daft, Mari! Everyone can dance – come on, let's have some fun.' He leans down and grabs her hand and, pulling her to her feet, drags her over to the dancing.

Soon, most of my friends are on their feet, some protesting, some thrilled, running to join in. Then the music changes again and, with longing, I watch the carolling dancers, holding hands in a great circle and skipping around Adam the blacksmith, now in their midst and singing the carole, while the dancers join in the chorus.

Then, to my surprise, even Pa gets up and, bowing low, holds out his hand to Ma, who giggles like a girl and lets him pull her to her feet. Off they go, and I'm left alone. All the lads seem to have dancing partners now and my eyes fill as I sit there, the only girl unclaimed. I stare unseeing at the dancers, refusing to meet the gaze of any of my neighbours.

But then a dark shape blocks out the sun and, wiping my sleeve quickly across my cheeks, I turn to see a man standing beside me. I can't see his face for the brightness, but then he crouches at my feet and I go all hot at the sight of him.

'Will you dance with me, Agnes Tyler?' he says, and I can't believe it's Thomas Wodeman, of all people, asking *me* to dance. Why hasn't he asked one of the other girls, the pretty ones? For Tom's the best-looking man in Broadham, with his shiny black hair and dark brown smiling eyes.

I can't look him in the face, for I'm certain mine's bright red, and I don't want him to think I'm even plainer than I am. But he's bold and not prepared to wait – and after all, my parents aren't here to protest. He takes my chin gently in his hand and turns my face towards him. He's grinning.

'Are you shy, little Mistress Tyler?' he says, and I give a weak smile, feeling foolish. But I let him pull me to my feet and I brush the grass off from my kirtle and smooth the fabric down, before allowing him to take my hand and lead me to the dance. As we get near, I notice Mariota's face as she sees us coming. She whispers something in Harry Fuller's ear, then, as we pass close by, she gives me a huge grin. How pleased I am! And how dazed when, after what seems like hours of dancing and singing, Thomas returns me to my parents, waiting for me underneath the trees.

But Ma looks cross. 'You've kept Agnes to yourself all evening, Master Wodeman,' she says, frowning.

Thomas beams. 'Indeed, Mistress Tyler. She's been a charming companion. Perhaps I could call on her tomorrow?'

Ma seems to have a sudden cough, but Pa nods slowly.

'Perhaps,' he says. 'But these are still testing times, maybe not yet right for courting?'

'I understand, sir,' says Thomas, 'but even so I'd like to call.'

Pa presses his lips together and nods again. 'Very well.' Then, shaking Thomas's hand, he bids him goodnight.

I'm hugging myself with excitement. 'Thank you, Pa.'

He grunts. 'Your Ma's not pleased,' he says, leaning close to me and speaking low. 'The lad's more or less a complete stranger, and she thinks his behaviour improper.'

'But it's been so hard for *so* long, Pa,' I say, taking his hand. 'Surely you don't begrudge me a bit of fun?'

He gives a little laugh. 'I daresay not. But mark my words, Agnes Tyler, if Thomas Wodeman does call on you, just make sure you behave and don't upset your Ma.'

By the time we're home, it's fully dark, and I climb the ladder to the loft, eager to be alone. Ma and Pa come up soon after, and it isn't long before both of them are snoring heartily. I lie awake, unable – and not wanting – to banish the thought of Thomas Wodeman from my mind. Then I remember what Mariota told me years ago, when we were younger. I sit up and listen: Alan and John are both still out – no doubt tumbling some girls in the fields

– so I don't have them to answer to when I climb down the ladder and slip quietly from the house.

How light it is outside! The moon's full and shining brightly, so it's easy to find my way to the remains of Ma's flower garden: the three rose bushes she couldn't bear us to dig up. Despite the rain and cold of the past weeks, the bushes are still a mass of flowers – and it's their petals I've come here for. Mariota said if a girl wants to know who her true love will be, on Midsummer's Eve she must scatter rose petals on the ground and say out loud:

Rose leaves, rose leaves,

Rose leaves I strew.

He that will love me

Come after me now.

I feel very silly, picking petals in the dark – and I'm sure Ma'd be angry if she knew – but, as I throw them to the ground and whisper the magic words into the night, I think of Thomas and hope he's thinking of me. If he visits me tomorrow, I'll *know* he's my true love. The thought of it makes me light-headed, and I have to wait outside the house for a while before I go back in, in case I laugh out loud.

XII.

Tom Wodeman's called on me each day since Midsummer. The first time he came, Ma opened the door, and frowned when she saw who was standing there. But this evening she waves her hand at me to answer the knock that comes just as we're finishing our small supper.

'Good evening, Master Wodeman,' I say, inclining my head a little, though already I feel anything but shy.

Tom steps inside and greets Ma and Pa. Pa looks up and nods, but Ma begins to bustle around, clearing the supper things away. I feel tears pricking at my eyes. But, if Tom notices her disapproval, he disregards it.

'Mistress Tyler,' he says, 'can Agnes and me take a turn outside? It's such an agreeable evening.' His eyes smile so warmly I can't understand why Ma doesn't like him.

She nods. 'Not too far and not for long. Agnes has chores to do.'

Outside, I regret helping Ma dig up her flower garden: it would've been a lovely place to stroll, amidst the sweet-smelling honeysuckle and stately lilies, to sit beneath the little pear tree, now stranded in the middle of a field of cabbages. Even the roses look forsaken, out of place beside the ranks of onions, their sweet scent overpowered by the onions' sour stink. Seeing them there reminds me of what my precious gardening book says about growing flowers and onions together, and for a moment I feel sorry for the roses.

Have two gardens, one for flowers and one for porray... Not that the flower garden can have no herbs and the potager no flowers, but keep them separate for the most part, else your flowers may be affronted if you intermingle them with onions and leeks...

Chatting easily, Tom and me walk across the garden and through the gate leading to our little orchard. We sit down beneath an apple tree, me with my back resting against the smooth trunk, Tom half-lying on the grass, propped up on one elbow. Suddenly, we're quiet, our chatter ceased. I can even hear the hum of insects up amongst the leaves.

Tom squints at me and grins, but then he drops his gaze.

As the silent moments pass, I feel uneasy. To fill the silence, I point to the branches above us. 'We'll not have many apples this year,' I say. 'It was so wet in the spring the insects couldn't fly so the flowers didn't turn to fruit.'

Tom sits up, grinning broadly. 'You're a funny girl, Agnes Tyler,' he says, leaning forward to take my hand. 'You're the only girl I know who'll talk about apple trees and flying creatures when a fellow's trying to declare his love.'

I feel my neck grow warm. 'I didn't know you were.'

He laughs. 'I was trying to think how to say it.'

My heart's thumping inside my chest but, feeling bold, I lean forward and squeeze his hand. 'Try again?'

XIII.

When Tom comes to ask my father's consent for us to marry, Pa looks uncomfortable but Ma's face creases into lines of anguish. I thought she'd be happy for me, proud I'd caught myself such a handsome and upright suitor, for Tom's a skilful carpenter, his labour much in

demand. But Ma seems anything but pleased.

In truth, what she looks is *anxious*, and I don't understand it at all.

Pa gestures Tom to sit down. 'Times are still bad,' he says, shaking his head slowly.

'I agree,' says Tom, 'but not for Agnes and me. I love her, Master Tyler, and want her to be my wife.' Even in the gloom of a late September afternoon, I can see his face is flushed, and I feel a flutter of excitement at his words. But he continues, his voice solemn and sincere. 'And I think you know, sir, that my business prospers and I'm well able to take care of her.'

Pa nods and starts to smile, I'm sure of it, but Ma coughs loudly and Pa turns to face her. They hold each other's gaze for a moment, and then Pa shrugs. Ma gets up from her stool and goes to stand in front of Tom.

'Agnes is very young,' she says. 'She's years yet before she needs think of marriage.'

'But I'm not so young, Mistress Tyler,' says Tom, smiling. And it's true, he's at least as old as my oldest brother, Edwin. 'I'm ready to be married and I've my father's blessing on it.'

Pa sighs and wipes his hand across his eyes. 'It's not just she's young. You can understand, I'm sure, how much we still rely on Agnes – how much her mother needs her help and support.'

I know it's not just Ma who needs me. Since Alan left us, neither with Pa's blessing nor strictly legally, Pa maybe feels he can't manage just with John. How I wish now Alan hadn't gone.

Tom nods his head and runs his fingers through his hair. He sits for long moments, saying nothing, then at length stands up. He nods again at Pa. 'I understand,' he says, and I know then he'll not press his suit. I feel a tight knot in my breast and want to cry out, but instead I press my fist against my mouth.

Tom walks towards the door and, scraping my tears away with the back of my hand, I hurry over to him. I'm sure my eyes are pleading. He takes his good wool cloak down from the hook behind the door, throws it across his shoulders and fastens the clasp. He goes to open the door, then turns back and takes my hand.

'Perhaps I'm not *so* old,' he says, pressing his lips together in a weak sort of smile. 'I can wait, for the times to recover their strength, and for you, sweet Agnes, to grow a little older.'

I nod agreement to the pact, but in my heart I know I'll not see Tom again.

To worsen my misery, when John comes in that evening, he brings news that cows are dying in fields the other side of the manor, this time not from wet, but from disease.

Pa sinks to a stool, his head in his hands once more. ‘So it’s come at last,’ he says. ‘The murrain’s been skirting around the county for two years or more.’

‘That must be what it is,’ says John. ‘They say the beasts all have a fearsome fever, their eyes and muzzles leaking a vile-smelling pus. Then in days they’re dead.’

Pa shakes his head. ‘The worst of it is, the bodies must be burned. We can’t eat them for fear of getting the disease ourselves.’

John nods. ‘I’ve heard that crows pecking at the carcasses fall straight down dead.’

Pa sighs. ‘What a waste.’

But it’s not the waste of someone else’s cattle that troubles him. He’s terrified we’ll lose our own small herd – the cows he’s struggled with for years to keep alive. There’s nothing he can do but hope the murrain doesn’t come our way, and his helplessness brings back the melancholy we hoped he’d put behind him.

The pyres are such a desperate sight. Every few days we hear of cattle dying somewhere on the manor – sheep as well as cows – and their putrefying carcasses pile up in great spiky mounds waiting to be burned, a forest of cloven hooves pointing pitifully to the sky. The sickening stench of their roasting rotten flesh fills the air, and columns of dense black smoke sweep across the fields, stinging your eyes and clutching at your throat.

Pa frets at the sight and the smell of it all, and I just want to cry.

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XIV.

I was right about Tom Wodeman. We met each other a few more times but, when the rain and cold came back, and the struggle to find enough to eat, it was hard to find much energy for courting.

A year after he’d asked Pa if he could marry me, his father found him a good match with the daughter of a master builder on a neighbouring manor, who offered his new son-in-law not only a wife but also a share in his thriving business. It seemed surprising *anyone* could

be prosperous after so many years of floods and famine, but the news of Tom's seeming good fortune sent John into a violent rage.

'Those whoresons took advantage of others' misfortune,' he said, his voice harsh. 'Remember them buying up land from those poor souls who'd lost the strength to work it? Not just taking the land off their hands, but *cheating* them with paltry offers of cash. It's those bastards who've the money to rebuild houses, or build new ones on the land they stole. And it's *those* bastards this builder'll be making money from.'

Ma and me both were shocked at the fury of John's words. I couldn't think what to say but Ma was shaking.

'That's wicked talk, John,' she said. 'You shouldn't speak so ill of folk.'

He flapped his hand at her. 'Why not, Ma?' he said, hoarse with fury. 'Why not speak the truth? There are men in Broadham who've survived all this misery by grinding others into the dirt. Folk've *died* for being forced to sell their land.'

Ma shook her head. 'I don't think it's quite like that. Those folk couldn't cope with their land and were glad to have some cash to buy the food they couldn't grow.'

But John refused to agree, and argued on until he stormed out of the house. When he'd gone, Ma slumped onto a stool and wiped her face on her apron. When she looked up at me, her eyes were wet.

'It isn't you John's angry with, Ma,' I said, and she nodded.

Anyway, if Tom Wodeman was now well suited, it seemed like I'd lost everything. Whatever girlish dreams I'd cherished had vanished like an autumn mist rising from the fields.

I was melancholy for months.

But somehow or other we made it through to another warm summer, and another *good* harvest. Once again, we wondered if this was truly an end to all our misery – had God at last listened to our prayers? Was He now satisfied we did deserve to see the sun again?

Pa was, as ever, doubtful. God's nothing to do with it, as far as he's concerned, but when he voiced his opinion, Ma put her hands over her ears and screamed at him to stop, in case God heard his blasphemy and decided he'd let us off too soon. I too was fearful Pa might spout his views outside the house – in front of the bailiff, say, or even Sir Giles himself, and what would they say or think of him?

But Pa just laughed and shook his head.

‘You’ve little cause to fear God’s opinion of me, my love,’ he said to Ma. ‘For I’m sure he has none! I’m one of the lost sheep of the Good Shepherd’s straying flock.’

Poor Ma moaned and stopped her ears again, then picked up her basket and swept out into the garden, maybe to find some comfort among her cabbages.



Despite my fear at hearing blasphemy fall from my own father’s lips, and despite his refusal to believe our troubles might possibly be behind us, Pa does seem stronger in his mind, if not yet in his body. It seems also he’s been looking to the future – and not just his own and Ma’s, but mine.

When Pa first tells me of his plan, I feel a flutter of excitement. We’re walking towards the common pasture to inspect the new flock of sheep he’s bought, to see how they’re settling in. We’re quite silent: for my part, I’m still enjoying the warmth of the sun, the simple pleasure of walking along a path without having to watch my every step for mud and puddles. As we reach the gate marking the entrance to the meadow, instead of going through, Pa leans his elbows on the gate and turns to me, smiling.

‘I’ve some news, daughter,’ he says. ‘News I hope’ll please you.’

‘What sort of news, Pa?’ I say, nervous of the answer.

He grins. ‘Wedding news!’

I gasp and don’t know whether to be pleased or not. ‘Who?’

‘Richard atte Hyl, the son of a man who farms a stretch of land the other side of the manor. These past few years, Master atte Hyl’s increased his property many-fold, buying up holdings abandoned by his neighbours. Now he’s giving some of it to his eldest son, provided that he marries.’

Master atte Hyl is, then, I suppose, another of those sorts of men John says take advantage of their neighbours. Despite that, the prospect of marriage to the son of such a man sounds agreeable enough.

But I’m puzzled. ‘Why now, Pa? You’ve not mentioned this before.’

Pa pulls off his hood and runs his fingers through his hair, then shrugs a little. ‘I want to make recompense, for making you give up Tom Wodeman, when I think he would’ve made you happy, even though your Ma had reservations.’

‘Tom married someone else.’

He grimaces. 'I know. Hence I thought it my duty to find you another good man.' He smiles. 'The atte Hyls are a good family. Prosperous.'

'But what's this Richard like?' I say. 'I may not care for him at all.'

I almost laugh to see how Pa's eyebrows shoot up, as if he hasn't considered such a possibility.

'Oh, I'm sure you will, Agnes,' he says. 'He seems a nice enough fellow to me.'

Today I'm to meet this "nice enough" fellow. He's coming with his father to make my acquaintance. I wonder what he'll make of me – for I'm no beauty, with my freckles and my pointed chin. Ma's made a paste from iris root and rubbed it on my face, but my freckles still cling fast.

To make sure I look my best, Ma's sewed me a new kirtle, in a green fabric she says brings out the colour of my eyes. The kirtle fits me well, for I'm not quite the bag of bones I was a year ago. I look down at the dress and smooth it over my waist and hips, pleased with how I've filled out again.

All the same, I'm nervous – he might not like me after all and, worse, I might not like him, and then what will I do?

The atte Hyls arrive on horseback and, as they tie up their two fine chestnut mares, Pa goes out to greet them, while Ma peers through the door. But I can't look, and sit in shivery apprehension by the fire.

Only moments later, they're here, the father and the son, and Pa's introducing them, first to Ma and then to me. I rise unsteadily from the stool and look up at the father, a tall imposing man in a fine wool surcoat more fitting for Sir Giles's steward than a farmer. I drop a brief curtsey and he inclines his head.

'Young Mistress Tyler,' he says. 'Here is Richard, my eldest son, come to greet you.' He steps aside to reveal my suitor.

How my heart sinks at the sight of him!

For Richard atte Hyl's no more than my height and stocky, with a broad, solid sort of face and such peculiar pale hair, like spiky stalks of wheat after they've been cut. I can't help but compare him with Tom Wodeman.

He stands there for a moment, unsmiling. But his father clears his throat. 'Well, son, aren't you going to greet young Agnes, after you've so long wished to meet her?' He grins, and winks at me in a way I find unsettling.

It's clear Richard is discomfited by his father's words, and I feel sorry for him. I wonder if his so-called longing to meet me is not quite the truth. But at length he does step forward, and puts out his hand towards me.

'Mistress Tyler,' he says, nodding his head but still making no attempt to smile.

'Agnes,' I say, hoping to put him at his ease. He nods again.

'Why don't you two young people take a stroll outdoors?' says Ma, though I'm not sure I want to be alone with this surly lad. But I've no choice, as Ma bustles us out the door like she's shooing out a couple of errant hens.

'Let's walk down to the orchard?' I say. It was where I'd walked with Tom, the first time he called on me.

Richard just nods, and I wonder if he's any conversation at all.

We walk across the garden and through the gate to where the apple trees are full of frothy white blossom.

I point to the trunk of a fallen tree Pa's not yet got round to sawing up, and we stroll across and sit down, Richard at one end and me at the other. I look across at him, sitting sullen and silent, and wonder what I might say to stir his interest.

'Do you prefer working in the fields or with the animals?' I say at last, hoping a familiar subject might encourage him to talk.

He shrugs. 'Neither.' But then, shifting awkwardly, he seems to reconsider. 'Or pigs, if I'm forced to choose.'

'Why pigs?' I say. This was not the sort of conversation I ever had with Tom.

He shrugs again and scratches at his spiky hair. 'They're cleverer than people.'

It seems such a strange answer I can't think how to carry on. So I don't, hoping maybe he'll ask something of me. But he doesn't and, after a further spell of silence, I suggest we return to the house and he seems content to agree.

When the atte Hyls have gone home, Ma asks me what I think.

'There's something very odd about him, Ma,' I say. 'Don't you think so?'

She shrugs. 'I suppose he's shy,' she says, and sits pondering a while before she leans across to me and whispers. 'But I'll tell you what I've heard about young atte Hyl, Agnes, though I think Pa doesn't know.'

She tells me it's Richard's father who's anxious for the marriage, to settle Richard down, as she puts it. For Richard may be heir to his father's holdings, but it seems his mind's set on a life beyond the farm, beyond the manor, even beyond Sussex, and Master atte Hyl isn't pleased.

'What does he want to do instead of farming?' I ask, intrigued.

Ma shrugs. 'I can't be sure, but folk say he's very skilful at the targets.'

So Richard atte Hyl dreams of a life beyond the manor! Which maybe explains his lack of interest in the subject I chose for conversation. Despite his unsociable behaviour, I find this news ridiculously enthralling, though I do not say so.

'Of course, if he's no interest in farming,' Ma says, 'he might not make a very satisfactory husband.'

I agree he might not make a very satisfactory farmer, but as a husband...?

Ma might have misgivings – again! – but she agrees Richard and me should meet again, as both our fathers want, in the earnest hope we'll grow to like each other.

Although I can't say we do exactly *like* each other, we're beginning to reach some sort of understanding. We sit often in the orchard, away from our parents' pricking ears. On the fallen apple's trunk, Richard sits closer to me than that first day, though he never takes my hand. Conversation's not abundant, but we do at least now talk. It seems Richard's decided he must win my trust.

'I'll make a go of the holding Father's giving me,' he says, 'if you'll help me.'

I agree, but not because it's my heart's desire. I see Richard as a sort of rebel – something I now realise I'd like to see also in myself – and I think, or maybe hope, our longing for something other than this farming life will draw us both together. Though I'll not say this to my parents, or indeed to Richard.



So I'm getting married, and in truth I am excited, for all the strangeness of my betrothed.

The day's bright but still chilly for early May, and I'm obliged to cover up my new green kirtle with Ma's best woollen cloak. I braid my hair with ribbons and Ma tells me I look pretty, though I know it's her mother's love that thinks so.

As Pa and me cross the village green towards the church, me clinging to his arm, the path is lined with friends and neighbours, smiling, clapping and wishing me good fortune.

Richard's waiting with his father at the porch, and, as we come closer, he lets his mouth turn up into the smallest of smiles.

As we approach, he comes forward and, taking my hand, leads me to the porch, where Master Anselm's waiting, ready to conduct the exchange of marriage vows. A hush falls on the crowd, as Master Anselm asks Richard to announce the dowry he's providing and his answer draws a murmur of approval. Then Richard makes his marriage vows, '...for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, in bed and at table, till death us do part...' I then do the same, and we exchange the rings Master Anselm has already blessed.

So we are man and wife.

I turn to look at Richard and, though I'm smiling, he just nods back at me. How I wish he seemed more content with what we've just affirmed. I take his hand and we follow Master Anselm into the church for the Mass and the blessing on our marriage. The crowd pushes in behind us, and I look round to see where Ma and John are standing, and I'm pleased to see Pa's with them too, grinning cheerfully – the first time for years he's looked at ease in church.

The bride ale celebration is still going on when Richard comes to tell me we should leave. At once my mouth is dry and I want to find a reason to delay.

'Are we going alone?'

Richard frowns. 'Of course, Agnes. We're man and wife.'

My heart thumps at his gruffness, but I tell myself it's just his anxiety about later.

'Then I must find my parents and my brother and say farewell.' I smile at him, despite my trepidation, and turn to go.

But Richard frowns again and grasps my hand. 'Be quick,' he says, and then I notice a curious spark in his eyes I've not seen before.

I make all my farewells and return to where Richard said he'd wait for me, the reins of Bonnie, his chestnut mare, already in his hands, the cart behind her decked with ivy. He's not alone, for word must've got out that we were leaving, and a small crowd's gathered to see us off. Richard holds out his hand to me and, not sure if I'm scared or eager, I smile bravely at him as I take it and climb into the cart. Richard then climbs up beside me and clicks his tongue at Bonnie. The well-wishers clap and cheer as we drive away but, though I wave back to them quite merrily, I feel a rising knot of panic in my breast.

It isn't really all that far. Richard's holding and our cottage are on the far edge of Sir Giles's manor, in a tiny settlement that now has just two cottages aside from the atte Hyls'

farmstead. I've been there twice before – to inspect my new home and advise Richard on furnishing – each time riding on the palfrey Richard's father loaned me. I'd thought it close enough to Broadham village for me to call daily upon Ma. But now, as we travel in the cart, it seems much further, and I feel the distance between me and my family growing wider.

It's dark when we arrive. Richard takes Bonnie to the barn, while I go indoors and light two of the good wax candles Ma's made for me. By the time my husband comes into the cottage, the fire's lit and I offer him a mazer of new ale. We sit down together on the bench beside the fire and sip our drinks. Neither of us speaks.

The wood burns brightly and the warmth and smoke are making me drowsy. My head feels heavy and begins to droop, and I start when I wake up from a momentary nap. Richard's shaking my shoulder.

'You're tired,' he says. 'It's been an eventful day.'

'And a merry one,' I say, forcing a smile. I'm not ready for it to end.

'We should go to bed,' he says, almost tenderly, though when I look him in the eye I see once more the gleam I saw earlier. Again I feel the panic rising, but I have to see this through. Besides, why should I be afraid? Surely I should be excited, longing to fall into my husband's arms. Isn't that what girls are supposed to feel on their wedding night?

I let him lead me into the chamber where we have our bed – a wooden bed frame, with a thick straw mattress and a linen sheet, and the woollen blanket Ma's had woven for us specially. The room's cosy enough, drawing warmth from the hall's fire through the flimsy partition wall. I've brought a candle with me and set it down on the small green painted chest that was a wedding gift. Richard's close beside me, one hand resting lightly on my waist. Then, with his other hand, he takes my shoulder and turns me round to face him. Our eyes meet and I don't look away despite my churning belly. He smiles thinly and I smile back, willing my quaking breast to calm.

'Ready?' he says.

I nod. I've little choice. But I raise my hands and rest them on his arms, to delay a moment longer. In the dimness of the candlelight, I study his face more closely than I have before. It has the square shape of an ox's and his nose is rather broad. When he's not smiling – which is most often – the corners of his mouth droop in a melancholy-seeming pout. But his eyes redeem the rest: their blueness and their brightness shine out even in this gloomy light, and I can see in them something of the twinkle I saw always in my Uncle William's eyes, and that thought gives me comfort.

After a few moments Richard takes his hands from my shoulders, and mine also fall away. Leaning forward slightly, he unknots my new leather girdle and lets it drop, then he takes my hands one after the other and, turning them, unlaces a little of each sleeve. I feel sure he can feel me trembling, but he doesn't mention it as he turns me around and undoes the back lacing of my kirtle. When the lacing is undone, he draws my kirtle down, over my shoulders and my arms, and lets it slip down to the floor, leaving me shivering a little in my thin chemise.

'Get under the blanket,' he says, and I obey, glad of the blanket's warmth, and its concealment.

I watch Richard strip off his surcoat and his tunic, throwing them carelessly to the floor, but then I pull up the blanket and just peep over its edge as he unties his hose and then unknots the drawstring of his braies and lets them fall. At last he blows out the candle and climbs into the bed beside me, naked apart from his linen shirt. I make no sound as I feel his hand reach out and, first brushing against my thigh, push up the hem of my chemise towards my waist.

'Are you ready?' he says again, and I nod, although in truth I'm not.

My husband gives a little grunt, as he rolls on top of me and kneels astride my body. Then I can feel him pulling up his shirt and, lifting one knee, he pushes my legs apart and in a sudden movement drives his member into me. I can't help but cry out at the pain.

'What's wrong?' he says.

I shake my head in the darkness, trying not to weep. 'Nothing,' I whisper. I grit my teeth as he drives once more, and then again, until he shudders and cries out, and flops down onto my chest.

I assume it's over. If it is, I didn't enjoy it. Should I have done? I don't really know. I wish now I'd asked Ma what to expect, but I'd thought it'd be a pleasure not a pain, with no need of explanation.

Richard soon falls asleep still lying on me, crushing the breath out of me with his weight. Freeing one hand, I push at his shoulder, and am grateful when, still sleeping, he rolls off me with a snuffling grunt and lies snoring on his back.

I long for sleep, but lie awake unable to drift away. Rubbing my thighs together, I can feel a stickiness between them, and when I touch it with my fingers I can feel it's wet. I want so much to get up and light the candle, so I can look at what it is, but I'm afraid of waking Richard and anyway I'm loath to leave the warmth of the bed. So I lie still, trying not to

think of what's down there, and wondering if this so-called act of love will ever bring me pleasure.



What I feel for Richard is not love. When I look at him, I don't feel that tremor of delight I remember fluttering through my body when I saw, or even thought of, Thomas Wodeman. Standing at Tom's side, I ached for him to touch me and, when he did – a gentle caress or a furtive, tender kiss – an icy shiver of excitement thrilled up and down my spine.

Some days I'm sad to think I'm married to a man I do not love – and who does not, I think, love me – a man whose lovemaking is brief and brutish, with no tenderness or passion, scarcely different from the coupling of an ox and cow, or dog and bitch. Sometimes I imagine how it might have been with Tom and I'm certain, if he'd made love to me, my pleasure would've been as great as his.

I've always thought a woman must enjoy the act of love as much as her husband if she's to conceive a child, but now I know that's just something people say. For though in truth I shrink from Richard's nightly ploughing, and have to grit my teeth to bear it, yet a child's growing inside me, conceived, I think, not long after our wedding night. Already, it's kicking against my belly.

The coming baby's a delight – I think for Richard as well as for me. In our anticipation of parenthood, at least, we're finding a sort of mild contentment that could be – I tell myself – as valuable as love.

1326

XV.

We're a good team, Richard says. Or at least he said it once, many months ago, and I was then happy to agree.

I suppose he's content enough with our children – Will, Lizzie and little Geoffrey – and with the success we're making of our holding. But this is the second year the summer's been so hot, with so little rain the ponds and streams are all dried up. Ten years ago we were

praying for the rain to stop, and now we're beseeching it to fall. It's the same for everyone of course, finding enough water for crops and animals a daily struggle.

For Richard, though, it seems particularly irksome. He never wanted to be a farmer, no more than I wanted to be a farmer's wife. It was foisted on us by our parents, though in truth we did know we were fortunate, with no good reason to protest.

Now, for my part, I'm happy as the mother of three healthy children, with yet another almost here. But that little old resentment – that inkling of what might have been – lurks still, and bubbles up when life seems more troublesome than usual. I think often of my two oldest brothers – Edwin and George – who escaped a life of daily toil for one of learning, which still I find an irritation, foolish as that is. For I – a woman – could hardly have become a bishop's secretary like George, or stand on the high rung of the Church's ladder that Edwin now occupies, as archdeacon of wherever it is, far away up in the north of England.

But now there's a new irritation, and it's this maybe as much as the farming that's so rankling Richard. For his younger brother, Adam, has just gone off to sea – an uncommon thing for a son of Broadham – and Richard's resentful of what he considers his brother's great good fortune, to escape the villein life, explore the world, and maybe even find adventure.

In the stifling warmth of these summer evenings, we sometimes sit together on the rough bench Richard made from the trunk of a fallen ash tree. We watch the sun lowering in the sky, then dipping in an orange blaze behind the trees that mark one of the boundaries between the *atte Hyl* lands and Sir Giles's *demesne*.

The news of Adam's leaving came yesterday – though his ship set sail for France some days ago – and all today Richard's been yet more silent than he usually is. But, as the sun slips away and the clouds above the trees are lit up in a rosy glow, he clears his throat. 'Does the sun set the same the world over? Is what Adam's seeing now the same as here?'

'Is he in France already, do you think?'

He shrugs. 'I suppose it's not far in fine weather.'

'My grandfather went to France,' I say, 'and other places too. Uncle William used to tell me of his travels.'

'You've not talked of him before,' says Richard. 'Was he a merchant? Or a soldier?'

'I don't know,' annoyed with myself for never asking Ma about him. 'But I know he brought home special things, like that garden book my uncle William gave me.'

Richard shrugs again. 'Any traveller might buy a book.'

I agree, and we're silent again until, as darkness throws its cloak around us, Richard clears his throat again. When he speaks, I hear a little snagging in his voice.

'I wanted to travel,' he says, 'see more of the world.' He coughs, maybe to clear away the catch. 'I'd like to know what sights Adam's seeing on his journey.'

'Perhaps not all that much,' I say, thinking to ease my husband's envy. 'After all, he's just a ship's hand.'

I can see him turn and look out into the darkness. 'Who knows where it might take him?' he says, his voice hardly more than a murmur.

I don't add to Richard's melancholy by saying I too feel wistful about the world I'll never see. Instead I say it's time to check the children are asleep and, rising awkwardly from the bench, just as the baby flips inside my belly, I turn to go back into the house. But Richard does not follow, and I'm almost asleep when he rolls onto the bed, his back towards me and immediately starts snoring.



Only days later, on a hot June night, my baby decides the time has come to escape my belly. As my pains grow stronger and closer together, Richard bids Will watch over his sister and little brother and, not bothering with a saddle, mounts Bonnie and speeds away to fetch both Ma and Edith Bellyng, the best-trusted midwife in Broadham.

When Edith and Ma arrive, having travelled here, no doubt at headlong speed, in the back of Pa's new cart, their faces are as sweaty from their short journey as mine is from my hopeless efforts to prevent my cries frightening the children, huddled together in a corner of the room, eyes wide, their arms around each other.

Edith Bellyng immediately takes charge, shooing the two men from the room, bidding them take the children and cheer them with a game. Ma hangs a pot of water on the fire, and then bustles about closing window shutters and doors and stuffing straw into the keyholes.

'Must keep you good and warm,' she says, patting my arm, though she can surely feel the heat issuing fiercely from my skin.

I smile feebly. 'And protect the babe from evil spirits?'

Edith grunts agreement, but Ma clicks her tongue. 'Blessed Saint Margaret and the Holy Mother will protect you,' she says, and murmurs some words of prayer. Then she helps me to squat down upon the edge of our sturdiest stool while she – still strong despite her advancing years – stands firm behind me and bids me lean against her.

Edith draws up another stool and sits before me, wiping dry my dripping face and rubbing my taut and straining belly all over with an oily salve.

‘This’ll ease your pains, Agnes,’ she says, ‘and help the baby come.’ She whispers words of calm and comfort as her hands bear down upon my belly.

But the baby doesn’t seem to want to come.

‘Must be a boy,’ says Edith, grinning. ‘I recall young Will being just as difficult.’

Ma laughs, and I try to join in, but the pains are coming so fierce and strong I can hardly catch my breath.

Then Edith jumps up from her stool. ‘Stay here with Agnes, Marjory, while I go round and open things up. That usually does the trick!’

Ma grunts, and when Edith’s out of earshot, mutters ‘foolish woman!’. But I’ve no objection to Edith’s funny ways, if they’ll help this baby out. I can hear her bustling from room to room, and know she’s opening cupboard doors, unlocking chests, and untying any knots she finds.

Ma might think Edith foolish but it’s not much longer before the baby slips from me in a rush and waits hardly a moment before telling us, with fury, what he thinks of his short journey from my belly to the midwife’s hands.

‘What did I say?’ she says. ‘A boy!’

She ties and cuts the cord with expert fingers, then washes him in the water Ma’s heated on the fire, rubbing his skin with salt and oil, and drying his little body with the towel I keep especially for my babies. Then, wrapping him tightly in a swaddling cloth, she rubs a little honey around his gums before laying him against my breast and fixing his mouth upon my nipple.



The afternoon’s so hot and sticky I’m forever wiping the sweat from my own skin and the children’s, and all our clothes cling damply to our bodies. Will cries so ceaselessly I agree at last to leave the airless house and walk down to the orchard, to sit in the apple trees’ cool shade. I fill a basket with a flask of boiled milk and some biscuits, and a spare clout for baby Edwin.

Edwin’s such a bonny bright-eyed baby, who roars loudly for his milk and rocks his own cradle with the very vigour of his pitching and rolling. But now, God bless him, he’s not complaining like his brother, but lying quietly in his cot. When I bend down to pick him up,

he gurgles and I'm sure I see him smile. I stroke his cheek, and find it comfortably dry, not damp and sticky like the rest of us. I take him up into my arms and, noticing how dry his swaddling cloths are too, I coo at him, glad we can go down to the orchard without delay.

'What a good boy you are,' I say, and kiss his forehead. Then I call to the others. 'Bring the basket, Will, and let's go and find some shade.'

It's indeed a far better place to be, underneath the apple trees. There's very little breeze to relieve us from the heat, but what there is gently fans the heavily laden branches and the rustling leaves at least sound like a breath of wind. The three older children soon settle: Will and Lizzie play happily together with the wooden horses Pa carved for them last winter, and baby Geoffrey – out of his swaddling for months now, but so intent on crawling into mischief I have to tether him like a puppy – seems content to keep inside the circle of shade cast by the tree, for each time he scuttles beyond its edge and feels the sun's heat on his head, he scurries back again. Will and Lizzie giggle at their little brother's funny capers, and I can't help but laugh as well. How good it is to see them merry once again.

Free for a few moments to attend to little Edwin, I shuffle over to where I've left him, nestling in a folded blanket between the roots of the old tree. He's quiet still, but his face is as red as when he bawls and, touching his cheek, I find his skin is hot, yet still as dry as it was before. Unwrapping the lower part of the swaddling cloth, I unfold the clout and find it quite dry too, though the yellow staining on the cloth is dark. I feel a panic rising in my breast, though I've no idea what if anything's amiss. I tickle him to make him laugh but he seems not to notice, and when I look into his eyes, I'm certain he can't see me.

When Richard comes home tired and hungry from the fields, he finds his youngest son naked and unmoving in his cradle, the other children silent and bewildered, his wife collapsed and weeping.

I can't bear to look him in the face.

He kneels down beside me and takes hold of my dripping chin.

'What's happened?' he says, his voice quiet yet full of accusation.

I shake my head. 'I don't know!' I say, unable to stop the tears. 'He was so well—'

'So what changed?' he says. 'Was he too hot?'

'I don't think so,' I say. 'The rest of us were sweating but his skin was dry—'

Richard's blue eyes blaze. 'But was he *hot*?' he cries. I can't deny it.

‘Didn’t you think to take off that stupid swaddling cloth?’ he says, and I shake my head. Swaddling’s meant to keep a baby safe – comfortable. ‘Imagine how hot he must’ve felt inside that *shroud*–’ He spits out the word as if it’s the weapon I’ve just used to kill my baby.

‘I did...’ I say, ‘but too late–’ I let out a scream and beat my forehead against the cradle’s edge.

But my husband gives me no consolation in my grief. The children burst immediately into tears when they see and hear my terror, and it’s then he goes to comfort.

XVI.

Richard leaves the house each day much earlier than he used to and comes home late, not till it’s almost dark. He has his dinner in the fields and eats little of the supper I prepare. In bed, we lie always back-to-back – not touching, nor speaking. He takes no interest at all in me and even speaks little to the children.

He’s decided to rebuild the barn and this morning the carpenter’s come to discuss the job. He knocks on the door soon after first light and Richard gulps down his pot of small ale and rushes outside to meet him with such a merry greeting I wonder if he’s the same man who just failed to pay me any sort of notice.

Sighing, I tether Geoffrey to the table leg with a leash long enough so he can roam a little but not reach the fire, and I settle Will down to play with Lizzie while I attend to my chores – chopping vegetables for dinner, mending Richard’s hose, tidying the house. When I fling open the door to sweep out the dirty rushes from the floor, I see three men over by the barn, hard at work tearing away its rotten timbers. Richard’s no longer with them – I suppose he’s left them to it and gone off to the fields.

I lean against the doorpost watching them at work. It’s cooler now the days are drawing in but the morning sun still has the power to make a man sweat. After a while one of them stands up, pressing a hand against his back and wiping his sleeve across his face. He gestures to the others to continue and, turning, walks towards a cart standing some distance away, the horse harnessed to its shafts idly cropping at a patch of grass. But, as he turns, I can’t suppress a gasp, and wonder why I hadn’t known already it was him. Unable to stop myself – and quite unmindful of propriety – I let my broom drop with a clatter, pick up my skirts and run across the yard towards him.

‘Thomas!’ I cry. ‘Tom Wodeman!’

He turns to see who's calling him. I'm not sure what to make of his first expression – is it pleasure, or alarm? Nonetheless, the expression quickly changes to a smile, and he walks towards me.

He bows his head as he comes near. 'Mistress atte Hyl,' he says. 'You're looking well.'

I grin like a silly girl. My heart's pounding, and it's not from running.

I nod. 'I am,' I say, though of course it's hardly true. 'You?'

Tom shrugs. 'Well enough,' he says. 'Perhaps you haven't heard?'

He tells me the wife he married instead of me all those years ago suffered one loss after another until, last year, having finally brought a baby boy to term, she died in the birthing of him.

'The baby lived a week,' Tom says, 'and I buried him with his mother.'

I tell him then of little Edwin's death though, as I tell it, it sounds more like a mishap than a mother's careless failing.

'Then we both know the pain of a child's loss,' he says, and I nod. 'But you still have a family,' he continues, 'whilst I'm now quite alone.'

He turns his face towards the sun and I can see a glistening on his cheek. A tightness grips my chest and, dismissing it as sorrow for his sadness, I change the conversation to a less painful matter.

'How long will it take to rebuild our barn?'

He shrugs and gives a little grin. 'Weeks,' he says. 'But it'll not just be me and my men here – as soon as we've cleared the old timber away, the mason'll come to lay the footings. Then we'll come back to raise the frame and build the walls.'

'So I'll be seeing more of you,' I say, and at once bite on my lip. A warming flush spreads to my neck and face. My hand goes to my wimple's edge and I pull at it to hide my flaming cheeks.

But Tom grins again and his eyes are smiling in that way I used to love. 'I'll be here, Mistress atte Hyl,' he says, 'but whether or not you see much of me...' He trails off, leaving the prospect vague and me feeling like a foolish girl.

Later, I don't mention my encounter with Tom Wodeman. It occurs to me that Richard's no idea Tom and I were once in love, or even that we knew each other. But I say nothing to my husband about Tom or the past we shared. And because I don't – because I can't – I feel it is a guilty secret.

And feeling that, and understanding *why* I feel it, I determine to keep away from Tom Wodeman while he's working on our barn. I'll busy myself with my many chores inside the house and with the children, and spend more time in the garden, which is the other side of the house, away from the yard and barn. Though, if I allow myself to think of Tom's smiling eyes, I fear my fortitude might weaken.

XVII.

These days John Tyler goes rarely to the alehouse. His melancholy is etched upon his face. There is no one much to drink with any more – all his friends are married, and the drinkers now are mostly lads ten years his junior.

But one man no longer young nor married is the carpenter, Tom Wodeman, lately returned to Broadham after years living away. As they drink alone together, the carpenter tells John of the loss of his wife and child, and his decision to come back and set up a business of his own, now his ageing father can no longer cope.

John raises a subject close to his heart. 'Will you look for another wife?'

Tom shakes his head. 'I would, but I hear Broadham's got few prospects.'

John agrees. 'It's high time I was wed, but there's only little maids or ageing widows – and none I fancy.'

The carpenter grins. 'A widow can be a good match – provided she's got land, and is still young enough to be interested in what's inside your braies.'

The two men laugh together, and agree that swiving is ever on their minds. But John then knits his brow, for he suspects Tom not only thinks of it but often *does* it too, and he laments out loud his own unwanted and largely untried chastity.

The carpenter shrugs. 'Ah, John,' he says, 'it's not hard to find a maid to tup. I wouldn't want to marry them, but I can always find some wench to serve me well.'

XVIII.

Once Tom's men have dismantled the old barn and taken away the rotten timbers, it's Henry Stevens, the stonemason, and his men, who arrive each day at dawn, and while they're here I can go about my work without restriction. But the day comes soon enough for the carpenters' return and, when they do, I keep the yard door closed and come and go just through the garden door.

The weather's keeping fine and it's so pleasant in the garden. There's much to do – weeding leeks and planting out more cabbages, lifting onions and garlic to overwinter in our store, picking peas and beans for drying. I'm so glad the weather's dry and warm so I can follow the advice in my gardening book.

Harvest not the onion till the leaves are dry and withered. Push the leaves over to lie upon the earth and let the sun complete the ripening before you gather them for storing...

For I remember well how, in those rain-drenched years, Ma's onions never dried enough to store. She'd pull them all out at once and we ate as many as we could before they rotted – and how much we missed their pungency in all the tasteless months that followed.

I settle the children on the little patch of grass that lies between the garden and the house. Geoffrey's tethered as usual – this time to a strong stake driven into the ground – and Will's in charge, though he's already irked to have to amuse his little brother and sister so often. Child minding's a job for girls, he says, aggrieved he's not allowed to help his father in the fields. So says a four year old!

I'm going to lift the last of the onions today, and lay them out to dry. There are plenty still to lift, but I work quickly along the rows with my small mattock, gently loosening the fat golden bulbs from their bed. Shaking off the light dry soil, I leave them lying on the surface for the sun to crisp their skins. Then I collect into a basket the garlic I dug up last week, their skins already frail and wispy, taking them to the small shed Richard built behind the house.

I start to set out the bulbs on an old flat winnowing basket so they can finish drying. But suddenly the room goes dim and I turn to see who's standing in the open door. For a few moments I can't quite see, but then my eyes accustom to the gloom.

He's taken off the workman's coif he wears to keep out the dust and dirt, and his black hair's free and flowing to his shoulders, just as he wore it years ago. His brown eyes smile at

me, and my resolve is almost swept away. Saying nothing, he comes forward and, reaching for my hand, he lifts it to his lips and kisses each fingertip in turn. He knows just what he's doing, for a small surge of desire erupts inside me, and my head's struggling to keep a grasp of what's happening outside this hot cocoon.

'Why've you come here, Tom?' I say, my voice a strangled whisper.

He chortles. 'I thought I was making that plain,' he says and I nod, knowing the question was ridiculous.

'Anyway, it's dinnertime,' he says. 'The men are eating, so I—'

I gasp. 'Dinnertime! How can it be so late?' I cry. 'The children'll be hungry.'

He shakes his head. 'They're playing happily enough,' he says, and slips his hand around my waist and pulls me to him. Then, pressing his body hard to mine, he pins me back against the wooden shelves.

I cry out, shocked at the unexpected force. I tell myself this is assault, but my body's responding to the delicious pressure of his loins pushing against mine, betraying me, dulling my reason.

But then, beyond this cramped shed and Tom's embrace, I hear Will calling me, and my head clears in an instant. Taking him by surprise, I push Tom aside. My sleeve catches on the handle of the winnowing basket behind me and it tumbles off the shelf sending the garlic bulbs skittering across the floor. I ignore them, and in two steps I'm standing at the door. My heart's pounding and I sigh, from relief I think but also from regret.

'I must go to my children, Tom,' I say. He pulls a face, a sort of wistful grin, and nods. Then, kneeling down, he gathers up the garlic bulbs.



Tom comes each day to the shed, finding me – whatever time in the morning or afternoon I'm there – making some excuse I suppose to his men for leaving them to continue with the work alone. In truth, I give in easily. Each day I'm distracted beyond reason from my chores, waiting for him to come. And when he's here, I think of nothing but his tongue upon my breasts and his cock between my legs and, afterwards, it frightens me to realise how far my children drift from my mind in those heady, selfish moments.

Later, when he's gone, I'm in an agony of conflict. I'm racked with terror at my sin but unable to confess it for the shame of seeing Master Anselm's shocked and disappointed eyes.

Yet I'm quite powerless to tell Tom not to come to me again. For the truth is my hunger for the pleasure Tom brings me is far stronger than my fear.

Now I lie awake, back-to-back with my sleeping husband, turning over and over in my head the certain knowledge that my pleasure will have a price. At length, steeling myself to deepen my deception – yet fearful of the outcome – I turn to face his back and, my heart thumping, I put out a hand to stroke the solid jutting of his hip and then his thigh. He stirs a little in his sleep but when I'm bold enough to close my fingers around his drooping cock, it responds and he wakes up and rolls to face me in the dark.

'You sure?' he says.

"Jezebel" is whispering in my head as I say 'Yes'.

Richard's breathing quickens as he climbs on top of me and, entering me at once, ploughs me three, four, five times before the shudder comes and, sighing, he rolls off me and falls asleep again.

Next morning, before the children are awake, Richard talks to me more than he's done for months – in truth not very much or about anything in particular, just the sort of talk we used to have when we were still a team. But I can't bear to look him in the eye, for fear of what he'll see in mine. I can't abide to think how hurt he'd be to discover my deceitfulness. For, though I don't love my husband, neither do I hate him. Indeed, if I hate anyone, it's myself. And maybe also Tom, for uncovering so easily the frailty of my hunger and giving me no choice but to gorge myself on him.

But soon the building of the barn is done, and Tom Wodeman no longer has a reason to be here. Our exciting, shameful amour is over. It must be over, I tell myself. And yet, despite it all, I can't give him up.

Can't give *it* up.

I'm accustomed to go into Broadham once a month or so, to sell my surplus vegetables and fruit in the little makeshift market, and replenish my stores of necessities like salt and tallow. But there's so much to do on market days, there'd be no time to spare for Tom.

I decide to go more often, telling Richard openly I'd rather spread the load. He seems not to suspect my reasons and agrees. But there's an obstacle I don't discuss with him – the children. I consider taking on a girl to mind them while I'm gone, but then I think of Ma. I tell her of my plan, and suggest the children's visits as a chance for her to enjoy their company, and happily she sees it that way too.

So now it's my mother I'm deceiving as well as my husband. I know it and I'm ashamed, but I have no choice.

1327

XIX.

My little Beatrix has black hair and brown eyes.

Richard was looking forward to the baby's birthing but, when she arrived, I saw the disappointment in his eyes, though he said nothing. Now he ignores her mostly, though not so it's obvious to others.

I think I'd prefer him to be angry. I don't know what he does and doesn't know, and it's unsettling. And the slight return to closeness we shared a few months ago has gone again. He hardly talks to me, though he still ploughs me once a week or so, as if he's staking some sort of claim.

1328

XX.

I know now where my hunger for Tom Wodeman has led me.

In truth – although it's only days ago – I can't remember how it happened, or even *what* happened. Richard won't speak of it. He blames me entirely – for allowing another of his sons to die – and I can do no other than admit he's right.

I seek Tom out in Broadham, and find him working on some house repairs in the middle of the village. I make no attempt to draw him away for a private conversation.

'I heard about your little lad,' he says, and reaches out to take my hand. But I take a step back, not trusting myself to his touch. I look up and see the hurt in his eyes, but I'm resolved.

‘It was my fault,’ I say, keeping my voice low. ‘I let myself be distracted.’

He looks perplexed. ‘Distracted?’

I nod. ‘By you.’

He frowns. ‘You’re blaming *me*?’

‘No, of course not,’ I say. ‘I knew what I was doing – I wanted it. But I shouldn’t have.’

‘You regret it, then?’

I sigh and shake my head. ‘I don’t know. Of course I regret losing Geoffrey.’ I can’t stop the tears leaking from my eyes. ‘But how can I regret our love? How can I wish away our little Beatrix?’

He shrugs, but my tears are falling faster, and I’m wondering if I can bear it, never to see him again, never again to have my hunger for him sated. When I look up again, I can’t construe his face. I’d thought – hoped, perhaps – he’d try to change my mind, but he’s saying nothing.

I don’t know how to end the conversation. I don’t want to end it at all, but I must.

‘I’m sorry,’ I say at length, and he nods, shuffling his feet. He’s like a sulky lad, rolling his tongue around inside his mouth, as if he can’t think what else to do. Then he stops rolling and nods again slowly.

‘This is it, then?’ he says. ‘Just like that?’

‘No,’ I cry, ‘not “just like that”. I can’t bear for us to part – truly I can’t. But I have to, you must see that?’

He shrugs again. ‘I’d been thinking you’d leave Richard, and you and Beatrix come and live with me.’

I cry out, and Tom’s workmen look up. ‘You’ve never said that before. Why say it now?’

I bow my head, my mind a sudden tangle. Could I even think of leaving Richard? My marriage was made in the sight of God – it’s not for me to end it.

When I look up again, Tom’s staring at me. ‘There’s been no need before.’

I nod and wipe my teary face with the edge of my cloak. ‘And now it’s too late.’ I close my eyes, wishing myself no longer here.

‘So you’re denying me my daughter?’ he says. ‘My only child?’

I gasp with sudden understanding. ‘Yet you’ve not asked for her before, and she’s already eight months old.’

He shakes his head. ‘How could I? She’s been hidden away inside the cuckold’s house.’ His mouth then stretches into a mocking grin. ‘Who seems not to care about the cuckoo in his nest.’

‘That’s not fair!’ I cry, my temper rising. ‘Richard’s a good man. He accepted her without a word, despite what he must’ve known. How could I forsake such a man? And how could I abandon Will and Lizzie?’

‘So you’re abandoning me instead,’ he says, and turns to go. ‘So be it.’

He walks slowly away, back to his workmen. He turns just once and, raising his hand to his forehead, tugs at his hood.



Now at last I’ve told Tom I’ll not see him again, I find my heart, though still yearning for the pleasure that he gave me, is calmer, not so fearful of the sin to which my hunger drove me. Yet, at times, I wonder if I’m deceiving myself. For, after all, I *have* still sinned. Does ceasing sin absolve you in some way, avert the risk of punishment in the world to come? Or is merely *ceasing* not enough?

If, from this moment on, I pray every day for pardon, am wholly faithful to my husband, and give my entire, unbroken, devotion to my children – can I yet be saved?

Yet, as time passes, my fears diminish and my promises to myself seem less pressing, and I begin to question after all the wisdom of my choice.

For I defended Richard to Tom, upholding his goodness as a man and his steadfastness as a husband. But in truth, I’m not now sure – if I ever was – of Richard’s virtues, as a husband or a man.

I gave up the man I loved, to ease my guilt – a guilt that remains a thorn as sharp as ever in my heart. I denied a father access to his daughter, to keep up the pretence she was legally conceived and born.

And for what?

The husband I stood up for is not standing up for me. He knows he’s no longer cuckolded, but we returned to lying back to back long ago. It’s clear he blames me wholly for the loss of his two sons, and it rankles with him daily – maybe each time he sees me in his house.

This past year's been a good one on the farm – the animals thrived and the fields produced good harvests. But Richard's not satisfied with what he has – he never was of course, but his discontent's grown worse. He talks little but, when he does, it's always to bemoan the endless dullness of our lives, day in day out, year in year out.

'Surely there's more to life than this?' he says, and now I do agree.

'But what else can we do?' I say. 'We have the children.'

He looks up at me, his face gloomy and careworn. He shakes his head. 'Get me some ale,' he says, in a growl I'm hearing more and more these days.

He spends the evening drinking, and I go out into the dark to close up the animals for the night. When I return to the house, he's drunk and lunges at me, brandishing his mazer like a weapon. I easily avoid him and, the ale spewing onto his shirt, he falls against the table edge, swearing as the sharp corner catches at his hip.

This is the man I left my beloved for. Of course I had no choice but, even so, I find I dislike him more and more. Yet, despite my loathing, I fear more he'll give up the farm and leave, maybe following his brother Adam.

Then *I'll* be the one abandoned – with a farm to run and three children to manage all alone. He'll have got away, escaped the wearisome constriction of our life. But I'll be left behind, unable to escape – in truth, not wholly wanting to, for how could I desert the children?

And yet...



3: War

Richard atte Hyl

1328

I.

When snow came that night six weeks ago, little Geoffrey thought it magic. But Will'd seen it before, and said he was off to throw snowballs with his cousin Ralph. Geoffrey wanted to go too, and Will pouted and pulled roughly at the fastenings of his hood.

I was at the forge in Broadham when we heard a cry go up. We saw folk running to the pond. I ran too. I saw a child lying on the bank. Folk were crowding round but they parted when I came near.

'Master atte Hyl,' someone said. 'It's your lad here.'

I ran forward to find Geoffrey, wet, cold, whimpering.

I shouted to the children standing by, 'What happened here?' They just shrugged, shook their heads. Then I saw my nephew Ralph.

'What happened?' I said. Snivelling, he said Geoffrey must've fallen in.

A bigger boy stepped forward. 'We pulled him out, mister,' he said. 'He were only in there moments.'

I threw off my warm cloak and wrapped it round my boy, clasped him to my chest.

Back home, we tried all ways to warm him up – dry clothes, blankets, hot milk, chafing his arms and legs. Nothing worked. He didn't stop his shivering. Despite the milk, his lips stayed cold. So were his ears, his fingers and his toes – we felt them each in turn. Agnes brought a candle close and they were blue. But his face was pale.

And he wasn't speaking.

Lizzie rocked the baby's cradle, singing softly. A long time passed before she came and tweaked my sleeve.

'What is it, Lizzie?' I said, impatient.

‘Pa?’ she said, her voice a whisper. ‘Where’s Will?’

‘Oh, sweet Mary and Joseph!’ cried Agnes. ‘Where is he?’

‘I’ll go look for him,’ I said. I put on my boots, not bothering with cloak or hood, and ran out of the house.

Inside the barn, I heard him weeping. I climbed the ladder to the loft. I’d found him there before. He refused to come close at first, wailing at me not to beat him.

‘I never beat you,’ I said, angry he’d think I would.

But I stayed at the loft edge. His crumpled face peered from the hay.

‘What happened, son?’ I said, keeping my voice low. ‘I must know.’

I crawled towards him. He let me take him in my arms, but sobbed too hard to speak. It broke my heart to see him. He was shivering with cold, for the day was drawing in. The warmth had gone from the winter sun. I carried him back to the house, sat by the fire with him on my lap. When Will saw how blue his brother was, he wailed some more. But still he wouldn’t say what happened at the pond.

Agnes said we shouldn’t press him.

We sat all evening by Geoffrey’s side, taking turns to watch, to doze. But, in the middle of the night, I looked into my boy’s pale, old man’s face.

‘He’ll not last the night,’ I said to Agnes. A sob rose in my throat. Even in the poor light of the fire and dwindling candles, I could see her eyes were wide, dark ringed.

I put the blanketed bundle in her arms. ‘Hold him close.’ She nodded, clasped him to her breast, wrapped her own cloak round them both.

I rode for Master Anselm, had to wake the old man from his sleep. But he was willing enough to come, to bless our boy before he died.

As Master Anselm left us – happy, he said, to walk back through the snow – he reminded me to call for the coroner.

‘An accidental death must be reported, Master atte Hyl.’

I didn’t want to but had to allow it. Though it’d be days, weeks, before the coroner came. We had to keep the body safe until then. I’d have buried our little boy that day, if I’d had my way. But Agnes said we should obey the law.

‘The coroner’ll ask questions,’ I said. I lowered my voice. ‘He’ll want to talk to Will.’

She shrugged. ‘If he can coax the boy to speak.’ Since his brother’s death, Will did little but huddle silent in a corner of the house. I tried to make him talk, but he shook his head, pulled his hood down to hide his face.



I didn’t want to marry. Not when there was the whole world to see. But Father wouldn’t listen. His eldest son, I was expected to play the part. To accept the land he offered, a wife to help me farm it.

He found me Agnes Tyler. No beauty, Agnes. He could’ve found a prettier one. Though she proved a useful wife – a hard worker. She knew more about farming than me, though I’d not admit it.

It was the children kept my discontent at bay. They’re why I stuck at the endless tedium of ploughing, sowing, reaping. But then my brother Adam went away, to sail on ships, see the world. Agnes said maybe he’d not see much of it, being just a deckhand. But he’d escaped the monotony of manor life.

The news of it unsettled me.

Agnes seemed content enough. Though, when little Edwin died, soon after Adam left, she blamed herself for it, for months. And I too found her wanting, as a mother, and a wife.



A week passed before the coroner arrived. We kept Geoffrey wrapped in a sheet, stored high up in the barn. At least the weather was cold.

I’d imagined coroners unfeeling. But this one – Henry Etheridge – was kind, wanted only to find the truth of Geoffrey’s death.

I took Will in my arms, hugged him close. ‘Geoffrey’s death was an accident, Will,’ I said. ‘You’ve no cause to blame yourself.’

Master Etheridge agreed. ‘Young William made an error of judgement,’ he said, ‘but he’s only five. We’ll agree it was misfortune ended young Geoffrey’s life. No blame can be apportioned except to the pond itself. I’ll apply to his lordship – as owner of the pond – for reparation for your loss, Master atte Hyl.’

‘Money won’t bring Geoffrey back.’

But I was glad of the coroner’s decision. There was no point blaming a child for neglect. It’s the nature of children to be careless.

Not so their mothers.



Agnes is still taking Geoffrey's death most hard.

'I shouldn't have let Will take his brother with him,' she says, over and over. 'He's only a baby himself.'

I repeat the coroner's verdict: it was an accident. I repeat it, maybe to ease her pain, or my own, though in truth I don't believe it. She was careless over Edwin. You'd have thought then she'd take no chances with the others. Devote herself entirely to their care. Yet she let a three-year old follow his brother out into the snow.

Maybe her devotion was elsewhere?

But no longer now, I think.

1335

II.

Sir Henry's stepped up the weapons training. Broadham men have practised at the butts as long as anyone can remember. But it's been a casual sort of habit. Even if they've got a bow, most don't much bother with practice. It's always seemed a slim chance Sir Henry'd ever need soldiers for the king. King Edward's fought the Scots for years but he gets his soldiers from the north country. He's never had a need of Sussex men.

But it seems times might be changing.

In a meeting of the hallmote, Sir Henry tells us of a new edict from the king, demanding soldiers from every English county.

'The king might soon go to war with France,' he says, shaking his head, 'for it's rumoured King Philip's giving succour to the Scots and making threats against us.' Anxious murmuring hums around the hall. We've heard of King Edward's ceaseless tussle with the French king over his lands in the south of France. But it's seemed of no interest to us – the lands so far away, the argument a matter more of dialogue than war.

‘If he does,’ continues his lordship, ‘my lord, the Earl, intends to give his strong and loyal support, and he will expect a contribution from us here in Broadham.’ The murmuring is now of approval. ‘We will build a militia here, to offer to the king in his time of need. So I intend to provide more formal training for those who show the sharpest skill and keenest interest. All men, sixteen to sixty, can apply.’

Sir Henry grins, his eyes alight. To find the best amongst us, he’s going to put us through our paces.

My father was always keen on the butts. He gave me my own bow when I was just fifteen. A fine bow made of yew, better than I deserved. Father was all for engaging me in what he called manly pursuits. I practised often then. But when I married Agnes, took on the land he pressed on me, there were other tasks to occupy my time.

I’ve not thought of that bow for years. When I dug it out this morning from the back of the storeroom, I found it still in good repair – or good enough at least for practice. I was a fair bowman when I was young. I’m eager now to prove I still have the skill.

On the practice field, five of us line up, facing the targets on a mound some fifty yards away. No distance at all for an expert bowman, but far enough to test our untrained skills. Other men await their turn, eyes bright, legs and arms twitchy.

Sir Henry leads the trial himself. He stands alongside us five, waiting for us to ready.

‘Loose six arrows at your target,’ he says. ‘Take your time. Aim well. The truest shots among you will be chosen.’ We five share rueful glances, my heart thumps against my breast.

‘When you are ready...’ says Sir Henry. Moments later, he gives the command of ‘Nock!’ I fit an arrow to the stave and string.

Then he cries ‘Draw!’

I turn and place my feet as I remember being taught. Then, pulling hard upon the bowstring, I draw it and the arrow to my ear. I fix my eyes upon the target. My hands are growing damp. Fearful the bow will slip, I tell myself to hold fast if I’m to shoot true to the mark.

‘Loose!’

I let the arrow fly. As it whistles away from my ear, I tremble with a moment’s dread, lest it doesn’t find its mark. But a shout goes up, and I see my arrow’s fixed not dead centre of the mark but close. I breathe out, grinning like a fool.

But then Sir Henry shouts ‘Keep going, then!’

And I remember we’re to shoot six arrows, not just one. Then I’m groping in my quiver for another. At the command of ‘Nock!’, my damp hands are fumbling to fit it to the bow. So, when Sir Henry calls out ‘Draw!’ and ‘Loose!’ again my hold’s not steady. The arrow’s not quite straight, lands wide of the centre mark. Angry, I wipe my hands hard against my tunic. Then put my mind to ensuring the next four meet their mark.

And they do, or close enough for his lordship to choose me.

III.

While his father is playing soldiers, Will atte Hyl – grown but hardly yet a man – is shouldering the burden of the farm. It is clear that he resents it – his curling lip, the tension in his neck belie his unspoken feelings. But it is not the work that he begrudges, but the way his father leaves it all to him yet scoffs at his love of the fields and animals, and taunts him for spurning what he calls adventurousness.

Will has an ally in his sister Lizzie – at twelve only one year younger, but sharp-eyed and wise.

When he tells her how greatly he hates fighting, she nods. ‘You never fight with other boys.’ She grins. ‘You don’t even like Ma’s stories about knights and crusades.’ She sighs. ‘Geoffrey used to love them, and so does Peter now.’

Her brother snorts. ‘Who cares about such men? And why’s it so noble to thrust a sword through someone’s belly or poke their eye out with an arrow?’

When his father comes home from Sir Henry’s trial, it sickens Will the way he crows of his success, just like some braggart boy. Ma laughs at Pa’s delight and little Peter claps his hands with glee. The girls too – Beatrix, and even Lizzie – seem proud of his triumph in the trial.

Will just thinks it stupid.

Soon, he will have to practise at the butts himself – he should have started years ago – and it angers him he has no choice. His lips are tight and his dark eyes louring when he confronts his father. 'You might like it, Pa, but why should I be forced to do it?'

But his father merely shrugs and looks disappointed.

IV.

It's disappointing Will's got no longing for adventure. Little Peter's different – he's only three but like his dead brother Geoffrey. He likes to watch me practise at the butts I've set up in our croft. He claps and cheers when I hit the bull's-eye. His eyes shine when Agnes tells the children one of her stories. I don't know where she gets them.

And Sir Roderick rode into battle upon his snow-white steed, his helm plume nodding, his breastplate gleaming, his silver sword aloft. His steed, Osmandua, bounded bravely forward, her nostrils flaring, her dark eyes bright; no fear was in her heart. And bold Sir Roderick, his trusty shield clasped firm across his breast, lunged with his blade to left and right and no sword stroke missed its mark...

Agnes seems proud of me too. Or pleased Sir Henry thinks well of me. But at times I catch her looking fearful, for there's much talk of war. Why else would Sir Henry be training men? Yet she speaks little of it and nor do I.

But I'm excited by the prospect of a battle.

Training's a fine diversion from the monotony of the fields. When I practise, in the croft or out at Broadham's butts, I know my skill's improving. It's a thrill to loose an arrow, see it strike dead centre of the target. And do it time and time again.

But it's not just the getting of the skill. At the butts, where we chosen men share our expertise, a bond's growing up between us – a bond of manhood, of fellow bowmen, of soldiers.

Something I've not known of much before.

1339

V.

Sir Henry's prophecy was right, though it took years longer than he'd thought.

Two years ago, a few weeks after harvest, French ships came close to England's shores. Attacked our vessels and raided towns in Suffolk, and off the Isle of Wight. Broadham's miles from the coast, but the threat from France seemed suddenly much closer than it had. For a while everyone thought war'd already come. Bonfires were built on hilltops all along the coast. The king's commissioners went round recruiting men in coastal towns and villages, demanding they be ready to defend their country. Later, rumour had it the commissioners were coming our way too. Sir Henry was glad his efforts were to be rewarded.

But the commissioners never came.

Yet still rumours flew about the French king raising a great army, preparing to invade. I didn't tell Agnes what I heard. If war came, she'd hear about it soon enough.

Then this time last year, in the spring, the news was all around the village. Agnes' face was grey when she came home. She came out to the barn to find me.

'How far away's Portsmouth?' she said.

I shrugged. 'Thirty miles? Why?'

'They say the French've burned it to the ground,' she said, leaning her head against the doorpost. 'They attacked it from the sea, and burned it to the ground.'

I stopped what I was doing, went over to where she stood.

'How long'd they take to get here?' she said in a whisper.

Surprised, I grasped her by the shoulder, spun her round to face me. 'Get here? You mean they're coming?'

She shook her head. 'Oh no, I'm sure they said they've gone back to France,' she said. 'I was just thinking it's not far from here.'

Later, at the training session, Sir Henry told us of the panic caused on the coast. He urged us to step up our training efforts. For he was sure we'd soon be called upon to support the king.

Many folk were fearful, especially the women. But for others – the members of Sir Henry's militia – the thought we'd soon not just be playing at soldiering, but doing it for real, was rousing. Bands of young men roamed the village, talking with bravado of the fighting, practising mock battles on the village green.

Roused as I was, I didn't speak of it to Agnes. She knew already how much I hoped Sir Henry'd put me forward when the commissioners arrived.

VI.

Robert of Hurst, a prosperous freeman, who has been ingratiating himself for years with Sir Henry, has somehow mustered enough weapons, armour and horses to offer himself as his lordship's best-equipped man-at-arms.

However, his son Alan, who is the same age as Will atte Hyl, like Will also has no interest in fighting. But unlike him, Alan does not confront his father with his hatred of weaponry and his terror of the approaching war. For he knows that a milksop son who prefers to carry a shepherd's crook than wield a soldier's sword has no place in his bellicose father's ambitions.

But Robert knows about his son, and one day pounces like a fox upon a chicken. Tightly grasping the top of Alan's ear between his meaty fingers, he forces him to stand before the assembly of his cronies and retainers.

Towering above the boy, Robert roars. 'Prefer to gambol with the little lambkins, eh, boy?' The cronies snigger and guffaw. 'Rather plough a furrow in the field than a maiden's queynte, eh?' Lunging forward, he grabs at the small bulge in Alan's hose.

Alan's face flames red, whilst the cronies collapse into whooping laughter, and their women hide their giggles behind their veils. Another boy might expect his mother to take his side against such unfatherly brutality. But Elinora chatters blithely to her

neighbour, not even passing comment on her husband's taunting of their son.

His father's face grows dark, his voice thick. 'It matters not one wit to me what weakness you might have for woolly lambs.' He looms over the boy and grabs a handful of his hair. 'But you're my son – though God knows I'd wish it different – and you'll do as I command.'

He pulls hard on Alan's hair, making the boy's eyes water. 'And when Sir Henry commands me to go to war, that also, boy, means *you*.'

VII.

At last the king's commissioners have come to Sussex. But the men they're taking from Sussex and from the other coastal counties are to stay in England, to defend the country from invasion. So I'm glad when Sir Henry tells us the commissioners will not come to Broadham.

'My lord, the Earl,' he says, 'is to fight with the king himself in France, and has commanded our Broadham militia to join him. He will send his own official to recruit the men to go.'

A cheer goes up from my comrades. I'm much relieved. And, even more, excited.

On the morning Sir Henry's to present us to the Earl's official, Agnes flies into a panic.

'Surely you're too old to fight?' she says. She might be right, but I'm not going to agree.

'I'm not yet forty,' I say. 'There's plenty life left in me yet.'

'Yes, life!' she cries. She would go on to say, I'm sure, life for farming, husbanding and fathering, but I don't let her. This is my chance and I'm taking it. For I'm certain Sir Henry'll choose me, never mind my age.

When Sir Henry puts me forward, he claps me on the shoulder, declares me the best of archers. The recruiting officer looks me up and down, maybe wondering how this greying peasant can be so good, especially when he's never been to war. But he nods. I join Sir Henry's small retinue, drawn from his own retainers – men-at-arms and varlets – and a few of us village men as archers.

Agnes is fearful of running the holding on her own. But I dismiss her doubts.

‘Will’s nearly grown. He’s a good farmer. And my brother James will help.’

She looks unconvinced. The children are on her side. Will’s not speaking to me at all. Even Lizzie avoids me when she can. And Peter just looks scared.

In truth, as the leaving day draws near, a small thorn of guilt does prick from time to time. But the anticipation firing up the members of Sir Henry’s force is contagious.

I’m impatient to be gone.

VIII.

If we thought war’d be exciting, we’ve found out we were wrong.

The past weeks have been grim. The sea crossing, from England’s east coast to Flanders, was, according to the crew, a gentle pleasure trip. Sir Henry and his retainers had all sailed before. But for the rest of us it was our first time at sea, and we were sick, heaving up our guts over the ship’s side. Some wept and cried out for their mothers. Some stood green-faced upon the deck, holding fast the wale and calling on God, or the Blessed Virgin, to save their wretched souls.

The crew looked on. They’d seen it all before. But it didn’t stop their snorts of mirth.

Relieved to be back on firm land, we marched east straight to Antwerp to join King Edward. But we were camped there for weeks, waiting for the king to make a move. Then last week we thought it was finally afoot, when he marched us south and set up camp again.

But we’re still waiting.

It seems the king’s as poor as any peasant, for he can’t pay his allies for their contribution to his war. They – princes from around these parts, Brabant and Hainault, even the Holy Roman Emperor himself – are refusing to join us until he does.

Neither have some Englishmen been paid. Some archers, come here on their own account, are threatening to leave for a paymaster more steadfast than the king. But we Broadham men are fortunate, for Sir Henry’s making good the king’s deficiencies from his own purse.

‘I’ll not see men of Broadham starve,’ he says, though his face is dark.



Even without the allies, the army camped around us seems vast beyond imagining. I've never seen so many men together in one place. The biggest crowd I've ever seen before was on Broadham's green at Midsummer. That crowd would fit into one small corner of the host that's gathered here.

We've already been divided into battles, groups of men-at-arms and archers who'll fight under the banner of their own lord or another. Sir Henry's small militia is naturally allotted to the banner of his lord, the Earl. We're sharing our encampment with men from all the Earl's manors and estates. For the first time, I've found companionship with men not born in Broadham, or any part of Sussex.

Simon Bigge's well named, large, broad-shouldered, with a wild shock of dirty yellow hair. An archer, he's served in the king's army for years, though he's still not more than thirty. He keeps us well amused, with his tales of derring-do that none of us believe.

We make the most of our time awaiting the king's pleasure. Or our commanders make it for us. Much of the time we practise – shooting at targets, hand-to-hand combat. But, when we get the chance, we talk – I've never talked so much in all my life.

And Simon tells us tales.

I'll tell you of Jack Archer, one of England's finest bowmen. Jack loved his bow more than his woman, and yet more than that he loved the brother archers who stood beside him on the field of battle. He'd willingly give up his life for any one of them.

It was in the Scottish Wars I met him, at Halidon Hill, some half dozen years ago.

Jack had been at Bannockburn near twenty years before, witnessed the disastrous defeat of the English army, one of just a handful of Englishmen to escape the bloodshed. The deaths of so many of his beloved brothers grieved Jack so sore he swore eternal vengeance for their slaughter, and vowed to kill at least one foe for each of his brothers slain.

For years he could only take his revenge on foes other than the Scots. But finally came the chance for true reckoning. Jack rejoiced in the storm of death he and his brother archers bestowed upon the hapless Scots, a storm that blinded and, at length, entirely overcame them. And when the battle was done, he gloried in the victory, but yet more in the retribution he had at last

obtained for those he loved more than his own life.



The allies have agreed to muster somewhere south of here. We're packing up to march. Thanks to Sir Henry, we Broadham men are fit, but many others are weak from hunger and, for them, the march is slow.

Yet, when we reach the muster point, still the allies don't arrive. Frustration at the lack of action fires up some of the more impatient men. A small band, led by Sir Walter Mauny, one of the king's most favoured commanders, goes pillaging. They come back with laden carts, full of tales of houses plundered, people fled or murdered, villages burned to ashes. The suffering of the villagers sounds grim, but nonetheless we cheer the men who've at last joined some sort of battle with the enemy.

Two days later the king seems to think his army large enough to lay siege to Cambrai, a French garrison. We camp in fields alongside the river, to the south of the city, between it and any help that might come from the French king. It seems a clever plan, intended to goad the enemy as well as invite assault.

But no one comes to relieve Cambrai.

Edward, frustrated by King Philip's indecision, incites Sir Walter and his other commanders to ravage the lands owned by Philip's countrymen. For a week, bands of Englishmen rampage across the countryside, strip it bare of grain and beasts and anything else that might fill the army's bellies or their lords' coffers. They burn whatever's left behind. Neither Sir Henry nor his lord the Earl join these raiding tactics, bidding us stay with the main army, pressing forward with the siege. But the city's too well defended and, after a failed assault against the northern gate, the king loses heart and abandons Cambrai to its citizens.

Sir Henry looks grey when he tells us our next marching orders. 'The plan is two-fold. First we must earn our living from the land we're moving through. Second,' he passes his hand across his eyes, 'we're required to destroy as much land and property as we can.'

Sir Henry shakes his head. 'Of course we need to eat, but the farmers and villagers won't give up their victuals willingly. We'll be forced to take them...'

He doesn't spell out the rest, but we know it's not just land and buildings we must destroy. Only days ago, we cheered when Sir Walter led his men out to pillage. And now it's our turn.

In truth, I'm eager for some action. Though a few of my Broadham comrades seem uneasy at the prospect of what they'll have to do.

One fellow, a great strapping lad, the blacksmith's son, stands up to address Sir Henry. 'When I signed up for this,' he says, his face reddening, 'I thought I'd be fighting soldiers, not murdering women and children.'

Sir Henry nods. 'I feel the same, lad. But it's always been this way. Their lives are forfeit in this game. Violence weakens people's faith in their own king.'

'But it's so brutal,' says the boy, 'and many seem to find the prospect rousing.'

'They do,' Sir Henry says, shaking his head. 'The brutality of man against man. But not many think it *wrong*, merely the acceptable morality of a just war. God is on their side – on *our* side. Remarkable as that sounds.' He grimaces. 'Can't think Our Saviour would much approve.'

There's a murmur of agreement among the group at this and the blacksmith's son sits down. His face is ashen. I wonder why he came – after all, he chose to. As did I. Perhaps his reasons were not the same as mine. But, although I knew no more than he what to expect of war, I now find myself eager to be like Simon Bigge, to be a soldier of the king.

Whatever it takes to be one.



Half a day later, the thousands of the allied army are spread out across a vast tract of French countryside twenty miles wide. Our orders: to murder, steal and burn. We must leave behind a wasteland. A vision of Hell.

We Broadham men stay together, with Sir Henry in the vanguard of our militia. His tactics are different from the other commanders. For he drives the Frenchmen from their homes, urging them to run away, taking their families and a few possessions with them.

'But take no food,' he commands, 'nor any animals. You must leave all that for us.'

The Frenchmen don't go quietly, but at least go with their lives. Though I can't say they look grateful to be spared. Only once they've gone does Sir Henry order us to overrun their homes and gardens. We pile up our carts with whatever food they had: sacks of grain, remnants of smoked hams still hanging from the rafters, squawking hens and new-laid eggs,

rounds of cheese and fresh-baked loaves of bread. We heave in flagons of ale and vats of milk. We tramp through their gardens, churning the soil to mire and ripping from the ground whatever's growing there – beans, leeks, cabbages and turnips – and tearing fruit – apples, pears, medlars, quince – from their orchards. Then, throwing open the doors of barns and sties, we drive out those pigs and cattle we can butcher for our fires and slit the throats of those we can't. When our carts are creaking under the weight of what we've gathered, we set light to whatever's left – houses, barns, animals, trees. When it's burning well we leave, to that night's camp, to enjoy the fruits of our day's work.

After two days of this, Sir Henry falls sick with an ague and is left behind. It's Robert of Hurst who takes Sir Henry's place. He's no rightful claim to it, but other men-at-arms who might have claimed it for themselves do not object when Robert rides his sleek black destrier forward, brandishing his sword, yelling at us to do the bidding of our king.

But, when we ride into the first hamlet, Robert gives the peasants no warning. We charge in amongst the cots and hovels, a tight-packed throng of thundering hooves and bellowing men. The men-at-arms swing swords against the necks of fleeing peasants, chop axes down upon their heads. Sir Henry's not here to stop them. Soon the hamlet's muddy lanes are strewn with mutilated bodies, running red with blood. The way's clear for us to empty them of anything of use.

But it isn't all so easy – some villagers await our coming. Yet our new leader seems unready for resistance. When the village men run at us, beating stout wooden sticks against the horses' legs, thrusting pitchforks at their bellies, Robert's enraged, screams at us to hack the peasants down.

'Show these French bastards who we are!'

The men-at-arms, well armoured against the peasants' rustic weapons, ride their horses fast, thrust the villagers aside with their bucklers, throwing them off their feet, down into the mud. Then two soldiers, dismounting at the door of the nearest cot, draw their swords and run inside. Moments later, they reappear, one hauling by her hair a screaming woman, wearing only a chemise, the other clutching by their shirts two tiny wailing children.

Robert of Hurst rides forward, grinning. He leans down from his saddle, lunging at the woman with his sword, rips through the fabric of her chemise. The sword point grazes the woman's skin, leaving a trail of blood from breast to belly. The thin fabric falls down onto the ground. The woman cries out, tries to cover her nakedness with her arms.

Her husband runs forwards to protect her and is skewered in the belly. The woman falls to her knees, screaming and wailing without pause. A soldier steps forward and smacks her

in the face so hard she collapses on the ground out cold. The soldier bends down, grasps her arms, and hauls her limp naked body up onto his shoulder. Then, striding to a waiting cart, he throws her in. The two children, unhanded for an instant by their captor, run wailing towards their mother. But the soldier grabs hold of them again, and hurls them down onto their father's bleeding lifeless body.

'Fire the hovel,' says Robert, and I run forward with two others.

Burning a house is easy.



Later I find myself in a small group with Simon and two of Robert's fellow men-at-arms. We move from house to house. I can do no other than join in dragging women out, and striking down their husbands. One of the men-at-arms, Gilbert Mannering, pulls a toddler – Geoffrey's age – out from the wooden chest where he was hiding. He takes him outside to show his mother. But, dangling him by his shirt for a few moments, grinning, he then swings him hard against the stout timber doorpost. The crack as the child's head hits the wood is grim.

'Have you no pity?' I say, but the soldier shrugs.

'Better to die quickly than be burned alive.'

Then he strides over to where three women are held fast by the others, their arms pinioned behind them. Following Robert's example, Gilbert orders the soldiers to strip the women naked, despite the chilly autumn weather, to tie their wrists and ankles tightly. They too are then thrown into the cart.

'We'll have them later,' he says, and all of us guffaw.

We soon catch up with Robert and the rest of his retinue. They're surrounding the largest house in the village. They hold the man – given his fine wool tunic, he might be the bailiff – head down, kneeling in the mud. Two archers hold his wife and daughter – she might be thirteen, same as Lizzie – by their hair.

Alan's standing by his father's side. He looks uneasy, and we soon see why. Robert orders his son to strip the girl, handing him a knife.

Alan whimpers. 'Please don't make me, Father.'

Robert's face goes dark, but then his mouth widens into a grin. 'Here's your chance to be a man!'

He cuffs Alan quite lightly on the side of his head, looking round the company for approval. We cheer but, despite his terror of his father, Alan hesitates.

Robert then grabs the boy's ear, puts his face close to Alan's head, hisses something. Alan nods, takes the knife, steps forward and cuts the lacing of the girl's kirtle. Then he rips the fabric until her child's breasts and slender belly are exposed. The girl weeps and begs, for mercy I suppose. But Alan, spurred on by the soldiers' cheers, unties the points of his hose. Then he drops his braies, pushes the girl roughly down onto the ground, and straddles her.

Her father struggles uselessly to free himself. Her mother screams what sounds like abuse at Alan. But Robert steps forward, hits her hard across the mouth. She gasps then begins to howl and struggle as four soldiers grab her hands and feet, spreading her against a low wall.

'Yours, sir,' says one of them. Robert grins and nods, then lifts the skirt of his mail shirt, pressing his paunch between her open legs.

Robert takes his time. When he finishes, he stands up, turns to face his men, grinning and holding his mail shirt above his protruding belly. His cronies are still crowing their approval when a lad – about Will's age, I reckon – bursts, yelling, from behind the house. He moves so quickly, no one has time to stop him plunge the tines of a pitchfork into the soft flesh of Robert's paunch.

Robert, surprise more than shock upon his face, falls backwards onto the weeping woman, blood spurting from three neat wounds. One of the soldiers lets go the woman, lunges at her son, throwing him face down onto the ground. As they fall together, the pitchfork skitters away. The lad tries to throw off the soldier, but the man's too strong. With one knee pressed against the middle of his back, he pulls hard upon the boy's long hair to expose his throat, and draws his knife across it.

Then it's bedlam as the boy's father bellows at his captors, his mother and sister howl, the soldiers roar their fury, and Alan, his braies still hanging at his knees, weeps in terror and confusion.

Amid the uproar, one of Robert's cronies takes charge, clapping me and three other archers on the shoulder. He shouts his orders.

'You four, drag the family inside the house. Tie them together, loot the place, then set it alight. Let them roast!'

I'm a soldier in the English army, my duty to my comrades and my king. We must get this over with, get Robert's bleeding body back to camp. So I grab hold of the lifeless body

of the boy, while the others grapple with his family's flailing arms and legs. We haul them all inside the house, force them down onto the rush-strewn floor, lash them together, the living with the dead, close to the central hearth, where a small fire's burning.

My three comrades search the house for valuables, taking them outside to be hauled to the waiting carts. There's much to loot, for this bailiff's a wealthy man. I'm left to gather what food I can find in this room and the store. As I go back and forth, taking bread and cheese and meat outside, the bailiff jolts me with his shoulder.

'Monsieur,' he says, his eyes wide and full of tears. He says something. It sounds like pleading. But I shake my head, shrug.

He whimpers, tries again in faltering English. 'My woman... my girl... Save them!'

I shake my head again, and can't suppress a laugh. 'No chance! They'll kill me if I do.' Not that he understands.

As I run back to the storeroom to fetch more cheese, the man keeps calling out to me. 'Please, monsieur, I beg!'

I go and cuff him round the ear. I want him to shut up.

When my comrades have taken all they want, they come back to the hall to set the fire. I wave them away.

'I'll do it. You put the stuff on the cart.' They nod and go outside, calling for others to help with the booty.

Inside the house, the woman and girl are wailing. For a moment, I think of Agnes and of Lizzie. The bailiff pleads with me once more. This time I nod. Drawing my knife, I go round behind the family. Then, quickly, I grab hold of the girl's chin, pull it up and back. I slit her throat. Then do the same to her shrieking mother. Their blood spurts in arching plumes across the room.

The bailiff roars in protest, but I shake my head again at him. 'They're saved the agony of the fire,' I say, but of course he doesn't understand.

I kick at the embers in the hearth, add some rushes and cast off clothing to the growing flames. I bring more things to get the fire burning well. Then, as the flames take hold, licking at the bottom of the bailiff's legs, I cuff his ear again and point at the bleeding bodies of his wife and daughter.

'They – not – suffer,' I say. He nods, weeping.

As I emerge from the bailiff's burning house, I see the whole village is in flames. All its inhabitants are, I suppose, either dead or taken.

I join my comrades by the carts. One cart's already gone back to camp.

'We bound up Sir Robert's belly,' says one of the men-at-arms, 'wrapped him in a blanket and put him in a cart.'

'Alongside the naked women, he were,' says one of the young archers, sniggering, and is thumped for his remark.



When we arrive back we find Sir Henry's returned, somewhat recovered from his ague. He's also displaying a rage I've not seen before in our usually mild-tempered lord. As we ride in, he's railing against a man I know is one of his most trusted men-at arms.

'Why did you let him take the lead?' cries his lordship. 'A lout like that! *You* should've taken my place.'

The soldier looks away, shaking his head. 'I'm sorry, my lord. I was at fault.'

'You were! You risked the de Syngletoun reputation,' says Sir Henry.

The soldier's a big man, strong and fearsome. Nonetheless he bites his lip. A faint redness rises on his cheeks. Then he ventures a smile. 'God be praised you're recovered, lord, and at the helm again!'

But Sir Henry just grunts, and turns back into his tent.

IX.

Father Hubert, the physician-friar Sir Henry brought with him, tries every trick he knows to heal the wounds in Robert Hurst's fat belly. But, small as they are, the wounds soon leak a steady flow of vile, foul-smelling pus.

'Shall I bleed him yet again, sire? I fear it may do no good.'

Sir Henry, enraged by Robert's brutal and blundering behaviour, but unwilling to let him die if there was a chance to save him, agrees. 'Do what you can, Hubert. Robert's a thug unworthy to

wear the de Syngletoun badge, but I'll not lose a Broadham man if I can help it.'

But the friar is right and the bleeding does no good. Robert lingers three more days before the poison does its worst.

In those three days, Alan – despite his fear and hatred of his father – spends every moment sitting by his bed, believing it his duty to hear his father's dying words and ensure a priest is there at the end to absolve him of his sins.

Robert drifts in and out of consciousness. In his few lucid moments, he urges his son to be a man. 'You're head of the family now. You must direct your sisters, and take care of your mother.'

When Robert dies, Alan is much relieved by his heartless father's death, but terrified to find himself alone. He wants to go back home to Broadham, though he knows he will get no comfort from his mother, still less acceptance of his new-found authority.

But when he asks Sir Henry, his lordship shakes his head. 'I understand your plight but unless you can make your way back to England on your own–'

Alan gulps. 'On my own? I don't know how.'

'Well, quite.' Sir Henry smiles benignly, placing a fatherly hand on Alan's shoulder. But then he turns away to deal with more pressing matters.

X.

Towards the end of October, the two armies, French and English, are close at last – only a mile or so apart. The French king finally throws down a challenge and Edward happily accepts. Eager now for action, he draws up the battle lines, on a hill near a place called La Flamengrie, with us archers on the flanks, the knights and men-at-arms dismounted in three lines behind a trench defended by Welsh pikemen.

It's still early morning, not long after daybreak. But we all get a special handout of wine, and it soon brings a heady excitement. At last the chance of battle is in sight.

But we find ourselves still waiting.

Simon's used to waiting. 'You novices'll learn. War's as much about waiting as fighting.'

A nearby group of archers shout their agreement. 'Too right, mate!'

Simon grins. 'We just have to make the best of it.' He thrusts his mazer in the air and cheers. We all do the same.

Yet by midday the French king's still not attacked. It's clear he's ordered a retreat. After days of fruitless waiting, King Edward's angry and frustrated, and abandons his attempt to meet the French on the battlefield.

Frustrated too at the waste of time and men and money, Sir Henry tries to explain the outcome of the months of marching, mayhem and murder.

'King Edward's allies are saying it is no matter the two kings' armies have not engaged. They are trying to convince him he has won a *moral* victory, as he – we – have ravaged so much of Philip's kingdom yet drawn no response from him.' He throws his hands up. 'Yet it seems to me no victory at all, and the king, too, is not persuaded of the claim.'

'What do we do now?' someone says.

Sir Henry shakes his head. 'The king's already left for Brussels, and the armies are dispersing. Some will follow the king and others return to England. We, my friends, will go home to Broadham.'

The cheer we raise is muted. Indeed I don't raise a cheer at all – for I'm not ready to go home. I consider telling Sir Henry I'll not go. But what would I do here, when there's no war to fight? Anyway, who'd take me on, a village archer who's still not fired an arrow in anything but sport?

XI.

Little Peter atte Hyl is out of breath, he has run so fast up from the village, eager to impart his news. He bursts into the house and finds his big brother Will and older sister Lizzie sitting at the table, waiting for him and Beatrix to present themselves for dinner.

Lizzie looks up. 'Where's Bea?' Anxiety, or perhaps irritation, is in her eyes. 'Isn't she with you?'

Peter cannot yet speak for running so, nodding, he flaps his hand towards the door.

Moments later, Beatrix appears, also somewhat out of breath.
'Sorry, Lizzie, we got held up with all the excitement—'

Peter jiggles up and down. 'Let me tell! Let me!'

Beatrix grins, shrugging at the others.

Will frowns. 'Let you tell what? What excitement?'

Finding his voice at last, Peter squeals out his news. 'Pa's coming home! They're all coming home. Tomorrow they'll be here!'

Will snorts. 'Oh, that is good to hear.'

Lizzie exchanges a grimace with her sister.

But Peter does not notice. 'Can we go and watch?' His eyes shine with anticipation. 'Everyone's going.'

Will shakes his head. 'You think I want to cheer him home? I've better things to do.'

Lizzie shrugs. 'I couldn't leave Ma alone, now, could I?'

Peter pouts. 'Then I'll go by myself.'

'You won't.' Will thumps the table.

Beatrix sighs. 'I'll take him, Will.'

'You sure?'

She nods. 'I'd quite like to, really.'

Will raises his eyebrows but she just smiles, so he shrugs and Peter claps his hands.

XII.

As we get close to Broadham, passing through forests whose leaves are gleaming gold and red in the autumn sun, Sir Henry sends a scout ahead to announce our homecoming.

'They'll give us a great welcome,' he says. 'No matter we've not yet won a glorious victory.'

Sir Henry laughs and we all join in, though most of us consider the expedition a waste of time. But it's good to think our families are looking forward to our return.

As we ride into Broadham village, a great cheering crowd is gathered on the green. Women break free from the throng, crying out to greet their husbands and lovers. Children too run forward, begging their fathers to lift them up into the saddle. It seems every man in the militia has someone to welcome him back.

But Agnes is not here, nor Will, nor even Lizzie.

But then I hear a shout and see a small boy running, pushing through the crowd towards me. 'Pa!' he cries out, 'Pa!'

Shortly young Peter's clinging to my leg, grinning up at me. 'Hello, Pa,' he says. I confess I'm pleased to see him. I lean down to ruffle his wild curly hair. Then I notice a young girl standing a few feet away, holding back.

'Welcome home, Papa,' she says, coming forward with a smile.

I at once recall the young girl whose throat I slit. And, seeing Beatrix, I realise the girl was more her age than Lizzie's, though it had been Lizzie I was thinking of. But the memory of the girl is soon dispelled. Peter jumps up and down, asking to be lifted up into the saddle. I lean down again and pull him up, and we ride away out of the village, towards the farm.

Outside the house, I dismount and lift Peter down again. He's been talking all the way, asking questions, demanding answers. Tired from travelling, I find his eagerness an irritation but try not to show it. I'm glad he's pleased to see me.

Peter runs ahead into the house, calling excitedly he's brought Pa home. But no one comes out to greet me. Going inside, I find Lizzie alone, preparing vegetables. She looks up at me and nods. No trace of a smile.

I look around, marking the silence in the house apart from Peter's whooping. 'Where's your mother?'

'In bed,' says Lizzie, her face turned away. 'She's sleeping. Don't disturb her--'

'But it's the middle of the day.'

Lizzie looks up at me again. Her lips are pressed together in a thin, tight line.

Then Will's standing at the door. 'Ma's sick, you leave her be. She's no need of you.'

'What's wrong with her?'

He shrugs. 'No one knows. Her belly pains her and sometimes she can't catch her breath.'

'How long's she been like this?'

He shrugs again. 'Since two months after you abandoned her.'

I open my mouth in protest but Will, still a boy, yet with a man's resolve, holds up his hand and points his finger at me. 'Since you *abandoned* her,' he carries on, 'to look after the holding alone.'

'But she had you and Lizzie—' I say, but he shakes his head.

'You think she'd leave it to her children?'

'And James,' I say, but he curls his lip.

'We've not had much sight of him, or any of your *atte Hyls!*' He snorts. 'Every day for two months, Ma worked to exhaustion, trying to keep it all together, not wanting the burden to fall on me. She at least still thought me not ready for the responsibility.'

Lizzie comes to stand next to her brother. 'But in the end she couldn't cope,' she says in a small voice. 'She got sick. She's hardly managed a single day's work since. So Will's bearing the burden after all.'

My body's feeling weary, I long for rest and sleep. The small pleasure of Peter's welcome has vanished. I'm still holding my bag of weapons and let it clatter to the floor.

'I had to go,' I say. 'The king needed archers – you know that.'

Will snorts again. 'But it wasn't *you* he needed. There were plenty of other men – men without holdings, without families. You *wanted* to go!'

He might be right.

'I'm going up to see your mother,' I say. Will steps forward to block my path, but I easily push him aside.

Lizzie puts her hand onto his arm. 'Let him go, Will.' He grunts.

I climb the steep stairway to the solar I built years ago. Through the gloom I can see Agnes lying on her side on our bed, motionless but breathing harshly. I step forward, touch her shoulder. She starts awake and turns towards me.

'Oh, it's you,' she says. Her voice is hoarse. 'You're back.'

I nod. 'For a while.'

'I'll wager Will's not pleased to see you.' As my eyes accustom to the dark, I can see her almost grinning.

'No, he's not. Though Peter seems to be.'

'Peter's always thought more of you than the others. He's adventurous – like Geoffrey.'

She breaks into a fit of coughing, struggles to sit up, unable to catch her breath.

‘I’ll ask Sir Henry for his physician to come and see you,’ I say, alarmed. But Agnes shakes her head.

‘Lady Margaret’s already been. Nothing can be done.’

She coughs cruelly again, flaps her hand at me. ‘Leave me.’

When I go back downstairs, Will’s still there, his arm around a weeping Beatrix. He rounds on me, eyes glaring.

‘What cause have you to upset Bea?’ he says, his voice raised.

‘Upset her?’ I say, not understanding.

‘She’s come home crying. Says you ignored her in the village when she came to welcome you.’

‘Nonsense. Peter was clamouring to be given a ride. That’s all.’

Beatrix stops crying, looks fiercely at me. ‘I bid you welcome, but you said nothing, just rode off with Peter, leaving me behind.’

I shrug but Will’s eyes are cold. ‘You’ve always been the same with her.’

I look over at Beatrix, black haired, brown eyed. She was a pretty baby, but her hair and eyes were not like mine. Nor like Agnes’. Nor anyone’s in either of our families.

When I first went to see her, pleased at the safe birth of another atte Hyl child, she was sleeping. Agnes watched as I approached. She wasn’t smiling. I looked up from the cot and turned towards her. Her face showed she knew what I was thinking. I kept the shock of it to myself, for Agnes’ mother and the midwife were in the room. I forced a smile, remarked upon the child’s comeliness, then said I had some jobs to do.

But I didn’t know what jobs, and I didn’t care. I saddled Bonnie, rode away – away from the holding, from Broadham, up onto the downs. On the top there’s a fine view towards the coast – to the sea. I dismounted, tied Bonnie to a tree. I sat down on the grass. I wept. The first time I’d ever wept like that, even as a child. The last time I ever would.

I’d no choice but to accept the girl as mine.

1340

XIII.

At the end of January King Edward declared himself the king of France. Then in the spring he started making plans to go back and fight for possession of his new kingdom. Sir Henry intends taking the Broadham militia again to join the king. He wants me to go with them.

For a moment I wonder if I shouldn't go.

Since I came home, six months ago, Agnes has got no better, but she's less dismissive of me than she was. We spend time alone together, talking as far as she's able. We even sit in the garden when the weather's warm.

One day she bids me go up to the solar and fetch a book from what she calls her treasure chest.

'Did I ever tell you about this book?' she says.

I shrug. I've not seen it before.

'My uncle William, the priest, gave it to me years ago. He taught me to read, you know.'

I don't, and am astonished. 'But you never read.'

She shrugs. 'I've no reason to, nor have I books to read. Apart from this.' She lays it carefully on her lap and opens it.

I look but the marks on the page mean nothing to me. 'So did you learn to read it?'

'Yes, a little.'

I look again and nod, but she knows I can't read. I don't know why she's showing me the book at all. Later I put it away and we don't speak of it again.

When I'm not with Agnes, I spend some time with Peter. Will's resentful if I keep the boy too long from his chores. But Peter loves me to tell him what I've seen and done, though there's much I do miss out.

But Will doesn't want me here at all. Despite his complaint that I abandoned him to run the holding, now he dismisses any offers of help I make. In truth I'm glad, for there's no comradeship between us. He'd rather hire a labourer than have me working at his side.

And there's naught else for me to do in Broadham.

I long to return to France, never mind the disappointment of the last campaign. Maybe next time it'll be better. I don't exactly say to Agnes how much I yearn to leave – to abandon her again, as Will'd have it – but she knows it's what I want.

'I feel much better now the warmer weather's come,' she says. 'Don't stay here on my account.' She suppresses a cough and smiles. 'It's good Sir Henry regards you so well. You must be proud.'

I shrug. 'I've much respect for his lordship. I'm proud to serve him – and the king.'

She nods. 'Of course you are. And you did come home a richer man than when you left.'

Will dismisses the wealth I won from all the looting as despicable and ungodly. Yet I intend to leave it here for him to use – to buy another horse, a better plough, or improve the comfort of the house for his mother's sake. I daresay once I've gone, he'll not be so proud as to reject the prospects that the plunder offers.

XIV.

Young Alan of Hurst, home from France for six months and hating every moment of it, is re-joining Sir Henry's militia. He does not want to go, but staying at home does not seem to be an option.

When he suggests to his mother Elinora that he might not go, she rounds on him, her voice shrill. 'Not go! Don't be ridiculous, Alan. You have to avenge your father's murder.'

'I don't think it was really murder, Mother.'

Elinora shrieks. 'A filthy peasant speared him with a pitchfork! What else can that be but murder?'

Alan shuffles his feet. 'Father was...' He hesitates, wondering if he dare say it. In the end he does not dare and wanders away from her to gaze out of the window across the park and woodland he now owns. Then he leaves his mother's chamber, knowing further discussion will serve no purpose.

When Alan goes to see Sir Henry, his lordship is surprised. 'Are you really sure, lad?'

Alan shrugs. 'I've no choice. Mother thinks I should take my father's place, though I could never be a soldier. But I could squire for someone.'

Sir Henry nods. 'Poor lad, you're cut from very different cloth from either of your parents.' He pats Alan on the shoulder. 'No matter. I'll find you a position, perhaps with one of the archers – Richard atte Hyl, say?'

He gives Alan a wink, and the boy wishes he had had a father like Sir Henry. Though he hopes his lordship will choose another archer for him to serve – any but the peevish Master atte Hyl.

XV.

A week later, on a warm late June day – two days before the feast of Saint John the Baptist – we're on a small cog, sailing out of the Orwell river, across the English sea to Flanders.

The French king's fleet of ships, hundreds of vessels all big enough to carry hundreds of fighting men – the great army of the sea, they call it – is attacking the Flemish coast. The assaults are spreading panic all across the Low Countries. For years, the French have had command of the English sea, pestering our shipping and raiding our coastal towns. Now King Edward's determined to destroy their ships, and put his army ashore in Flanders – to support the Flemings against the French attacks, then pursue his invasion into France, to enforce his claim to wear its crown.

But, where the great army of the sea is huge, the English fleet is not above two hundred strong. And many of those ships are small – some not fighting ships at all – with a crew of only five or six, and no more than three times as many archers and men-at-arms.

Sir Henry's saddled me with Robert Hurst's lad, Alan. I can't think why he chose me. The boy's a milksop, worse than Will. No use on the battlefield. A burden I could do without.

As we pass out of the river and into the open sea, a strong breeze blowing from the north makes our little ship buck and toss like an unbroken colt. Alan doesn't enjoy riding on the sea – he's hunched up in the forecastle, throwing up last night's supper and calling on Our Lady. I remember my first time. But he should be used to it by now.

At dawn, we pass the point of Harwich, and the following afternoon we're stood off the Flemish coast, west of the wide opening of a river. Looking across, we can see the vastness of the French fleet crammed into the river's mouth. So many masts stand close together, it looks like a forest. Sir Henry says the ships'll all be chained together to make a solid fighting platform. But he grimaces and shakes his head.

'They look jammed in to me. No room for manoeuvre.'

'Could be good for us, then, sir,' I say. 'Caught like rats in a trap.' My comrades cheer, flourish their bows in the air.

Sir Henry smiles. 'You could be right, Master atte Hyl. We must hope their greater numbers don't overwhelm us.'

On the feast day of Saint John our fleet's drawn up into battle lines, with fighting units of three ships, two crammed with archers each side of one full of men-at-arms. In the middle of the afternoon we approach the mouth of the river where the French are waiting. King Edward's judged the moment well, for the wind and sun are behind us, the tide running our way.

As our front line engages with theirs, the noise is deafening, with the blare of trumpets, the drumming of nakers and tabors, the cracking of the ships' timbers as they crash into one another. Immediately men throw hooks and grappling irons across, to bind the enemy ships and ours together. At the same time bowmen in the towering castles, and in the crow's nest at the top of the mast, start firing upon the enemy decks. Even from a distance, we can hear the arrows hissing through the air like a shower of hail. The archers keep up the arrow storm until enough of the enemy's fighting men are slain for our men-at-arms to board their ships and fight survivors hand-to-hand. They throw their opponents – alive or dead – overboard. Many others jump into the sea, fleeing from the flailing swords and deadly axes of the men-at-arms. Of those still living when they hit the water, some drown from their armour's weight. Others, less encumbered, swim to shore. But many of those who reach it, thinking themselves then saved, will fall into the pitiless hands of the Flemish crowds thronging the shoreline in excited support of our battle, and be clubbed to death.

Ours is not among the first ships to engage. Alan's shuddering with fright, keeps running to the side of the ship to throw up, though he's nothing left inside him. I'm not entirely undaunted, but this is what I wanted – what I left my family for. So, like my brave comrades, I clench my teeth and hold fast to my bow. And wait our turn.

When it comes, Sir Henry stands aloft and flourishes his sword.

‘Positions, Broadham archers!’ he cries. We clamber up into the castles – and some climb up the mast. Alan recovers his courage sufficient to come with me, but up in the forecastle he takes fright again and cowers, pathetic and a hindrance, at my feet.

The ship full of men-at-arms now closes with an enemy vessel, with our little ship and the other ship of archers hugging alongside. If I found the noise of the distant battle loud, it’s nothing to the ear-ringing thunder of the smashing of the ships together. The splintering and groaning timbers, the screams of men thrown by the impact overboard, the shrill whistle of the arrows we now let fly down upon the enemy decks. French bowmen fire their quarrels in return, heavy iron bolts deadly when they reach their mark. But they’re much slower to reload than us, and they soon find our onslaught overwhelming.

We realise too how few trained crossbowmen there seem to be. Our men-at-arms storm aboard the enemy ships, to set about their brutal demolition. But we can see from the castle tops they’re not all knights and men-at-arms they meet but ordinary men with paltry weapons.

Sir Henry sees it too and hails us through the mêlée. ‘They may have greater numbers,’ he shouts above the din, ‘but they’re not fighting men. We have the advantage!’ He wields his sword, urging us to press on with our onslaught.

Looking down from our tower onto the French ships’ decks, I see them piled with dead, the living pushed or jumping into the sea. Those wearing mail – the knights and men-at-arms – sink rapidly beneath the waves. Those who can, fight through the slew of corpses in the water, so red it looks like the sea has turned entirely to blood. They swim away, expecting to escape, but we know their fate once they reach the Flemish foreshore.

It’s dark before the battle ends. And it’s no surprise to learn that victory is ours. Sir Henry’s beaming when he tells us the news.

‘Some ships have escaped, mostly Genoese. But we’ve destroyed or captured the most part by far of the French fleet, and great numbers of their fighting men are slain.’

Of course we cheer, brandishing our war bows in the air. Even Alan cheers and, in his excitement, throws his arms around me. I prise his arms away and slap him on the back instead.

‘Worth all the throwing up, eh, lad?’ I say.

The boy purses his lips and shrugs. ‘I don’t know about that, Master atte Hyl. But it’s good we’ve won, isn’t it?’

“Good” hardly describes my exhilaration – or that of my comrades, those of us who’ve been doing what we trained for, and found ourselves more than fitting to the task.

Sir Henry smiles at our elation, flourishing his sword alongside our bows.

‘Comrades, this was a great conquest. God was on our side today, and we must praise Him for our victory!’

XVI.

News of the great English victory flies across the sea to London, and soon messengers are riding fast to every corner of the land.

In Broadham, the glorious victory at Sluys is greeted with wild enthusiasm. And relief is added to the store of their emotions when the villagers learn Sir Henry’s militia has survived intact.

But enthusiasm is not expressed in every household. Will atte Hyl reacts to the news with gloom. He winces at his sister Lizzie. ‘I suppose that means they’re coming home.’

She nods, wiping her eyes on her apron yet again, and leaving a smear of ashes on her cheeks. ‘But it’ll be too late for Ma.’ Her voice is a whisper. ‘Unless they’re back tomorrow morning, I don’t think Pa’ll see her again.’

Will snorts. ‘He doesn’t care about Ma, or us.’ He sucks in his lips as if he is going to spit but Lizzie frowns fiercely at him and he purses them instead.

‘I’m not sure that’s really true, Will. It’s not he doesn’t care, just he wanted the adventure.’

Her brother scoffs. ‘Adventure! He’s a bloody farmer, not a knight in shining armour.’

Beatrix comes to the bottom of the staircase leading to the solar. ‘Don’t shout so, Will. Ma’s trying to sleep, and finding it hard enough without your noise.’

Will shrugs an apology, and turns to go back out. ‘I’ve work to do.’ He grabs his hat from the peg. ‘I’ll see you two this evening.’

As he storms away, his anger plain in his hunched back and long strides, the two girls look at each other.

Beatrix cannot help but grin. 'He's so peevish!'

Lizzie grimaces. 'Pa did leave Ma. And Sir Henry didn't make him go.'

'I know. But even grown-ups sometimes make bad choices.'

'Goodness, Bea! That's a knowing thing to say.'

Beatrix shrugs. 'Ma once made a bad choice too, didn't she?'

Lizzie can see Bea's eyes glistening. 'Whatever do you mean?'

Beatrix gives a little laugh. 'Oh, come on, Lizzie, you know. Pa's not my Pa, is he?'

Lizzie puts her arm around Bea's waist. 'But you're still my sister.' She gives her a squeeze.

Beatrix leans her head against her big sister's shoulder. 'Maybe all of us choose wrong sometimes. When we want something so badly?'

Lizzie takes her sister's chin and, turning her face up, smiles at her. 'I suppose we just have to pray for the strength to make our choices well.'

XVII.

The last few months have been disastrous.

I don't know what the king was thinking when he hived off us archers to the command of his crony, Robert d'Artois, an old French fool who came over to Edward's side some years back. The king thought well enough of d'Artois to ask him to press the English success by advancing on Saint Omer. But our bone-head leader made no secret of our coming, and so the French garrison was waiting for us.

It was chaos.

The company of English archers in large part survived, but great numbers of our Flemish allies were slain, our supplies largely lost. And the great French army was coming our way.

We left everything we couldn't carry and made a rapid retreat. Frustrated and angry at d'Artois' ineptitude, we marched back to rejoin King Edward.

The king was laying siege to the city of Tournai. He hoped to starve them into surrender. So, yet again, it was a waiting game. We camped, we looted, pillaged, burned and killed, just as we'd done last year. We won great quantities of booty: for fifteen miles around nothing was left standing. But when there was no more plunder to be had, we had to occupy ourselves with drinking the wine we'd looted and listening to Simon's stories.

Amidst the horses' cries and screams of men, the crash of blades and crunch of broken bones, the flying blood and bursting flesh, the comrades stood together, shoulder to shoulder, one body fast against their foe.

And, amidst the chaos and confusion, whenever a comrade fell, struck down by shaft or sword, they never left him to be trampled, his brains or entrails leaking into the mire. By unspoken pact, one of them went always to their comrade's aid, first to shield him from the fray, then to carry him away.

At length the king's impatience overcame him, and he decided to attack. But our assaults all failed. It was rumoured Edward's allies would abandon him if he didn't either capture Tournai or force Philip to a battle. But it was clear he could do neither.

So a truce has been agreed.

It takes a few days to pack up our belongings, to load the carts and prepare horses for the long march north. Simon's cheerful and phlegmatic.

'I'll take the chance,' he says, 'to go and see my Ma. Assuming she's not yet gone to meet her Maker.' He grins, so I suppose he's expecting to find her in good heart.

'Will you stay at home?' I say.

He shakes his head. 'Not likely. I'm not much use there any more. Soldiering's all I know.'

I nod. It's the way I feel too, though I've not done it for as long.

'I don't want to go back home. I want to stay and fight – to be a soldier – but now there's no war to fight.' I scrape my fingers through my hair and give Simon a rueful grin. 'I'm angry with the king for giving up.'

He grins back and shrugs his shoulders. 'We're at his command, like so many meandering sheep.'

I laugh. 'I didn't expect to be a sheep, but a lion, full of courage and derring-do.'

Simon laughs too. 'Things don't always turn out as you expect.' He claps me heartily on the shoulder.

Most men seem happy to be returning home. Some are looking forward to their wives' excitement when they see the booty they've brought with them. I've plenty of plunder too – a cart load of it – but my family won't be interested in my spoils of war.

Though maybe Agnes'll be pleased enough to see me. And Peter surely will.



Not even Peter's waiting for me when we ride back into Broadham. Like last time, a crowd's gathered on the green, cheering our return. As we approach, some of my comrades leap from their horses, running to clasp their wives close to their breasts, lifting their excited children into the air.

But no one's there for me.

I wave a glum farewell to my comrades, and slap Alan on the back. 'Go well, lad.'

He shrugs. I know he's nervous of the welcome he'll get from his mother.

'We won a great victory,' I say, grinning. 'She'll be proud of you!' She should be, but I can see Alan's unconvinced.

I ride slowly towards our farm. I look out for Peter, hoping he'll be waiting for me somewhere on the road. But I reach the house without sight of him. Or my wife.

I tie the mare's rein to the rail and go indoors. The house is silent. The fire's out, though the ashes are still warm. All the boots are gone from their place by the door. Everyone must be in the fields. Even Agnes? She must be recovered.

I climb the steep stairs to the solar. All the beds are empty, the blankets and sheets crumpled and awry. They must've had an early start. Yet Agnes never leaves her bed untidy.

Down in the hall again, I ease myself down onto a bench. Suddenly I ache. The long ride, I suppose. It's the middle of the afternoon or thereabouts. If they're in the fields it'll be a while before they're back. I consider going to look for Agnes – I could do with the walk. I try to imagine her face when she sees me coming: will she smile?

But I'll not go looking for her.



Will occupies the bed I used to share with Agnes. She sleeps in the churchyard now – has done for three months.

I kneel by her grave, thinking maybe I shouldn't have left her back in June. But what could I have done?

Back at the house, Lizzie suggests I join them for a meal. Will bids me sit next to Peter, not in my accustomed chair.

I refuse. 'This is my house, not yours.'

But Will shakes his head. 'You abandoned it,' he says, his eyes cold. 'You abandoned Ma, and all of us—'

I raise my hand in protest but he sneers.

'When you abandoned us, you gave up your rights to mastery of this farm.'

I'm angry. And astonished. Will's only eighteen but he's acting like a man. I look across at Lizzie but she turns her face away. I suppose she feels the same as Will. I should assert myself. It's still me, not Will, who owes fealty to Sir Henry in return for this house and holding.

But I decide not to argue. I sit down next to Peter and Lizzie serves the meal.

I can see Peter's pleased to have me home, though he's tired from working in the fields and not saying much. But his eyes still shine with eagerness as he asks me about my time in France, and Will tolerates my answering. At length, though, Peter's eyes grow dull and Lizzie shoos him up to bed. Beatrix goes up too, giving Lizzie a little smile.

Will goes out to check the animals but, when he returns, he paces about the room.

'You don't seem much grieved about Ma's passing,' he says to me.

Lizzie gasps. 'Will, don't—' she whispers, but he waves his hand at her.

I don't know what to say. I felt nothing as I knelt by Agnes' grave. I recall the bailiff's wife whose throat I cut, and all the other wives – and daughters – I've since abused and murdered.

'I'll hire a priest to pray for her soul.'

Will snorts. 'Is that it? All you can say?'

I shrug. I don't understand why I feel so little at Agnes' death. I know I never loved her – not that I know what love is between a man and woman. I didn't want to marry – her or any

woman. But we got on well enough at first, and the children were a joy when they were small. But when she let my two boys die, then when she betrayed me with that carpenter, I could no longer find anything inside myself for her.

‘I don’t have to explain myself to you,’ I say, anger rising in my breast. ‘I’ll pay the priest.’

Will throws up his hands and looks as if he’s about to burst. But Lizzie lays her hand upon his arm.

‘Pa’s tired, Will,’ she says. ‘We all are. Let’s go to bed.’ She’s only – what? – seventeen, but her eyes are dull and she seems to have the stoop of a woman two or even three times her age. My poor Lizzie’s old before her time.

Will nods but then cocks his head in my direction. ‘He’s not sleeping under this roof. The roof he chose to abandon.’

Lizzie seems to be about to protest but I stop her.

‘I’ll sleep in the barn. It’ll be no hardship.’ She gives me a thin smile. I know I should assert myself. But, in truth, I just don’t care. I don’t want to be here at all.

The hayloft above the horses’ quarters is soft and warm, paradise when I think of where and how I’ve slept these past six months. Yet already I’m missing that discomfort. Despite my fatigue, I sleep little. I listen to the snorting of the horses, picking out my Bonnie’s snuffle from the other two. But mostly I reflect on what I must do.

I can’t stand the thought of staying here in Broadham. I’d rather die on a battlefield with the smell of blood and shit in my nostrils, than collapse from exhaustion behind a horse and plough. Anyway, Will doesn’t want me here, and even Lizzie is indifferent.

Peter would have me stay of course – it’ll grieve him if I go for good. But there’s nothing for me here but him. I resolve to pass the winter here somehow, so I can spend some time alone with him, as much time as Will allows.

But in the spring I’m going to leave. One morning, I’ll go to Southampton and buy a passage on a ship. I’ll offer my strong bow arm and my good eyes to anyone who’ll pay me.



We have some good days together, my boy and me. On dry days we walk the fields and woods. He asks what it was like camping out under the stars. On cold, wet days, we sit together in the hayloft, huddled under blankets, trying to keep warm. Lizzie says we can sit in the house but I’m happier out here, away from Will. We play dice and knucklebones, and

I tell Peter some of the stories I heard the other soldiers tell in camp. Though I miss out the worst bits, for the boy's still only seven.

I tell him about our great victory at Sluys.

'The king was clever, for he got our ships into position so the sun was in the Frenchies' eyes. Then us archers let fly torrent after torrent of arrows, and cut the Frenchies down. We could fire five arrows to every one from their archers, who weren't French at all but came from some place called Genoa. They used different bows from us – crossbows – and right difficult to load they were.'

'And were all the Frenchies killed by your arrows, Pa?' says Peter, his eyes alight.

I half-smile. I'm amused by the boy's eagerness to know the details of what happened. But I shake my head and pull on my beard. 'We killed a lot but had to fight hand-to-hand too. We boarded their ships and fought them with knives and hammers. It was a bloody business.'

'But you won in the end?' he says, his eyes now wide.

'Yes, we won.' Peter claps and cheers, and I remember the exhilaration we archers felt, knowing we'd won. I remember too looking down from the castle of our ship onto the churning waves.

'Those Frenchies, Peter. The sea was heaving with their bodies...red with their blood, God rest their wretched souls.'

Peter isn't shocked by the horror I describe. He likes to touch the long pale scar that now runs down my face from brow to throat and cuts an enduring furrow through my beard.

'You must be proud, Pa,' he says, 'to be one of the king's archers.'

I agree with him, not wanting to dampen his boyish enthusiasm. But am I proud? I'm not sure pride's much to do with what I feel.

1345

XVIII.

It's near five years I've been away. I've travelled far and wide, to Aragon and Castile,

Hungary and, most lately, the Kingdom of Naples. It's taken three months to get back from there, a long slow journey, full of diversions and adventures.

But now I'm here, I wonder if I made the right decision, coming back. From up here on the Sussex downs, through the mist, I fancy I can almost see the sea I crossed four days ago. If I turn around, I can just about see Broadham nestling beneath the hill. But the thought of riding into Broadham once more brings me no joy. These past years, I've faced so many ordeals and overcome so many hardships, you'd think I could meet any challenge. Yet, an encounter with my children seems more unsettling than one with a whole band of mountain brigands.

In truth it's only Peter I've come to see.

Though by now he's perhaps decided I'm never coming back – dead, or just a deserter, as Will's always claimed. He'll have told Peter to forget me. Yet Peter must be twelve or more, with ideas of his own. I want to see how he's grown. Has he just yielded to his brother's rules? Or is he as roused by training at the butts as I was?

With a heavy heart, I trot the mare slowly back downhill and into Broadham. It looks much the same. Yet how different from so many of the villages I've seen – those pillaged and burned, emptied of their people, barren of everything that made them a community. Broadham's still a community, a thriving place. It's early morning and I've arrived at market time – the narrow roads around the village green are thronged with people buying and selling, eggs and butter, onions and cabbages, pots and ironwork, boots and hoods.

As I ride through the village I lived in all my life till I became a soldier, most folk gaze at me with suspicion – a stranger in their midst. A few look at me quizzically, as if they think they recognise my face. But then they turn away, maybe thinking they're mistaken.

So I carry on, taking the road out of the village, up to the atte Hyl holdings. I dismount at the end of the track, walking the rest of the way. As I approach the farm, I'm impressed by what I see. Will's still only – what? – twenty-three. Yet it's clear he's managing the holding well. Perhaps he's applied to Sir Henry to take on the tenancy. In truth, I hope he has.

When I reach the yard, Peter's there, sitting on a stool just outside the barn, mending harness. He looks up as I approach.

When I'm a few yards from him, I can see his face is curious. I daresay I look different – thinner, my skin browned, thick and leathery from the southern sun, my beard long and grey and shaggy.

I stand in front of him and grin. 'Don't you know me, son?'

A moment's hesitation, then he runs forward and throws his arms round me. I let go the horse's reins and, wrapping my great cloak around him, squeeze him tight.

'So you do.'

He nods his head against my breast. 'I'm so glad you're home, Pa.'

I confess that, for the moment, I'm glad too.

XIX.

Peter wonders whether to bother telling anyone his Pa is back. He knows Will hopes he is lying on some filthy foreign battlefield. He has always said they were better off without him. 'And haven't I proved it?'

If Peter tells Will their Pa is home, he knows he will get angry. He is irritable enough already. Peter thinks he is already regretting marrying Isabel, who has changed from a pretty maid into a tetchy scold in only a few months. Lizzie's nose was so put out of joint by Isabel's intrusion, she found herself a job up at the manor. And even Bea abandoned him, thinking she would rather be a servant in another villein's house than suffer Isabel's daily chidings. So he is left at home with a sister-in-law he hates – and who finds him an irritation – and a brother he no longer loves.

He is impatient to run away.

But now Pa is back, perhaps things will not be so bad.

However, if Peter thinks to keep Pa to himself, his plan is thwarted soon enough. The news reaches Will's ears through the medium of his gossiping wife. When Will looks enquiringly at his brother, Peter flushes bright red to his ears. 'So you knew already. Why didn't you say?'

'Cos you'd have just got angry.'

Will sits down next to Peter. 'Have you seen him?' Peter nods, flushing again. 'Without telling me, eh?'

Isabel stirs the broth simmering on the fire. 'He's a little sneak.'

Will ignores his wife, and asks Peter what stories Pa's been telling him. But, when the boy replies, Will sneers. 'War isn't exciting, you little fool. It's vicious and dangerous. Pa doesn't tell you all the bad bits: people getting their arms and legs chopped off, their eyes poked out, their guts spilled out onto the ground. Is all that exciting?'

Anger tightens in Peter's breast. 'It sounds exciting, the way Pa tells it.' His voice rises. 'A hell of a lot more exciting than mucking out pigs and weeding fields and looking after stupid sheep...' He trails off, realising he is shouting and Will is looking hurt as well as angry. But he will not let it rest. 'Anyway, Pa must be really brave, to do all that, and I want to be like *him*.'

Will sighs deeply. 'Of course he's brave on the battlefield, little brother. I know I should respect him for it, and in a way I do. But he also ran away. He abandoned Ma when she needed him most.'

The boy cries out. 'You always say that, but it's not fair. He had to go! And Ma said he should – you know she did.'

Will shrugs. 'Maybe that time. But he didn't have to go the last time, did he? The king had no war to fight. Sir Henry didn't go. Pa just decided to abandon us, to abandon the holding, with me still only nineteen! And he's been away near five years. Is that fair?'

XX.

I feel obliged to pay a visit to Sir Henry, for the sake of old times. His eyes twinkle when he sees me.

'Well, well, Richard atte Hyl,' he cries, slapping me on the shoulder. 'Your sons believed you dead!'

'I've been close many times,' I say, grinning. 'And I've got the scars to prove it.'

Pulling my hair aside, I show him the long white ragged stripe across my face. Sir Henry seems impressed.

'But I survived,' I say.

'And now you're home again.'

‘Well, for a while.’

He laughs. ‘Ha! Still devoted to the soldiering life?’

I shrug. ‘I wanted to see Peter.’

‘Ah, yes, a fine archer in the making.’

‘That right?’

‘Indeed, just like his father.’ He grins. ‘Daresay he’s glad you’re home?’

I nod, wondering how he knows.

‘Unlike his brother, perhaps?’

‘How—?’ I begin, but he taps his nose.

‘I have spies.’ His eyes twinkle again. ‘The village gossips make splendid informers.’ He laughs out loud and I join in.

‘But I daresay you’re not expecting to pick up the farming reins again,’ he goes on. ‘Especially when Will’s doing such a grand job.’

‘That right?’ I say again.

‘Oh yes, fine job. I’d say it’s in his blood.’ He puts a hand on my shoulder. ‘His mother’s blood, that is.’ He winks at me and grins.

Agnes always did know more about crops and cows than me. And her father Geoffrey was a legend of triumph over adversity among the villeins and freemen of the manor.

‘Has Will taken on the tenancy? I thought he might’ve, I’ve been away so long.’

Sir Henry shakes his head. ‘Not yet, though he has thought of it.’

‘He should. I’m not going to farm again.’

We stroll together through the manor, Sir Henry pointing out the many building works he’s undertaking. Then he steers me onto the track leading out of the village, and at length we reach the butts.

‘Remember?’ says Sir Henry, pointing to the targets on the hill. ‘All those years ago?’

I grin. ‘The start of my adventures.’

‘How about a job, Richard?’ his lordship continues. ‘I don’t train our militia these days – too much else to do, as you have seen. But the fellow who’s done it the past few years plans to follow your example.’

‘You want *me* to train the archers?’

He nods. 'And the others. How about it?'

Suddenly my mouth's dry. 'I might not stay around.' I wish I hadn't come.

He shrugs. 'No matter. Do it for a while. Spend some time with your lad. There's a small cot in the grounds if it helps you decide.'

1346

XXI.

The long truce is over.

In January, King Edward sent messengers across the country with news of the French king's treachery. A great crowd gathered on Broadham's green, eager to hear the messenger's announcement, but their enthusiasm soon turned to jeering when they heard what he had to say.

'King Philip will not agree to any proposal from our king. On the contrary, he's in league with the Scots and is making plans to invade our country, to attack each and every one of you.'

Later, Sir Henry came to see me on the practice field. 'Did you hear the king's envoy this morning?'

'I did. Does it mean King Edward's going to war again?' My fingertips tingled at the prospect.

He nodded. 'In the summer. Plans are afoot already to bring a fleet of ships to Portsmouth. We must prepare ourselves, Richard.'



The king's demanded a new assessment of troops and Sir Henry's raising another militia, to support his lord, the Earl.

'You don't have to go this time, Richard,' Sir Henry says. 'I don't plan to go myself.'

But I *want* to go. His lordship still reckons I'm his best archer, despite my age.

And, in truth, I miss the thrill of battle, and the pleasures of comradeship. Yet this time I'm torn. If I stayed here, Peter would be happy. And training Sir Henry's archers does keep me reasonably content, especially when I can retell my war stories to all the keen young archers.

But it's also true that my contentment's fading.

And the chance of one last battle – or even several – is more than just enticing.



Word was we were going to Gascony. The ships in Portsmouth harbour – hundreds of them – were victualled for the long sea trip to Bordeaux. And a vast army was gathering – camped first around the harbour, and then so many came that the camp stretched out along the road back out of town to London. Thousands and thousands of men. Half of them seemed to be archers. Though of course there were carpenters, masons, farriers, surgeons – all the manner of men that go to make an army.

We men from Broadham – without Sir Henry this time – came to Portsmouth in mid-June, in loyal answer to the king's call. We idled here for two weeks, waiting for the king to order the departure. Some days I wandered the encampment looking idly for familiar faces. And, one day, having almost given up hope, I saw a large fellow with wild yellow hair standing midst a crowd of men. Their faces were alight, and broke often into laughter, as they listened to his story, told with much arm-waving and funny voices. I could scarce believe I'd found him.

When the story was done, the audience duly cheered. I waited a few moments before approaching, wondering if he'd still know me after so many years. When he turned, though I was certain it was him, I must confess to sorrow when I saw what the years had wrought. For the skin of his face was wrinkled – almost as much as mine, though I was fifteen years older.

I stepped forward. 'Simon? Simon Bigge?'

He turned. 'Who wants to know?' And then he saw me. I suppose in six years I was just as changed as he, with my long grizzled beard and dark brown face, yet he took only a moment to know me. In two long strides he stood before me. He put out his hands and grasped my shoulders and pulled me into an embrace.

'Old friend, it's good to see you after so long.'

I nod. 'It is,' I said, and for long moments found it hard to say more.

Come to Portsmouth on his own account and not yet assigned to any battle, Simon joined our Broadham militia and found himself serving once more under the banner of his old lord, the Earl.

An attempt was made to cross the water. The fleet sailed west along the Solent, hugging the coast of the Isle of Wight, but the wind was against us and we never made it to the open sea. But now, a further two weeks later, we're finally under way, and it's Normandy we're heading for, not Gascony. Which is a relief to some, not relishing the long journey into the Bay of Biscay and down France's western coast. I don't care much either way. But the weather's perfect for an easy crossing.

Before he allows us to disembark, the king issues orders, read out on every ship.

"Because of my love and concern for my people of France, it is my express wish that not one of you shall assault any old man, any woman or any child, or steal from any church, or set fire to any building."

I can't think why he said it. None of us can. We might not *set out* to kill the children. We might not *intend* to rape the women. That's just what happens. And as for burning buildings, pillaging and looting – it's what we do.

And so it proves.

When we land, we find villages for miles around abandoned – nearly all their people fled. So not much killing's needed. But burning? If the king thinks his commanders can stop it, he's wrong. Many of the infantrymen are much rowdier than me, than any of my Broadham comrades – almost beyond control. The threat of hanging or a chopped off hand or ear seems not to trouble them.

Villages burn. Whole towns go up in flames. At night the ring of fire on the horizon all around our encampment is so bright it lights up our faces. And the pickings from those looted buildings are rich beyond imagining. A raiding party sent to a town called Barfleur returns with reports that men already had so much they left behind fur coats and treasures.

So it goes on – another day, another few villages, another town. More wagon loads of plunder, more food to fill our bellies, more buildings going up in flames. We begin to meet resistance – or discover people who've not had time enough to flee. The richest are taken for ransom, but otherwise we don't spare them – soldiers, old men, women, children. All are cut down, in the streets, their houses, their gardens, racing for their lives across the fields.

I'm struck by the richness of this countryside we're wasting – everywhere are broad fields ripe with grain, sweet-smelling orchards heavy with fruit, well-tended gardens

burgeoning with vegetables and herbs, fine cattle and even finer horses grazing lazily under the summer sun. Despite myself, I think of the farms in Broadham – in particular the one Will's managing so well. So much work and care goes into growing crops, tending gardens, rearing animals. Just like these, rich, prosperous, the result of the daily sweat and toil of ordinary people – not people like me, of course, but like Will, my father-in-law, my neighbours, women like Agnes.

And we're simply destroying it all.

In truth I don't think about it overmuch. These people are the enemy, as much as King Philip, the Count of Eu and the lord of Tancarville. After all, I've got a job to do, to answer my king's demands.



After two weeks plundering the Normandy countryside, we come close to the great town of Caen. We camp overnight, and rise at dawn to march against it, spread out across a line miles wide to make us seem even more numerous than we are.

I serve in the division led by the young Prince of Wales. We move round towards the north of the town and set up camp again. But then the Earl of Warwick, one of the prince's two advisors, calls for archers to join a company to be first to enter the old town.

I always stand up for duty.

'We're told the people have taken fright at the sight of our great army,' he says, 'and have decamped to an island in the river, behind a barricade.' He grins. 'But that'll not stop us, eh, lads?'

We're raucous in our cheering, brandishing our bows and short swords in the air. Some men-at-arms have already taken one of the old town gates, and it's through this gate Warwick and our small company – a few men-at-arms and a troop of archers – charge into the town. The streets and houses are empty – the Earl's information was correct. A larger troop of infantrymen soon follows, a disorderly band who start firing the houses behind us, despite the king's instructions. The Earl's company moves towards the barricade, thrown across the bridge that spans the river.

The garrison troops and townspeople, armed with wooden staves and other sundry weapons, come out to meet us. It's soon a frantic brawl. We push them back behind the barricade, and more English soldiers press in behind us to join the struggle.

So many of us are crammed in here, the Earl shouts to those of us in the van to spread out along the river.

‘Go round!’ he cries. ‘Go round! The river circles the island. Get at them from behind.’

‘Easier said than done,’ says one of my comrades, grinning. He points to the barges moored along the river.

‘But the water’s low,’ I say. ‘Perhaps we can wade?’

‘Oh yeah, with them firing on us.’ He points again. The barges are crammed with crossbowmen, their bows ready cocked and waiting. But we grin at each other and plunge in up to our thighs, holding our bows aloft.

Some of our archers are cut down, but crossbowmen are slow to shoot and some of us reach the barges. Other men are following behind, and soon our numbers make it harder for the enemy to stop our advance. Before long two of the boats are burning, and we clamber aboard the others, scrambling across the decks until we reach the other riverbank.

We spread out across the island, rampaging through the streets, killing every man, woman and child we meet. Some of those that had been trapped behind the barricade are now fleeing the other way, over the bridge and back into the old town. But we chase after them and, though some knights and the town’s richest men are taken prisoner, we give no quarter to the infantry and common folk.

Back in our camp, our mood’s triumphant. It’s been a slaughter.

We lost many of our number too, especially among those in the front line attack – but our losses are naught compared to theirs. Our commanders are well pleased.

‘The king sends his salutations,’ says the Earl. ‘And I commend you all. You were brave and bold, my lads – and we won the day.’

Yet most of us are injured in some way or other, some less, some more. Though none of us much minds – or rather, we take some pleasure in our wounds. These are marks we wear with pride – the badges of our encounters with the enemy. But even minor cuts must be treated fast to stop them going bad. The surgeons attend only to the serious cases – crushed limbs needing amputation, deep cuts threatening to bleed a man to death. Those of us whose lives are not in danger must tend each other, cleaning out our wounds with wine – of which we’ve plenty, thanks to the good citizens of Caen – and binding them tight with strips of cloth brought specially for the purpose. We swab and bind and pour good Normandy wine down our throats as well as on our gaping wounds.



On the move again, we travel east. We meet little opposition to our usual drill, passing no building without setting it alight, seeing no French man or woman without giving chase.

As we come near to Paris, we hear the French king and his army are closing in. They try to halt our progress, breaking bridges and putting up some paltry resistance. But our carpenters mend the bridges and we easily push back their ill-trained infantrymen. At length, King Philip issues a challenge for the two armies to meet in battle, and he names the place. But Edward does not accept – perhaps he wants to choose the place himself.

So we continue our march north. But, strong and unruly as we are, even we are now finding it a tribulation. Our injuries add sharper pains to the usual aches in limbs and backs. Months of marching and mayhem are taking their toll on our bodies – and on our boots.

‘Look at this,’ says Simon. He lifts up his foot to show me. ‘I’m walking on bare earth.’ The sole of his boot’s not there, the leather worn away completely.

I lift up my foot and take off my boot.

‘Did you have to do that, Dick?’ Simon flaps his hand across his nose.

I laugh. ‘As if the perfume of my feet makes any difference amid this great stink.’ I wave the boot in his face. ‘Anyway, look, mine’s much the same – a great hole where there should be leather.’

‘Perhaps the king’ll bring us some new boots.’

‘And the rest. Bows, arrows, surcoats, mail...’

‘Food?’ says Simon, pulling a face and clutching wildly at his belly. ‘There’s nothing round here now those French bastards took it all.’

I’ve noticed these past few weeks the gradual change in Simon. Such a huge fellow, strong and hearty. But now his face is drawn. His arms and shoulders are still powerful but lack of food is weakening his energy. And mine, and everyone’s – men around us fall asleep more often than they should.

The French are closing in. We need to cross the river, but they’ve broken all the bridges and are defending every crossing point. There’s a ford a bit upstream, though we have to cross a marsh to reach it. We’re woken from a restless doze soon after midnight. The night’s dark, with thick cloud and little moonlight. Not the best time to attempt a marsh.

We pick our way forward over a narrow track, one man behind another, each treading in the marks made by the other’s feet. But, after all the effort, when we reach the main stream

of the river, close to the ford, we see the bank opposite is heavily defended. We're itching to get at them, but the tide's too high for us to cross. So we're forced to sit down on our bank, watch, and wait for dawn and the falling river level.

It's not until the sun's well up when a band of archers and men-at-arms – a couple of hundred of us altogether – wade into the river, holding our weapons high. It's all we can do to muster the energy to plunge into the water. I know it'll be freezing despite the sun's warmth overhead. Simon yelps as the water rises to his groin.

'Christ's Eyes! It's enough to freeze your balls off. I'll be no use tonight to those French strumpets.'

He throws his head back to laugh and those of us close enough to hear laugh with him. But he's right – the cold's seeping through into my vitals. Yet we archers must remain standing in the river. As soon as we get within range of the French troops on the other bank, we let fly a storm of arrows. We keep firing, while the men-at-arms continue forward, clamber up onto the north bank and begin to hold the line there while others follow them across. The French are fighting fiercely but, as more and yet more of our soldiers make the bank, the French are pushed back hard, until at last they break ranks and run away. Our mounted men-at-arms give chase, determined not to let them get away. By the time they return, all the English army – with all our carts and equipment – has come across the ford.

So we've escaped the French king's trap. But we're so short of food, we're weak-limbed, nauseous, light-headed. So we're still marching northwards. As we march, bands of foragers spread out towards the coast. When they return to the encampment, just past a place called Crécy, they bring carts loaded with sacks of grain and loaves of bread, baskets of plums and apples, panniers of beans, peas and cabbages, droves of cows and sheep, pigs and hens – a rich haul of food of every kind.

We greet them with something close to frenzy.



Next morning, we're drawn up into battle order, waiting for the French.

King Edward comes round to see us all, riding on a palfrey. He wants to make sure we understand his orders. But, more, he wants to make us brave – to buoy up any who might feel faint-hearted. He laughs with us and urges everyone to do their duty. We listen well, much heartened by the king's conviction.

‘Consider the glory we will win,’ he says, ‘the honour. After our victory, never again will the French king regard us English people with disdain.’ His cheerful encouragement fills us with self-belief.

‘But know this, my friends, on this I will give no quarter. On pain of death, none must break ranks, nor seek gain, nor pillage on the battlefield either the living or the dead until I give my permission. For, if this battle goes our way, as it surely will, there’ll be time enough for each of you to win your just rewards.’

He looks at us both stern and gentle. Towering above us, his gleaming gold-red hair curling beneath his crown, his blue eyes twinkle. Each of us, in that moment, so loves the king, yet fears him, that none would disobey his demands.

He gives leave for us to eat heartily and drink our fill, then rest until the trumpet sounds. ‘I commend you all to the love and protection of our Lord God and the Holy Mother Mary.’

Simon crosses himself then grins. ‘I’d as soon trust the love and protection of my comrades,’ he says, once the king has moved away.

We all hurrah and chortle our agreement but he holds up his hand. ‘Let me tell you what’s on my mind.’

And he speaks as if he’s telling us one of his stories.

Who do men trust in the midst of battle? "God" says our noble king. But is that the way it works for us? For us, who've stood together shoulder to shoulder, who've fought the enemy side by side, who've seen our fellows spill their guts onto the earth, who've yet survived the chaos? What binds us together with hoops of steel, what protects us on the field of war, is our comradeship, our love for one another.

When our friends plunge forth into battle, we're not afraid! No! Such admiration and joy fill our heart for their courage that we can do – no, we want! – none other than to plunge forth too, and either die or live with them. It's our love of them that means we'll not abandon them. And this love brings such delight that the man who's never known it is not fit to say or understand what this means to those of us that have.

It's a fine speech. I recall the story he told us years ago: about a Bowman who loved his comrades so well he didn't rest until he'd avenged their deaths. And Simon's right, what *I* feel for all these tough men around me *is* something akin to love. I'd die willingly for any one of them, and they'd do the same for me.

Towards the end of the afternoon the sky clouds over and it begins to rain. The first ranks of crossbowmen come into view. The trumpets sound and we're on our feet, restringing our bows. The crossbowmen advance, shouting what we take to be abuse. But we don't move. We don't give a rat's arse about insults and provocations.

The shouts then give way to the deafening clamour of French trumpets, drums and roaring infantrymen, and the crossbowmen begin to move in our direction, firing as they march. But their bolts fall short. We can't help but raise a cheer.

'That must've pissed them off,' says Simon in my ear. We share a grin.

But the bowmen still press forward, trying to reload their war bows as they come. As soon as they're in range, our trumpets sound, and it's our turn to roar and let loose one volley after another. The arrows fly away from us in a great curve, looking and sounding like a heavy shower of hail. At once Genoese bowmen across the field are falling to their knees. They seem to have no shields, and our arrows are piercing their armour as well as their soft flesh. When we see them sagging under our onslaught, we increase our efforts. And soon the surviving Genoese are breaking into headlong flight.

But then a troop of French mounted men-at-arms is charging across the field towards us and, to our astonishment, straight across the lines of fleeing bowmen. They run them down, crushing them under their horses' hooves and hacking at them with their swords. Then the rest of the French cavalry dashes headlong after them, charging in a tight body across our lines towards the centre, where the Prince of Wales is stationed with his battle.

But we're still firing, hailstorm after hailstorm. As the riders come within our range, men fall from their horses, tumbling into the path of those following behind. Our thin wooden arrows rip through their fine polished armour and thick padded surcoats. Many riders lose control, as the horses shy away in terror from the piercing deluge.

The noise everywhere is thunderous: trumpets blaring, horses whickering, the whine of arrows, the yells and screams of men. Time and time again the French horsemen circle, regroup and charge. Thousands of dead men and horses are piled up across the battlefield. But, as evening approaches and it becomes hard to see the enemy through the gloom, their attacks begin to dwindle. Nonetheless, the king demands the horses be brought forward from

behind our lines. Our men-at-arms remount, and charge and harry the surviving groups of French cavalry and infantry.

All around us the French are fleeing into the night.



It's only when we return to the battlefield next morning we see the greatness of our victory. Many of us are wounded, but deaths seem few. Those who died were mostly pikemen and archers, those less well protected than the men-at-arms by plate armour or sheltering shields. Yet the French losses are disastrous – among all classes of soldier, from the humblest infantryman to the noblest knight. We're astonished to be told it was us, the English archers, who won the day. How can we, a bunch of English peasants, with our wooden bows and arrows, have defeated the flower of French chivalry, with all their training and fine weapons?

We spend the day criss-crossing the battlefield, putting an end to any man still clinging onto life – unless he proves wealthy or noble enough to be worth a ransom – and ransacking bodies for whatever plunder we can find – weapons, armour, clothes, jewellery, money. Plunder and riches were not what I was seeking when I chose to become a soldier. But I must confess to an almost childish delight in the fortune I'll be taking home with me. Not that anyone there will share my pleasure – except of course the boy.

The king's staying here in France, attempting to win Calais. But many of my comrades are going home, with the king's grace. They miss their families back in England.

I don't miss mine. Not true – I think of Peter every day. Wonder how he's getting on. If he's forgiven me for leaving him behind. I daresay I should go home too.



4: Plague

Peter atte Hyl

1346

I.

Will got a good price for our sheep, so he's almost cheerful, which isn't much like him.

We're sitting in an alehouse near the market, spending some of the money on an early dinner of pies and cups of weak ale.

'Shall we go down to the quay later?' he says.

'Quay?' I shrug, more interested in my pie. It's got meat in it as well as onions, though I have to swallow hard to make all of it go down. 'Why?'

Will raises his eyebrows then grins. 'To see the ships, of course.'

I've never seen Will so merry. 'Don't we need to get home?'

'They can cope without us. We deserve a treat after our good fortune.'

We started out from home well before first light, walking the long miles to Chichester, to be early enough to get the best price. The air was crisp with an autumn chill, but it was pleasant enough at first, striding along the road, happy to be away from the farm for a while. But then the sheep started getting skittish, and it was hard work keeping them together. I'm a bit tired after all that, but Will doesn't very often offer a treat.

'So what d'you think?' he says.

I shrug. 'You sure Isabel won't mind?'

Will pulls a face, halfway between a grin and a frown but ignores my question. 'You remember the first time you saw the sea?'

I smile, remembering.

I was only little – about six or seven. Pa'd gone off to France with Sir Henry's militia in the spring. I used to wonder how they got to France, and when Will said they crossed the sea

on a ship, I couldn't imagine what the sea, or a ship, might look like. I pestered Will to take me to see them, and eventually he did.

We went to the market that time too. After we'd sold our sheep, Will marched us off to a hackneyman to hire a horse.

'It'll take too long to walk,' he said. 'We can't be out *all* day.' He grinned.

Will climbed up onto the horse, then helped me up behind him. The horse's back was so wide my little legs could hardly get a grip, but I clung on to Will's tunic and couldn't help crowing with excitement at the thought of where we were going.

'Hold on tight, little brother,' said Will and, clicking his tongue and flicking the reins, he set the horse walking at a brisk trot out of the town. It seemed ages before we reached a place called Wittering, where we went right down to the edge of the sea.

We slid down from the horse and Will tied the reins to one of a stand of stunted-looking trees bordering the beach. The tree gave some shade and Will sat down under it, but I was itching to go down to the sea.

'Go and see how cold it is,' said Will.

I grinned and set off across the soft yellow-brown sand that joined the land to the sea, my boots sinking in with every step. When I got close to the water, where the sand was all wet and shiny, my boots left deep dents and, when I lifted my leg out, the sand made a sort of sucking sound.

I played at sinking and sucking for a while, until I saw the sand I was playing on was getting wetter. I stopped playing and watched the sea rolling towards me, folding over and over as it ran towards the beach. I moved a couple of yards up the beach and stood quite still on a drier patch of sand, and I could see then I was right, the sea *was* getting closer.

'The sea's coming up the sand!' I yelled to Will.

He just laughed. 'Of course it is. That what it does – it comes up and later it goes back out again.'

'Why?' I said, but Will shrugged.

'I just know it does,' he said. 'They say it goes in an' out, in an' out, twice every day.'

'Why?' I said again, but he shook his head.

'You ready to go home yet?' he said, but I ran back down to the water's edge.

I stood on the wet sand again, letting the sea trickle over the toes of my boots. I liked the way the sand whispered as the sea rolled back, and the way the little black and white birds running along the edge poked their long beaks into the mud and pulled out worms, then skittered away as the sea folded over for the last time and chased them up the beach.

When I looked out across the sea, far away, towards where the sea touched the sky, I saw three ships out there, their white sails bellying out and glinting in the sun. I pointed, and called to Will.

‘Are they going to France?’ He nodded.

They were getting smaller and smaller. I tried to picture in my head what the sea must be like out there: it looked flat and still, not rolling and folding like it was here. Will said he’d heard that, when ships are in the middle of the sea, it heaves and swells and ships are tossed about like the little leaf boats we throw into the millstream at home, where the water rushes down the sluice towards the mill wheel, and the boats get sucked under and are never seen again. But if it really *was* like the millstream out there, the ships’d never get to France! And it didn’t look to me as if the ships were being tossed around, so I thought Will must be wrong.

Suddenly, two of the ships disappeared, just at the place where the sky meets the sea. It looked like they just fell over when they reached the edge of the sea, but that didn’t make much sense.

But Will was calling me. ‘Come on, Peter, we have to go.’

I turned and nodded, but still didn’t move.

He called again, more sharply. ‘Peter! We have to start back home. You know how long it took us to walk to Chichester.’

I pulled a face. ‘I’m coming.’ But still I didn’t move. I wanted to watch the last ship reach the edge of the sea. The sight of it gave me a shivery feeling inside. But Will wouldn’t let me stay. Moments later I heard him pounding across the sand and then felt his hands upon my shoulders.

‘I’m glad you like the sea, little brother,’ he said, ‘but we have to go, or it’ll be dark before we get home.’

‘D’you you think there are monsters in the sea?’

Will laughed. ‘What made you say that?’

‘Maybe that’s why the ships disappear? Remember the story Ma used to tell us?’

‘That can’t be the reason,’ he said, hooting, ‘else Pa’d never have come home.’

I was sure I’d gone red. Of course that must be true. So Ma’s story must’ve been made up.



This time we’re walking – the quay’s not too far away and I’m not so little. The day is fine and dry, and it’s good being just the two of us, my brother and me.

The quay’s a busy, exciting place, full of bustle and noise. Lots of ships are moored along the quayside, and more are waiting down the river. Brown-skinned men, ruddy faced and shiny with sweat, are unloading goods from the ships – crates and boxes, barrels and sacks – and loading them onto handcarts. Men carrying huge sacks on their backs run up and down steep narrow planks that slope down from the sides of the ships onto the quay, and others roll barrels down other planks. Yet other men are hauling carts over to the waiting covered wagons, their horses unhitched and patiently cropping the grass nearby.

Suddenly, there’s a lot of yelling and the crack of splintering wood: one of the barrels must’ve rolled down the plank too fast and has smashed to pieces on the quay, its cargo of fish slipping and sliding across the cobbles, making a broad and smelly silvery slick.

Will and me pull faces at each other, half wanting to grin. But the fellow who let the barrel go looks worried, for another man, dressed in a good cotehardie and leather boots, strides over to him, swearing and waving his arms. He cuffs the clumsy man around the ear and tells him, and some others, to clear up all the fish. There’s a deal of grumbling.

‘I want to go closer to the ship,’ I say to Will.

He frowns. ‘I don’t think we should, with them all in such bad humour.’

‘So let’s go and see that other one.’ I point to a ship further down the quay, where there’s no unloading going on.

We stand close to the ship. It’s bobbing gently in the water and knocking softly against the side of the quay. The ship’s enormous, bigger than a barn, and there’s a sort of castle at each end, like the tops of the towers on Sir Henry’s house. I climb onto a great pile of ropes on the quayside so I can look over the ship’s edge. The great tree trunk in the middle of the ship towers above me like the tallest oaks in the forest. I tip my head back and look up: there’s another little castle perched right at the top and I wonder what it’s for. A beam’s fixed across the tree trunk, below the little castle, with white cloth – the sail, I suppose – rolled up and tied to it.

Seeing this ship up close is giving me that same shivery feeling I had all those years ago when I saw the ships sailing on the sea. ‘Wouldn’t you like to be on one of these ships?’ I say to Will, thinking how thrilling it must be.

But he grimaces. ‘I can’t imagine anything worse.’



Back home I can’t stop thinking about the ships we saw at the quay – and the ones I saw when I was little – and wondering what really does happen to ships when they reach the edge of the sea. A long time ago, Pa told me about fighting on a ship but he never said anything about the journey, and I didn’t think to ask him.

I want to go and see the ships again but Will just wants me to do my chores.

‘I won’t take you to market with me again, if this is what’s going to happen,’ he says one morning, scolding me because I haven’t cleaned out the hens like I’m supposed to. He gives me a smack round the ear, for being lazy, as he puts it.

‘I was only thinking about the ships,’ I say, feeling bitter about the smack.

Will nods. ‘I know that, but you’ve got work to do, as we all have. You can think about ships when you’ve done your chores.’

Which’ll be never, with all the jobs he’s given me to do – cleaning out the stupid hens, mucking out the stinking pigs, chasing the thieving birds off the fruit trees, and spending never-ending boring hours watching silly sheep munch grass up on the downs. I don’t want to be doing these jobs at all.

What I want is adventure, like Pa.

I don’t mean not to get on with my work. But I can’t stop trying to picture what ships must be like inside. So there I am, miles away, remembering what it was like at Wittering, gazing out at the rolling sea and the little ships getting smaller and smaller and then falling over the edge. Then suddenly there’s Will, with a face like a rain cloud, asking me why I’m just idling by the midden with a barrow full of pig shit and not spreading it.

‘You’re just day-dreaming!’ he shouts, and smacks me round the ear again. ‘Biggest mistake of my life, taking you to see the ships.’

In truth Will’s been angry ever since Pa left Ma, years and years ago when he went off with Sir Henry, leaving her when she didn’t even have the strength to go and feed her hens. Will said Pa didn’t *have* to go. And when he came back again, he was too late.

Then, when he went away again, it wasn't to fight a proper war. He was just going to be a mercenary. Will was only nineteen, but Pa was leaving him to look after his sisters and me and all our land and animals. I was scared we'd never see Pa again, but when I said so to Will, he shouted at me.

'We're better off without him!' he said, and spat on the ground.

When Pa came home again last summer, he'd been gone nearly five years. It'd been so long I barely knew him. But Will was furious he'd come back at all.

But he was only home a year. Last summer the king decided to go to war with France again, and Sir Henry raised another militia. This time he told Pa he didn't have to join up, but Pa was desperate to go.

'There'll probably be just one big battle,' he said to me, 'then I'll be home again for good.'

But I didn't believe him. I loved Pa but I didn't trust anything he said.

'Can I come with you, Pa?' I said, not sure I really wanted to. 'I've been coming to the practices for ages.'

A few of the village boys were going. They wanted to be soldiers and persuaded their fathers to let them go. I remembered what Will said about how vicious and dangerous war is, but I thought maybe it'd be exciting.

But Pa sort of laughed and ruffled my hair, then shook his head and looked serious.

'You're too young—'

'But lots of boys go! You told me they do.'

He nodded slowly. 'It's true, boys do go. And lots of them die.' He drew me to his chest. 'I won't put you in that danger.'

'But you put yourself in danger! It's not fair!'

Pa shrugged. 'I know what to expect.'

I turned away. 'You just want me to stay here, a farm boy. Well, *fine*. That's what I'll do. But I might not be here when you come home again.'

But after Pa'd gone and my anger had cooled down, I reminded myself I didn't want to be a soldier. At the archery practices, I was already one of the best. But, though I was proud of my new skills, I didn't want to use them on a battlefield. I didn't want the kind of thrill I supposed some men – maybe even Pa – got from killing. I wanted some other sort of thrill.

Though I'd no idea what that might be.



It was only four months ago Pa left and now he's home again. He says he's back for good, though I won't depend upon it. But I do wonder if I can get away at last from Will and his horrible wife and bawling brat.

'Can I come and live with you?' I say to Pa.

He laughs. 'I suppose so. But must still do your chores.' I pull a face. 'I know you don't like it, but your place is helping your brother to work our – his – land. Unless, of course, you want me to ask Sir Henry if you can go as an apprentice to a carpenter or a blacksmith?'

I throw up my hands. 'I don't want to be a carpenter! I want to do something *thrilling!*'

'And what is "something thrilling", son?'

I flush and shake my head. I still don't really know.



Sometimes Pa and me go fishing and, as we sit together on the riverbank waiting for the trout to bite, we talk. I've always loved to hear Pa's stories, to hear how much he loved the life he'd chosen. But I've never had much chance to tell him of my own hopes for an adventurous life. I've been scared to tell him, seeing what Will thinks about it.

But, surely Pa won't think the same as Will?

Anyway, the sight of the river rushing along so fast beneath my feet reminds me of the millstream and the leaf boats. I decide to be bold.

'Pa,' I say, 'I've never told you about when Will and me went to see the sea.'

He looks up, his eyebrows raised. 'When did you do that?'

'Years ago, when I was little.'

'What did you think of it?'

I smile, remembering how I felt. 'I could hardly believe the sea was so big. And when I saw ships out there, I wondered what happened when they fell over the edge.'

'"Fell over"?!' Pa laughs and ruffles my hair.

I laugh too. 'I used to think monsters might've swallowed them up, like in Ma's story...'

Like an untamed colt, the little ship bucked and reared through

the dark and heaving waves. And round and round the hapless craft, from prow to stern, the leviathan prowled and bellowed. Up and up each towering wave the ship was forced to climb, then down and down and down it plunged into the monster's gaping maw...

I can only remember a few lines of the story, though Pa doesn't remember it at all.

'I always wondered where Ma got her stories,' I say. 'They were so exciting.'

But Pa just shrugs. 'She must've made them up.'

Yet it's hard to understand how Ma would know *what* to make up, what words to use. But I don't argue. Instead I tell Pa about the ships at Chichester quay.

'I so want to know what it's like to sail on one. It must be a great adventure.'

I really thought Pa'd understand. But when I say I'm thinking maybe I'd like to go to sea like Uncle Adam, he frowns. 'The manor's your home. This is where you belong.'

I feel as if he's hit me. 'But Uncle Adam didn't stay here.' My voice starts to wobble. 'And nor did you!'

'That was different—' he begins, but I shake my head.

'No, it wasn't! Will says you went away because you *wanted* to. That's why you left Ma.'

Pa goes stiff. 'You believe that?'

I don't answer.

'I thought you'd understand,' I say at last. 'But you're just the same as Will.'

He puts his hand on my shoulder but I shrug it off. 'I've got jobs to do.' I get up, throwing down my fishing rod, and march off back towards the farm.

It's not until I'm beyond Pa's sight I let the tears come.

1349

II.

Rumours have been flying around for weeks about a terrible sickness come to England – brought by sailors come on ships from Genoa, a place Pa once talked about. In the alehouses, travellers strike folk dumb with terror with their tales of what they've seen or heard – of people dying in agony, their bodies black with stinking boils, their wits gone to the Devil, of entire villages wiped out, men, women and children, none spared Death's icy finger.

It's hard not to listen, but harder to forget.

Preachers come too, with a different kind of story: they say God's so angry at men's sins He's sent a pestilence to punish us. They say we're all sinners and all of us'll die. In the crowd that gathers, men moan and women weep, and when all are quaking and wailing with fear of what's to come, the preacher gives a guileful grin.

'But you can save y'self!' he cries, delving deep into his scrip.

'See 'ere.' He holds up a small white thing that could be a bit of chalk dug up from our fields. 'A finger of the blessed Saint Sebastian!'

Some folk part with their pennies for a fragment of the holy relic, hoping to cheat Death.

Our priest, Master Nicholas, despises those wily preachers and chases them from the village. He agrees men's sins are the cause of God's wrath, but the remedy's confession, he says, not worthless charms. As days pass, and it seems the terror's drawing closer, folk pack the church to hear him speak and make their confessions. Day after day they go, desperate to understand, for consolation, to find answers to their fears. Even we atte Hyls go. Isabel insists and Will won't deny her, given how close she's to her time again.

Then, one evening, Will comes back from Chichester, his face grey and his eyes wild.

'No one's safe!' he cries, and Isabel whimpers and clutches her enormous belly, the two little ones clinging to her skirt. 'Everywhere, whole villages are dying!' Will claws at his hair, shaking his head from side to side. 'And no one knows what it is...'

Only days later, the pestilence arrives in Broadham and the first person dies – the last person you'd think to fall sick, John Addlebrook, a great strapping lad who works in the

smithy. After that, as days and weeks pass, so many die each day it seems no one in the village will survive.

III.

Lizzie Proudfoot is choking on her tears and clutches at her swelling belly. But her young husband Philip will not relent.

'I can't leave my parents and my little sisters. You must see that.'

She nods but is, these days, unusually deaf to reason. 'So I'm to be parted from my father and my brothers!'

Lizzie's father, Richard atte Hyl, has just left the cottage the young Proudfoots share with five other members of Philip's family. The cottage is in the middle of the village, one of several rather shabby structures huddled close together around the church and village green.

'Our holding's on the outskirts of the village,' Richard said, 'well away from here, where folk are obliged to throng together so.'

Philip took great offence at his father-in-law's contempt towards the undeniably modest home he had provided for his young wife, but he kept it to himself. 'So what are you saying, Master atte Hyl?'

'That you should bring Lizzie home, and you must of course come too. It will be much safer there—'

Philip saw Lizzie's lips part as if she would agree, but he shook his head with vigour and rejected what had seemed like a command, despite the tears he then saw spring to Lizzie's eyes.

Philip frowns and clicks his tongue. 'Lizzie, you've been parted from them three years. Your home's not there, but here, with me—'

Lizzie lets out a wail. 'I know that! But knowing makes it no easier to bear.'

IV.

Pa leaves his cot and comes back to live with us, saying the family should stay together, and Will does not refuse. Pa says none of us should go abroad, but keep ourselves to ourselves till the sickness runs its course. He tells Will to send away the cottars who work on our land, but Will snorts.

‘What good’ll that do?’ He shakes his head. ‘How’ll we work the land, just you, me and Peter? We can’t do it.’

Pa shrugs. ‘We have to, else we’ll go the way of the others.’

Isabel begins to weep. ‘Why us? If it’s God’s punishment for sinners, we aren’t sinners, are we? We go to church, we say our prayers, we pay our dues – what cause has God to punish us, to punish our little ones?’ She wails loudly, cradling her swollen belly and rocking back and forth, and little Geoffrey and little Agnes are big-eyed and blubbery, and Will can’t give her or the children any comfort.

Pa just shakes his head. ‘I don’t think it works like that, Bel.’ He comes and puts his arm round my shoulders, for I’m trembling like it was the middle of winter.

‘So how does it work, Pa?’ I say, but he shrugs again.

‘I don’t know. But I don’t think it chooses who to afflict and who to spare.’

We stay at home as best we can – or we do for a couple of weeks. But Will can’t bear to neglect the fields or abandon the sheep and cows, and at length goes out, ignoring Isabel’s wails of protest and Pa’s long face.

‘Let the sheep take care of themselves, Will,’ says Pa, taking hold of his arm as he opens the door to go out. But Will shakes off his hand.

‘What d’you know about sheep?’ he says, his face suddenly purple. ‘The ewes’ll be dropping their lambs soon – some of them will’ve started already.’

Pa nods, but Isabel carries on blubbing, adding to her fears for her children and unborn baby with a new terror for the “poor little lambs”.

Will ignores them both. ‘I’m going out to see them.’ Unhooking his thick winter cloak from its peg by the door, he throws it around his shoulders. Then, taking his crook from its place in the corner, he cocks his head at me. ‘You coming?’

Pa spins round and lunges towards me, grabbing me by the shoulder. ‘No! Peter’s not going out.’

Will snorts again. 'I'd say that's for him to decide.'

I'm being pulled between them: I hate to defy Pa, but I don't want to let Will down. I don't want to be a farmer, but I don't like to think of the lambs dying out there on the downs for lack of a shepherd's aid. So I nod at Will.

'Sorry, Pa, but I reckon we ought to see the ewes're all right.'



It's been frightening to see the village I've lived in all my life – the people I've known for so long, who've always lent a hand to neighbours in trouble, who always work together to bring in a harvest – to see it all break apart, all friendships lost.

Before the pestilence arrived, people still came together every day, in the church, believing Master Nicholas when he said prayer and confession would surely keep God's wrath at bay. But when John Addlebrook died and it seemed their prayers had failed, panic set in and folk stopped seeking comfort from their neighbours. A few families left the village, thinking they could cheat Death that way. But most folk, like us, stay at home, going out only to buy what provisions are still to be had, to plough, sow and weed their fields, or see to their livestock, but not to speak to others – even friends and neighbours – for any longer than they have to. People want to be alone, or just with their own kinfolk.

Though there's a bunch of folk who say there's no point trying to hide from Death – if the world's coming to an end, they might as well enjoy their last days. If you walk by an alehouse, which I don't often, you'll see them spilling onto the street, roiling around, fighting amongst themselves, shouting and swearing, the women cackling shamelessly as men fondle their breasts in everyone's plain sight. Yet these aren't the usual drunken mob, but people who've always been God-fearing folk, people who've now lost their faith in salvation and given themselves up to the Devil.

V.

None of us atte Hyls have fallen ill. Isabel had her baby, a strong lusty little girl, who keeps the whole household awake at night with her noisy clamour. I wonder if Lizzie too has given birth, for her time was close to Isabel's or so we thought, but we've heard nothing of her, and Pa says it's too soon to visit.

Will and me – Pa too – go daily to our fields, and Will and me tend to the sheep. We've a fine crop of lambs, and the green shoots of our new-sown barley are pushing through the soil. But lots of field strips close by ours are poorly tended – some not ploughed or sown at all, some only part ploughed or, where they were sown last winter, with the young plants choked with weeds.

Will cocks his head at a wide band of strips to the south of ours. His face is grey. 'Ben Craven must be dead. He'd never let his fields go like this.' Ben was one of Will's closest friends.

I nod. 'I suppose he is. Perhaps you should go and see?'

'No!' he says, almost shouting. 'How can I? I might bring it back to Bel and the little ones.'

I shrug but he must be right. No one visits friends, even – especially – to see if they're still alive. We just wait to hear the news from some chance meeting, at the mill or smithy. Will turns away and I catch him wiping his sleeve across his face. Then he bends down again and tears the weeds from between the shoots of barley.

Fearful as she is, Isabel still goes to the village to buy bread and provisions. She swears she never lingers at the bakery or market, barely speaking to a soul beyond asking for what she's gone to buy. But, one late afternoon, a day or so after visiting the bakery, she complains of feeling cold, her body stiff and achy. I see panic in Will's eyes but Bel, seeing it too, just smiles and shakes her head.

'It's just a chill. It's been right damp and cold these past few days.' She pats him on the arm. 'If you men can manage for one evening, I'll go early to bed.'

Will nods, smiling weakly. Bel picks up each child in turn, giving them a hug, then rests her head briefly on Will's shoulder before shuffling off into the little room that used to be a store but, since Pa came back, is where she sleeps with Will and the children.

'We'll all sleep in the loft tonight,' says Will. 'Let Bel rest.'

Pa nods and gets on with preparing the meal, though none of us are much interested in food. Even the children push the chopped up bacon and cabbage around their bowls of pottage.

All through the meal, we hear Isabel's low moaning through the thin partition wall. But, not long after, the moans become sobs and Will, his face taut, jumps up from his stool and goes to her, leaving the flimsy door ajar. Geoffrey and Agnes whimper as they hear their mother crying, and Pa gathers them onto his lap, rocking back and forth.

I go and listen at the door.

‘It’s like I’m being pricked all over,’ sobs Isabel. She lets out a gasp, then another shuddering sob. I peer into the gloom of the little room and can just see Will trying to cradle her in his arms, but she pushes him away. ‘It hurts so, Will!’

Will doesn’t come out again, and Pa takes the children into his own bed in the loft and soothes them off to sleep. I’ve never seen Pa do that before – I can’t remember him cuddling Will or Lizzie or even me like that. I stay awake long into the night, listening to the sounds downstairs. It’s almost light before Will appears again, his hair a tangle and his grubby face all streaked. I’m already awake after a night of restless sleep, unable to stop my ears against the sound of Isabel’s weeping.

‘How’s Bel?’ I say, keeping my voice low.

He shakes his head. ‘It’s not a chill.’ He looks about him, his shoulders stiff, his eyes dull and misty. When he speaks again, his voice is almost a whisper. ‘I think you and Pa should leave. Go to Pa’s cottage. Take the children.’

‘You mean...?’ I hardly dare even to think it.

He nods. ‘Bel’s got these swellings, under her arms, in her...’ he shakes his head briefly, ‘other places.’

I feel sick but try not to show it.

‘They’re hard, and burning hot. She’s in agony.’ He closes his eyes and shudders. ‘And she keeps rolling her head around, saying it hurts so bad.’ He looks directly at me then, and his face seems crumpled. I suppose he’s not slept at all.

Then, suddenly, Agnes is downstairs and darts across the room. She throws herself at his knees. ‘Pa! Pa!’ she cries. ‘Can I go see Ma now?’

It seems an effort for Will to crouch down to Agnes’ level and take her into his arms. He buries his face in her soft brown curls. ‘No, sweeting, poor Ma isn’t well.’ He sobs against her neck. Her thin little arms shoot out and grasp him around the chest.

Then Pa’s there too, little Geoffrey clasped in his arms. ‘We won’t leave you, Will,’ he says. ‘We must stay together.’

But Will shakes his head vigorously. ‘No! You know what we’ve heard. The sickness spreads from person to person. If those swellings burst, then all of us might–’ He stops, maybe the thought too awful to speak of. ‘Take the children to your cot. Save them at least.’

Pa looks doubtful but at length he nods. ‘How’ll I feed the baby?’

‘Peter can milk one of the ewes,’ says Will, and turns to go back to his wife. But then he stops and bends down again to pick up Agnes, and clasps her to his chest.

‘Be a good girl for Grandpa,’ he says, and she nods and wriggles to get down. Then, taking his little son from Pa, Will holds him tight, resting his cheek against his curly hair.

‘You too, Geoffrey, be a good, brave boy.’ For answer, the child just grabs his father’s hair and pulls it, crowing with delight.

Finally, my brother goes to the wooden crib where his newest child, Bella, is gurgling. He bends down and, lifting her out, cradles her in his arms and drops a kiss on her downy head. Tears run down his cheeks as he places Bella gently into Pa’s arms.

‘Take care of them all. Whatever happens.’ Then he nods at me and goes back into the little room.



A week later, we bury Isabel, and my brother too, and all three of their little ones. They’re all laid side by side in the last spaces in the churchyard. The next folk to be buried will go in the new common grave Master Nicholas’s ordered to be dug, on a patch of ground as close to the church as he could find.

Poor Master Nicholas! In the few weeks since the pestilence arrived, his hair’s turned grey, his face ashen and drawn, and his priest’s gown, grimy with the blood and spew of his dead parishioners, is now wide and loose, like it’s hanging on a peg. He spends his days going from house to house, giving what comfort he can to the sick and dying – the only man here willing to go amongst the stricken.

Soon, though, Master Nicholas himself is dead, and there’s no one left to give comfort to the dying. People go to their graves unshriven, their sins unconfessed, their souls surely destined for Hell or at least eternal Purgatory. Though it’s true that, in church last Sunday, those of us who still dared to go did hear Master Nicholas speak of the bishop’s latest proclamation.

‘No one need die unshriven,’ he said. ‘The dying can – no, must! – confess their sins to anyone, even a woman, if there is no priest to hear them. I urge you all, my friends, do not let your loved ones die without hearing their last words of repentance.’

It’s hard to believe such confessions would truly save our souls, when all our lives we’ve been told none but a priest can absolve us of our sins. Yet, we listened to Master Nicholas’

words and tried to accept them. But his death, only days later, plunged us once more into fear at the thought of leaving this world without him at our side.



Pa and I stay close, shut up inside his cottage. Despite everything, Pa's still strong. Losing Will's gone hard with him, for he grieves sorely for all the years he and Will have quarrelled.

'But naught can change that now. I still have you and, though I know you think I don't understand you, I'll not quarrel over it.'

'There's nothing to quarrel about, Pa,' I say, and in truth, since March, I've thought little of my plans; they've faded away like a dream does the moment you awake. The bold lad who so longed to get away from everything he knew has become a child again, needing the comfort of his father's arms.

The loss of my brother and his family is hard too for me to bear, despite Will and me not always seeing eye-to-eye. I think of what Isabel said – what cause did God have to punish them? Will was a good man, hard working, honest, a loving husband and father. Isabel was vexing but scarcely a sinner. And the children'd had no time to sin! No one, not even Master Nicholas, understood why God must be so cruel.

So now I cling to Pa, terrified I might lose him too.

VI.

Poor Lizzie Proudfoot is in tears again. She clings to her mother-in-law, who sobs against her shoulder. They are both wondering how they will survive this latest devastation, or if indeed they will survive at all.

The elder Proudfoot, John, died soon after the pestilence first came to Broadham. A big man, broad-shouldered and straight-backed despite years of labouring in Sir Henry's fields, he was the strongest and fittest of his fellows. Not one you might think to be among the first to succumb.

Next to surrender to Death's summons was John's younger son, a boy of fifteen, well-built like his father. Yet Lizzie's husband Philip,

who had always been much less robust, survived for weeks, along with his mother, wife and two young sisters.

But he has just now died – a different sort of death from that of his father and brother, for he bore no boils, nor suffered the pricking or the wracking pains. Only hours ago, he complained to Lizzie of feeling nauseous and hot, and seemed to find it hard to breathe. The signs were so unlike what they knew of the pestilence, they assumed it was just some sort of fever, and Philip went back to bed, to sleep it off, he said.

But, when Lizzie went up to see if he was feeling better, she found him silent and stone cold.

VII.

Pa and me, alone together now in his cottage in the wood, venture out each day to check the sheep or weed the crops, but never wittingly to cross our neighbours' paths. Though in truth there are far fewer neighbours now with paths to cross.

As a cool, wet May passes into a cool, even wetter June, our outings abroad bring fewer and fewer reports of sickness or of death. It seems the pestilence has nearly run its course. Pa becomes bolder in his desire to learn what's become of this friend or that and his excursions become more frequent. From what he learns, half the village folk have lost their lives, and Death's made no distinction between old and young, rich and poor – every family is afflicted, and none spared, not even Sir Henry's.

When Pa returns home this afternoon, his face is grey. He seems stooped and holds his body stiffly. He's been to see his friend Tom Elyot, the blacksmith, a man large in size and spirit.

'How was Tom?' I say.

Pa's lips tremble. 'Sick. I'd not expected it.'

'Was it...?'

He shrugs. 'Maybe.' My heartbeat quickens at the awful possibility and Pa slumps onto a stool and puts his head into his hands. He rocks back and forth for a while and I take it for heartache.

‘I’m sorry, Pa,’ I say, but he seems not to hear me. When he speaks next, it’s a whisper.

‘I don’t feel so good.’ He tries to loosen his shoulders and groans with the effort. He’s shivering.

‘I’ll go to bed. Try and shake it off.’

But I know, and I know he does too, he’s not going to shake it off. It’s true a few folk have recovered – I’ve heard that, once the boils burst, vile as the pus and stench must have been, they began to feel better and after a week or two were almost back to normal. But they were the fortunate few.

I go outside and walk through Ma’s garden down to the orchard. My heart’s racing and my legs feel weak. I almost fall onto Ma’s log bench, and sit there shaking. Why Pa? Why now? Am I to lose him, or will I too get sick and die? We thought we’d both come through, but maybe Death’s not willing to let us slip his bony hold.

Over the next few days, I remain untouched, but have to watch the strong, fearless soldier that was my Pa become a quivering, raving madman. I try hard to be brave – I’m sixteen and don’t want Pa to see me blubbing like a child. I slip away outside when I can’t stop the tears.

Pa weeps too, but his weeping’s from fury and from shame. He rages against the demeaning death about to overtake him.

‘Why didn’t I die on the battlefield?’ he sobs. ‘An honourable death, at least! That should’ve been my end – alongside my comrades, serving my king. A sword thrust in my side, an arrow piercing my heart, not these stinking boils rotting my flesh away.’

So he continues, hour after hour, until he loses his wits entirely and just rambles like a fool.

My poor Pa! I can’t bear to see him so broken, but neither can I leave him. I stay with him until the end, mindful of Master Nicholas’ plea that no one should die unshriven. I feel hopeless for the task, but no parson’s come to take Nicholas’ place and I’ll not risk Pa’s soul if I’ve a chance to save it. But it’s hard. For by the time Pa’s close enough to death and the time for confession, he’s hardly got the wits to understand what he’s to say, though I repeat the words to him over and over.

When the end comes at last, I can only hope God has understood his fitful mumblings.



Pa’s the last person in Broadham to die from the pestilence, and I’ve no choice but let his body be buried in the common grave outside the churchyard. But at least he’s buried quickly,

with some dignity, not flung into a ditch, as some have been, left to rot until those poor cottars collect them up and cast them into the trench without their loved ones even knowing, or seeming to care, about their fate.

I don't understand why I've not got sick myself. Of course not everyone has, else the whole village would be dead. It's said people get the sickness from being with others, yet I've been in the company of many who 've died – Isabel and my brother, my little nephew Geoffrey, and his sisters, Agnes and Bella, and I spent three days with Pa as he sickened and sunk into madness.

Perhaps it's just my good fortune? I nod to myself. It must be true.

But then another thought drops into my head.

Is it maybe some sort of sign, that my hopes of a different life aren't foolish after all? That I'm meant for greater things? Perhaps it is God's will for me to leave here and sail across the sea?

Yet why should God favour someone such as me? I cross myself and fall upon my knees right there on the cottage floor.

'Heavenly Father,' I pray, 'forgive me for my pride!'

I stay there on my knees a while, the cold dampness of the rushes leaching up my hose. Yet it's not long before the prideful moment passes. I feel at ease, lightheaded, warm.

Perhaps God's given me his answer?

VIII.

Towards the end of June, Sir Henry, the sole survivor of his family, summons the entire village to the hallmote at the manor. As the only survivor of my own family, apart from Lizzie and Bea, I have to go along.

The man sitting in the grand oak chair is old, much older than the man of spirit and authority I remember a few months ago. Pa thought him a great lord, but he seems small, lost inside his heavy velvet robes, his shoulders weighed down by the jewelled chain around his neck. Nonetheless Sir Henry nods to the constable, who steps forward and calls out in a loud booming voice:

'Oyez! This court is in session, this Friday after St John the Baptist in the twenty-third year of our King, Edward the Third. Our lord, Sir Henry de Syngletoun, presiding.'

Sir Henry does not rise but speaks from his chair. His voice too is small, and it's a strain to hear him. But it's clear enough the court's got much business to attend to: many virgates of land lie untenanted and untended, flocks of sheep and herds of cattle are roaming free, fields of wheat and barley, oats and peas are growing fast and will soon be ripe for harvest. Tenants must be found; livestock rounded up; crops harvested. It's the reeve, Robert Bordeman, also left alone without his wife or daughters – once a cheerful bully of a man, but whose eyes are now sunk darkly into his face – who brings before Sir Henry each case to be considered.

The list is long and each case seems more testing than the last. Some folk are glad of their good fortune, finding themselves inheritor of a holding, seeing their chance at last to own a goodly plot of land and become farmers instead of cottars. Others are unwilling, or too fearful, to take on the burden land brings with it, with too few sons or servants to plough and sow, weed and reap. Some want the land but can't find the fee demanded, and watch in anguish as it passes to another who can afford to pay. One or two of the wealthier villeins grow richer still, taking advantage of others' hardship and increasing their own holdings two or threefold. Some can hardly hide their pleasure at the boon that others' ill fortune – the pestilence itself – has brought them.

I too should be pleased I'm now responsible for the atte Hyl holding. It's big – a whole virgate – and Master Bordeman's keen for me to take it on, despite me being so young. I've listened to all the cases debated before mine and realise I'm among the fortunate, for I own the land and can afford to pay, with the money Will garnered from his wise and clever dealings. I find myself swept up by the excitement of those who've seen their fortunes turn around. Then Sir Henry sits up and, leaning forward, points a shaky finger towards me.

'Your father, young atte Hyl, was a good soldier,' he says, lifting his voice a little and jabbing the air with his finger, 'the finest archer in my militia. And the atte Hyl holding is one of the best on the manor, thanks to your brother William. You should be proud to take it on, lad!'

Murmurings of agreement buzz around the great hall, and I can hardly disagree with his lordship's view. So I nod. 'Yes, my lord.'

'I can see you are your father's son,' continues Sir Henry, 'full of energy, resolve, a fine successor to your forebears, young Peter.'

And the men around me slap me on the back and shake my hand.

IX.

As I sit by the fire, weighing up what I'm about to do, I tell myself what Will built up is now mine and, if I follow his example, I could make the holding the most prosperous on the manor. Maybe in time I could become one of the village's most powerful men – with so many of the leading men now dead, there's a good chance for those of us left behind. Don't I want to grasp the opportunity?

Yet, it isn't power, or even money, I want – it is adventure.

I should be proud to inherit the holding from my father and my brother, but I think of it only as a burden I want rid of. I've paid my fee and put my mark on the deed that says the land is mine, but I don't want it.

Instead I plunder my brother's prudence and take most of the money he's been saving in the small oak chest kept in the private solar Pa built years ago up under the roof. I'm sure he thought I knew nothing of it but, one evening, I caught sight of Will kneeling by it, the lid wide open. I said nothing, thinking maybe one day the money would be useful, yet I felt bad to be planning even then to rob my brother. But, now, the money's become mine anyway, and there's no reason not to take it.

I try to forget I'm abandoning my sisters – just like Pa did, Will always said. In truth, I'm sorry they'll think badly of me, but I won't give up this chance.

For it's the only chance I'll have. Life's short and we must make of it what we can. Will never wanted more than to be a farmer, and he learned to be a good one, whereas Pa, once he got soldiering in his blood, found he no longer wanted the farming life.

They both did what they wanted, and it's my turn now to do the same.

X.

Lizzie and Bea sit with their arms around each other, weeping.

Lizzie raises her head a little. 'How could he leave us, Bea? Leaving me alone, with my baby and my mother-in-law to care for.'

Bea nods her head against her sister's shoulder. 'He went without even saying goodbye to us.'

'And he's taken all Will's money.'

Bea nods. 'I suppose it *is* all his now.'

But Lizzie shakes her head. 'Surely some of it was mine? But he's left me without so much as a groat. So I've no husband, no father, no brother – and no money.' She starts to weep again, and Bea strokes her matted hair, thinking how much her sister has changed, from the strong, confident and happy girl she was just a few months ago.

Bea sighs and speaks then in a whisper, almost to herself. 'I have none of those things either. And never will have.'

XI.

I used to think, when I left the manor, I'd go to Chichester, where I first saw the ships that set me on this course. But, all the long years I've thought of leaving, I've listened in to talk in alehouses and markets, and when travellers come to the village, in the hope of learning the best place to find work. And the place I heard was best was called Southampton, a big port, it was said – much bigger than Chichester – where there were lots of merchants and lots of ships, and good prospects for men to work on them.

Southampton's far to the west of Broadham, about thirty miles or so – though I've not much idea how far that is, or what road to take. I'm wary of asking other travellers in case one of them turns out to be some fellow who thinks he can make a few pennies turning me in – with so few men left in Broadham, even Sir Henry might want me back.

So, when at last I find myself standing before Southampton's towering city gate, I feel light-headed with excitement for what lies in the future. But I'm also tired and hungry. I ask the gatekeeper where I can find a meal and a bed for the night, then slip through the gate into the city. I'm in a wide street flanked with tall houses and shops and workshops all along both sides. Before the pestilence, I suppose it must've been a busy place, but many of the shops are closed up and dark, in others just one man or woman is working. One or two look up as I pass, but when I call out 'Good day!' and smile, few reply. Nearly all look troubled, their faces grey, their eyes hollow, and I wonder if I've been a fool – have I given up good fortune in the place I know for an uncertain future here?

The inn the gatekeeper told me of is near the docks. *The Red Lion* is comfortable enough and its plump landlady, Dame Ellen Broustere, bakes a good meat pie. But she's gloomy about how few customers she's getting.

'A few folks still come here for their dinners, but you're the first wanting a bed.'

Despite her gloom, Dame Ellen's friendly enough, but holds out little hope of me finding work. Sitting down heavily at the table, she talks as I eat. Her face is red, and shiny with grease or sweat or both, the white wimple framing it brownish-yellow at the edges.

'You poor lad,' she cries, 'coming all this way for nothing.'

'Nothing?' I say, alarmed.

She shrugs. 'Well, I s'pose you might find something. These days there ain't so many looking for work, but there ain't much going neither. The merchants, them that owns the ships – even lots of them've died – and them as are left, well, they might've been rich before but, since the pestilence, trade's just dried up... Even Master Godfrey's finding it hard.'

'Master Godfrey?'

She nods. 'Master Hugh Godfrey. Wine merchant. Fine gentleman.' Dame Ellen heaves herself to her feet, and clears away the bowl I've scraped clean with the coarse bread she gave me. 'More ale, lad?' she says and, at my nod, brings me another pot of the thin, weak stuff she's serving.

'So might Master Godfrey have work?'

She purses her lips. 'As I said, lad, even he's finding it hard. What with the war, and then the pestilence, the Frenchies ain't been making wine.'

I try not to be downcast by her melancholy. Life's still going on, isn't it? I've come here to find work on a merchant ship and, if this Master Godfrey is as rich as she says, surely, if anyone does, he'll have ships sailing to France.

'How'll I know him if I meet him in the street?'

She chuckles. 'Oh, you can't miss Master Godfrey. Tall and wide, red face – cheery despite it all. Always clad in his green and blue cotehardie. Everybody knows him.'



I'd imagined Southampton's docks a bustling place, full of activity and clamour, like it'd been at the quay at Chichester, only more so. I expected lots of ships to be moored at the wharfs, goods being unloaded and loaded, men with handcarts running this way and that,

carrying the goods to waiting wagons. I expected noise, the shouts of men, the whickering of horses, the rattle of wheels, the whine of winches lifting goods from one place to another, the thwack of ships' sides knocking against the quayside.

But the quay is quiet. Not silent, nor completely still, but few men are working, and those that are seem to have little to do. All this inactivity is disheartening. If those men have no work, it's not likely even Master Godfrey will have anything for me. But I tell myself, if trade is slow right now, it's only been a couple of months since the pestilence. It'll pick up again before too long.

I stroll over to one of the ships, where men are unloading crates onto the wharf. It's a broad, tall ship – taller than any I saw at Chichester – its mast reaching up to the sky, a tangle of ropes streaming down from its top like ribbons on the maypole girls used to dance around on May Day. The great white sail, like those I saw bellied out by the wind on the ships going across the sea to France, is folded and tied up in swoops to the cross-beam high up on the mast.

I go up to one of the men on the quayside, heaving crates into the back of a wagon.

'Who's the master of this ship?' I say, smiling.

He stands up slowly with a grunt, one hand pressed into his back, and turns to me, a scowl upon his dark leathery face. 'An' 'ho wants t' know?' He spits onto the ground by my feet.

Startled by his gruffness, I stammer out my name.

'Well, Peter atte Hyl, this 'ere's Master Godfrey's ship but, if you're looking for work, you can sling your 'ook. Master Godfrey's got all the crew 'e needs.'

The crewman spits again and turns back stiffly to his crates. I walk away, but glance back at the ship's deck as I go, to see how many men there are on board. It's an easy count: I can see only three. Is that enough to man so great a ship? I wander further down the wharf, looking at other ships tied alongside, but none seem to have either crew or cargo. I slump down on a pile of heavy ropes and wonder again if I've been a fool to leave everything I know for this – for nothing.

I make my way slowly back towards town, my eyes fixed on my boots as I imagine what Will would've said to me about it, when I hear a commotion up ahead. I look up to see a group of men, close to where I left Master Godfrey's bad-tempered crewman, shouting and jostling. As I get nearer, I see one of the men, taller and much plumper than the others, is wearing a bright-coloured blue and green coat.

Master Godfrey's surrounded by the crew of his ship, and the bad-tempered crewman is complaining loudly that Master Godfrey's about to lay them off.

'But I have no choice, Jack,' says his master. 'You know that. This is the last consignment from France, and I can't afford to run more than one ship when there's so little business. I'm taking the *Margaret* for my next trip – she's a lot smaller. The *Sainte Marie*,' he waves at the ship standing alongside, 'will have to lie up for a while.'

Jack the crewman throws his hands in the air. 'And what're we s'posed t'do?' His voice is thick and hoarse. 'We've served you well these many years, Master Godfrey. You just throwing us over?'

Master Godfrey nods slowly. 'I'm sorry, Jack – sorry to all of you – but you know I have no choice. With God's will, when I next return from France, I will have more business and we will run the *Sainte Marie* again.'

But the crew of the *Sainte Marie* aren't happy. 'Where'll we go till then?' says a scrawny fellow with no teeth.

Master Godfrey shakes his head. 'I cannot advise you, Ben,' he says, his face long. Then he seems to think for a moment before speaking again. 'The best I can do is keep two of you on to mind the ship while I'm abroad. Jack, you've been with me longest. Choose another to keep you company.'

Jack nods and I think I see a grin crack his jaw for an instant, before he turns, grim-faced again, to his shipmates and, after a moment's hesitation, lays his hand on the broad shoulder of a younger man, tall and tough looking. 'I'll take Albert,' says Jack. 'He's a strong'un.'

The others grumble amongst themselves, but Master Godfrey nods, then sighs. 'You all know well enough why this has to be. First there were the French raids on our ports in thirty-eight, and the king's war. With the fighting and then the famine in Gascony, and then the pestilence in Bordeaux, is it any wonder the wine trade has suffered? But you can thank God it's my ships you crew and not John Fortescue's, for poor John's business is altogether ruined.'

He bows his head for a moment or two and then looks up again, a slight smile on his lips. 'In three weeks, I am away to France. When I return, God willing, there'll be trade enough for all my ships.'

Then he turns, raises his arm in farewell, and strides away, leaving the unhappy crewmen still protesting their discontent.

With all I've just heard, I hesitate to follow Master Godfrey. But this is the chance I've come all this way for – I can't let it slip away. So I run after him, calling out his name.

He stops and swings round. 'What is it now?' he says, his voice impatient, but then raises his eyebrows. 'And who might you be, lad, hailing me by name?'

'My name's Peter, sir, Peter atte Hyl.'

'And what can you want with me, Peter atte Hyl?' The lines at the sides of his eyes are crinkling, making him look friendly despite the gruffness in his voice.

I decide to be bold. 'I've come to Southampton to find adventure,' I say and, soon as I say the words, I wish I hadn't. And Master Godfrey must agree, for his eyes crinkle even more and he laughs, though I don't think he finds me funny.

'Adventure?' He shakes his head from side to side, then creases his brow. 'Adventure! Lad, where have you been these past months? Don't you know the world is ruined? There is no time for adventure. Work, lad, *work* is what we must do now. To salvage our trade, recover our city, rebuild our country!'

My face is pink, I'm certain of it, and, despite my tallness, I feel quite small beside the blustering bulk of Master Godfrey. I fix my eyes on my boots and try again.

'But I do want to work, sir,' I say at length, 'really I do.'

'So, look up, Peter atte Hyl, and tell me what it is you want to do.'

It's only at that moment I realise I still don't know. I look up at him, my cheeks aflame. 'I want to work on ships.'

'You want to crew?'

I shrug. 'You don't need any more crewmen. I heard you say so.'

'That's right, lad, I don't.'

I turn, thinking I should just go, but then have an idea. 'Apprentice?'

But he shakes his head. 'I've had no apprentices for years. Too much trouble.' He grimaces. 'And my wife loathes little boys.'

He laughs at that, but then his face turns serious again. 'Anyway, lad, what experience do you have? My apprentices always used to come from merchants' families.'

I nod and look away.

Master Godfrey lays his hand on my shoulder. 'I'm sorry, lad, I cannot help you now. Maybe in a few months.'

But I can't wait that long.



Days pass. I decide to try some other merchants – I suppose not all of them deal in wine. Each day I march up and down the quay, and go knocking on the doors of all their premises, asking if they'll give me a job. But, wine merchants or no, all turn me away. Most don't even trouble to listen to my story.

Each evening I go back to *The Red Lion* and Dame Ellen tries to console me.

'I'm not surprised, dearie,' she says, putting a steaming bowl of stew in front of me, and plonking down a cup of ale.

But I'm downhearted.

After the pestilence, I thought they'd all be desperate for workers. I was sure they'd see how keen I was, how good a prospect. As I lie unsleeping on my pallet, I wonder again if leaving Broadham was a mistake. My money's being spent and I can't stay here much longer if I don't find a job. Yet I can't bear the thought of going back – and what would Sir Henry say about me running off?

But in the morning, when the first shafts of sunlight shine through the gaps in the shutters, I tell myself I was spared death for a reason. I know I can do better than never-ending ploughing and endlessly swilling pigs. If I can be just a little patient...

Casting off my nighttime doubts, I roll off the pallet and jump to my feet. Passing up Dame Ellen's offer of some breakfast, I run down to the quay again, hoping – believing – I'll somehow spot the chance I came here for.

I soon see Master Godfrey, directing operations on his little ship, the *Margaret* – preparing to go to France, I suppose. I decide I must be bold once more, but wait a while until he seems unoccupied.

'Master Godfrey!' I call out.

He turns and frowns. 'Ah, it's you, young Master...' He wavers a moment.

'Atte Hyl, sir,' I say, fixing a broad smile to my face.

'Ah, yes, still here then? I'm not surprised. Most of my fellow merchants are worse off than me.'

My heart's racing and my mouth is dry, but I must ignore it. 'Please, Master Godfrey, please give me a chance. I so want to go to sea. And I'll work hard, you'll see.'

But Master Godfrey shakes his head.

I can feel tears welling, and I can't think of the words to sway him. 'I'll work for no wages!' I say at last.

He smiles a bit at that and rubs at his beard. 'I'd still have to feed you. And suppose you can't take it on board ship, what'll I do with you then? Abandon you in France?'

I hadn't thought of that, but it was a chance I had to take. 'But I *will* like it, sir! I know I will. Please, Master Godfrey, let me prove myself.'

He shakes his head again and sighs. 'I'll think about it. Now I must get back to the ship. You sit over there and wait.' He points to a great mound of thick greasy ropes.

I sit down and watch the hectic – and exciting – activity on board the *Margaret*. I can feel my heart beating a little faster. But hours seem to pass and, by the time Master Godfrey's finished directing his men, I no longer believe he's going to say yes.

When he at last comes over to me, I have to force myself to smile.

'So what did you really mean by "adventure", lad?' says Master Godfrey, taking me by surprise.

'I don't think I really know, sir. But, when I was little, down at Wittering beach, I saw some ships crossing the sea to France, and I wanted more than anything to find out what it was like out on the sea.'

Master Godfrey lets out a loud guffaw. 'I see!' Then he looks up at the sky – the sun's high overhead. 'I must be getting back.' He puts his arm around my shoulder and starts to walk. 'Walk with me, young atte Hyl, and tell me more about yourself.' As we walk, I tell him about watching the ships disappear over the edge of the sea, and wanting to know what happened to them, then, years later, seeing the ships at Chichester quay.

Before long, we come to a fine tall house, like nothing in our village, its front wall striped with white panels between planks of timber, its roof covered with grey tiles. Hanging from a beam jutting out from high up on the front wall is a huge timber barrel.

'Why's that there?' I say to Master Godfrey.

He grins. 'That's the sign of my trade. I am a wine merchant, and a good one at that. Or I was.' His smiling face changes briefly to a gloomy one. 'Trade is not so good, Peter. The wars and the pestilence between them.'

I nod. 'You said, sir, to your crew.'

He shakes his head. 'It's a bad business. But I must start again, find new trade.'

‘That’s why you’re going to France?’

‘Yes, and, d’you know, I’ve a mind to take you with me after all.’

‘Really?’ I suddenly feel hot inside.

He nods. ‘I still have my journeymen, Simon de Witt and Roger le Barbier, but I think I could make use of a lad like you.’

‘Yes, please, Master Godfrey!’

‘There’ll be no money, but I’ll feed and clothe you. You must do as I say and, sometimes, as Simon or Roger says. Can you do that?’



Master Godfrey’s house has five rooms – I’ve never seen a house so big, except of course Sir Henry’s. Downstairs at the front is the shop, where Master Godfrey, or one of his journeymen, sells goods over a counter that opens out onto the street. At the back of the house is a private room where Master Godfrey talks to his more important customers, and where he keeps his papers and counts his money. In between is a great hall, open right up to the rafters, with a fireplace set into the wall, in the latest style. Not even Sir Henry has a fireplace with a chimney.

Upstairs, Master Godfrey tells me, are two rooms, one where he and his family sleep, and the other where visitors are lodged, and where Dame Christina and her three daughters sit during the day, sewing and even reading books. I’ve not seen the rooms upstairs – I sleep downstairs in the hall. And I hardly ever see the girls – only when they come down to dinner – and even then all I do is snatch glances at them from the far end of the long table. The oldest one, Joanna, is very pretty. But all of them ignore me. The two journeymen, Simon and Roger, eat their meals with the family too, and the girls talk to them quite merrily. But they’re the sons of merchants, not country peasant boys.

XII.

When Master Godfrey says we’re setting sail for France, Simon and Roger both go pale.

‘Now, master?’ says Roger, in a rude-sounding voice.

Master Godfrey frowns. ‘Yes, now. We must take advantage of the weeks left to us before winter sets in, and get over to France with our cloth. We need new customers.’

‘But the sea—’ says Roger, his voice rising to a squeak.

‘The sea will be fine,’ says Master Godfrey, waving his hand in the air.

‘But what about the return trip, sir?’ says Simon, beads of sweat appearing on his lip.
‘Surely, by the time we’re ready to come back—’

Master Godfrey flaps his hand again. ‘We will stay in France until the spring. When we’ve done our business in Gascony, we will travel north to Tours and Monsieur de Martigny. There will be no problem with the roads.’

Simon and Roger stare at each other with what looks like alarm, and I wonder if I should be nervous of Master Godfrey’s plans or trust he knows more about the seas and roads than them.

Later, I ask Simon how many days we’ll be at sea, and he guffaws.

‘Hey, Roger, you hear what this fool just asked? How many *days* to France?’

Roger sniggers and cuffs the back of my head.

‘You don’t know much, do you, country boy?’ he says, a spiteful leer on his face. ‘It’s not days, it’s weeks. Weeks and weeks and weeks, rocking and rolling on the plunging waves, emptying your guts out over the side, wishing for all the world you were dead.’ He waves his arms up and down, swaying his body and rolling his eyes, and pretends to gag, but he and Simon laugh so much I think they must be jesting.

I shrug. ‘I didn’t think it was that far to France.’

‘Depends which way you go,’ says Simon, tittering. ‘You can go straight across the Channel, but we’re going the long way round, down the west coast to Bordeaux.’



I’m thrilled when we go aboard the *Margaret*. The first day, sailing west, in fine weather, and keeping close to land, the ship slips through the waves, and any unease melts away. I stand on the deck, holding onto one of the mast’s ropes to steady myself, marvelling at the way the landscape changes as we speed past.

I remember a story Ma used to tell us.

Thus spake the king, bidding the oarsmen pull strongly on their blades. The helmsman thundered ‘Heave, boys, heave!’ and the nimble ship leapt forward, pitching in the tumbling waves.

The king climbed steadfast towards the jutting prow, and stood

there proud and bold, his legs set firm upon the deck, one hand fast to the forward rigging. Spume blew sharply in his face but the king, exulting in the sea's tang upon his skin and the soaring of his mighty ship, laughed and roared in his delight...

But once we turn away from the land and head out into the open sea, everything changes.

I find out then how right Roger was about the rocking and rolling, and the sickness. Though he hadn't said how much the ship creaks and groans as it rolls, or how the waves thump and smash against its sides, or what a sickening stench rises from the ship's bowels. I stand no longer proud and happy on the deck, but lie in a bilious heap under the forecandle, or hang my spewing face over the ship's side. Of course, Roger and Simon think it very funny, and the crew laugh at me too, especially when the wind pitches my spew back in my face.

But Master Godfrey doesn't laugh.

'Poor lad,' he says, putting an arm round my shoulder. 'I remember how bad I felt the first few times I sailed. But, believe me, Peter, it does get better. Look at me, and Simon and Roger, even the crew – we all used to feel as you do now. But these days we suffer little – perhaps only when the sea is truly mountainous.'

Master Godfrey often sits and talks to me while the ship bucks and rears like a colossal untamed colt. He talks about his business, but also asks me about my life and what I did before. I tell him more about when I saw the ships off Wittering beach.

'Weren't you troubled,' he says, 'when you saw the ships disappear?' The corners of his eyes crinkle.

I shrug. 'I suppose I was a bit, but I was more confused. It looked as if they'd fallen over the edge of the sea, but that made no sense. My Pa'd been on a ship to France, and he'd come home again. Anyway, I wanted to find out what really happens.'

'And are you satisfied with what you've now discovered?'

'Yes,' I say, then press my lips together. 'Though when we first left the land behind us and set out across the open sea, the ship was going up and down so much, I wondered if I really wanted it after all, I felt so sick.' It's my turn to grin, and Master Godfrey ruffles my hair.

'But now I know the sea doesn't end, but just goes on and on, further than you can ever see.' I pause for a moment. 'How far d'you think it does go, Master Godfrey? The edge of the world? And what happens then?'

Master Godfrey laughs and shakes his head. ‘Some say monsters lurk at the edges of the world.’

I nod. ‘When I was little, my Ma told us a story about sea monsters, great fearsome beasts with scales and claws.’

He laughs. ‘Ah, yes, but *these* monsters are not dragons, but men with their faces in their chests, and men with one foot so large they can use it to shield their heads from the sun.’

My skin tingles at the thought of meeting such strange creatures. ‘Are they dangerous?’

He shrugs. ‘I know no one who’s travelled far enough to meet them.’ He puts his hand on my shoulder. ‘Perhaps one day you *will* have a great adventure, Peter, and travel to the edges of the world.’ He ruffles my hair again. ‘Then you can come back and tell me all about it.’



It takes us a week and four days (not weeks) to reach Bordeaux. We stop each night to rest, tying up in a big port or at a tiny jetty, sometimes finding an inn, sometimes making the best of it in the open, around a blazing fire. I don’t mind which, as long as we’re on dry land, so my churning guts have a chance to settle before the next day’s sailing. Though, as Master Godfrey foretold, I’m already more accustomed to the swelling waves and heaving ship.

Horses and wagons await us at Bordeaux. The *Margaret’s* crew unload the chests of fine wool cloth Master Godfrey’s brought to trade for wine, and I help Simon and Roger stack them carefully in the back of the wagons. It’s not agreeable working with those two: they obviously don’t like me. I decided long ago to keep out of their way as far as possible, but I can’t refuse to work with them when Master Godfrey asks me to.

For the next four weeks we travel all over Gascony, visiting places where Master Godfrey hopes to find new sources of trade. The countryside looks wretched – buildings uncared for, unharvested crops rotting in the fields. But our master knows how to wrinkle out what trade there’s to be had. We have to hire more wagons to carry all the wine he buys. When we’ve as many wagons-full of wine casks as Master Godfrey thinks the ship can bear, we make our way back towards Bordeaux.

The night before we’re due to arrive back in the port, we stay in an inn well known to Master Godfrey, no more than three miles from the sea. Master Godfrey’s in a merry mood, and stands us all a fine supper of beef and good red wine and, for a couple of hours, the four of us talk and laugh together most companionably. For that short time, it seems the bitterness between the journeymen and me has gone.

Master Godfrey, well satisfied with his meal, and flushed red with the quantity of Gascon wine he's drunk, rises a little unsteadily to his feet, and declares it's time for sleep. He's rented himself a private room with a proper bed on the first floor of the inn, whilst we three younger men must bed down in the common lodgings. I'm happy to go too, to find a bed space for myself, alongside other journeymen, apprentices, and travellers of every kind. But Simon and Roger seem to have their minds set on more wine, and insist I stay with them. So I'm left alone with my two tormentors and, as soon as Master Godfrey's gone upstairs, I sense their friendliness is about to disappear.

They've already drunk a great deal and, though in truth they've no reason to argue with me – and I don't want to argue with them – it's clear they want to pick a fight.

'If you think you're gonna be a merchant,' says Simon, slurring his words, 'you fooling yourself, peasant.'

Roger cackles, sloshing wine in the direction of his open mouth. 'Peasant!' he says. 'Rustic!'

'You're not one of us,' says Simon, 'and never will be. You think the master favours you, but you'll never be more'n a servant.' He takes another long gulp of wine, so much it spills from his mouth and drips onto his fine green tunic, leaving a spreading red stain. Then, leaning forward, he hisses 'Farm boy!' wetly into my face, then bangs his cup down, slopping wine onto the table.

Roger jeers agreement, and I see a queer light in his eyes. 'An' I tell you what.' He leans forward too, until his nose is almost pressing against mine. 'If you think, peasant, Mistress Joanna'll have ought to do with scum like you, you can forget it.'

Jerking my head away, I shake it vigorously. 'I've never shown any interest in Mistress Joanna. Why would I?' Though, in truth, it's a foolish question.

'Because you think she lusts after you,' says Roger, his lips curling into a lewd grin.

I leap to my feet, breathing hard. 'Why d'you say that? I've never thought that.'

Roger cackles again, his nostrils flaring. 'Of course you have. Why wouldn't you? Pretty girl like that. Who wouldn't want to think she lusted—'

I raise my hand, wanting – yet not wanting – to slap him across the face. 'Don't talk like that about her!' I cry, my hand itching to hit him. I turn to go. But Roger leaps to his feet as well, more steady than I might have expected, and grabs at my arm.

'So, peasant, want to fight, eh?'

I shake my head – I truly don't want to – but I see now he and Simon have been working up to this. 'No, I want to go to bed.'

But Roger grips my arm more tightly. 'Oh, no, you don't. We have to sort this out, farm boy.' Without another word, he twists me round to face him and throws a punch that lands on my ear as I quickly turn my head to avoid a broken nose. And now Simon's there too and, pulling at my other arm, he lands one blow after another into the soft part of my belly, punching the breath out of me until I'm dizzy.

It's maybe my good fortune they've drunk more wine than me for, once I recover my wits, I summon all my strength to wrench my arms first from Roger's, and then from Simon's, grasp. My sudden resolve takes them unawares, for their surprise leaves me a moment long enough to draw my knife. I don't intend to use it, just to defend myself from their attacks, no more. But Simon, yelling, comes at me again, his dagger in his hand too. He lunges towards me, slashing at my right arm, but he comes too fast and without control and skewers himself upon my blade. The tip slips into a gap opened up between his hose and shirt and I feel the blade stick a little before it slides in under his ribs.

Simon screams and collapses against me, blood pouring from the wound. I slump to the floor with the weight of Simon's body against my chest, and Roger starts to sob. Then suddenly we're not alone: Master Godfrey's at my side, and a small crowd's gathering, the innkeeper and some of his other drunken customers. Madame Ferrand, the innkeeper's wife, kneels down and, taking hold of Simon's body, lays him flat upon the floor and spreads a strong-smelling oil onto his wound, then presses a towel against it.

'What's the oil?' I ask, but she shrugs, saying something I don't understand.

Then, to my surprise, Master Godfrey asks her something in what I suppose is French. She answers, and he turns to me. 'She say's it's yarrow. Helps to stop the bleeding. Until Monsieur Hugo gets here.'

'Monsieur Hugo?'

'I believe he's a barber-surgeon. He'll probably have tended more wounded soldiers than he cares to remember.' I nod, relieved Simon will be saved.

But Simon's silent, and very still. I pick up his arm and his hand hangs limp in mine. Madame Ferrand sees this and, shuffling backwards on her knees, brings her ear down close to Simon's mouth. She sits up again and purses her lips.

'Depar', she says, shaking her head. Roger cries out, and I have to stop myself from retching.

I get up from the floor and slump onto a bench. Master Godfrey comes to sit next to me and places his hand upon my shoulder.

‘So what was it all about, Peter?’ he says, his voice heavy.

I can’t look him in the face, but I can feel anger and disappointment in the weight of his hand. I gulp back a rising sob.

‘I didn’t mean to kill him,’ I say, gagging on the words. ‘He came at me—’

‘You drew your knife first!’ shouts Roger, and I see at once how it must look.

But Master Godfrey shakes his head and sighs. ‘I saw the fight, Roger. Madame Ferrand was so concerned about you – “the young gentlemen”, as she so charmingly called you – brawling in her inn, she came upstairs to fetch me. It was you who threw the first punch, Roger, and Simon threw many more. Peter had to defend himself.’

Roger groans and sits down heavily, holding his head between his hands.

‘I am right, then?’ says Master Godfrey, and Roger nods but doesn’t look up.

‘Simon always had it in for him,’ he says quietly, jerking his head in my direction.

‘Then you were fools to take him on,’ says our master. ‘Where Peter comes from, his lord trains all young men to become archers, even soldiers. Peter here was a good student. It’s laughable that you and Simon should think you could best him.’

At that moment Monsieur Hugo arrives, along with the priest, too late to save Simon’s life or even his soul. Moments later another man comes too, who I guess must be the constable. I feel sick again, assuming he’ll arrest me for murder and I’ll end my long-dreamed-of, yet so brief, adventure hanging at the end of a French rope.

But, after a heated discussion with Master Godfrey, and an exchange of money, the constable takes Simon’s body away.

‘He’ll be buried tomorrow,’ says Master Godfrey, ‘then we can continue on our journey. You are fortunate, Peter. The constable has no appetite for hanging English boys.’

In truth I don’t believe it, but I’m grateful to my master that whatever he said – and paid – has bought me my freedom. It seems Simon was wrong when he said Master Godfrey thought little of me. But now it’s clear he thinks little of Roger, for he dismisses him, telling him to make his own way back to Southampton. I feel almost sorry for him then, and try to persuade Master Godfrey to change his mind. But he won’t. Roger’s no choice but to join the crew of the *Margaret* and suffer the discomfort of the sea voyage back to England.

After the ship has left, my master and me travel north, towards Tours and the chateau of Master Godfrey's friend, Jean de Martigny. Master Godfrey was right about the fair state of the roads, and our journey is straightforward, though by the time we arrive, in late November, the weather has turned bitterly cold and wet.

I'm astonished at the splendour of the chateau, and seeing it strengthens my ambition to become a merchant. Of course my master and Monsieur de Martigny both come from wealthy merchant families, not from a background such as mine. Yet it seems to me the world must've changed. Since the pestilence, surely there must be the chance for *anyone* to be successful, no matter how humble their start in life?

Anyway, I'm holding fast to that.

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XIII.

I now know the wine trade as well as my master. We've been travelling together the best part of three years, mostly in France. The Gascony vineyards are in fine shape now, their neat rows of vines heavy with dark grapes, recovered from the ravages of war, pestilence and famine. But, this year, we carried on south from Gascony, crossed the Pyrenees and journeyed throughout Aragon, Navarre and northern Castille. It was my idea to travel further afield, for I'd heard the Iberian states might offer us new markets for our English cloth and, in return, provide us with wines from the northern vineyards.

And so it's proved to be.

Hugh at first resisted. 'There's surely wine enough in all of France to meet our needs?'

I shrugged. 'Maybe, but why not go further, discover new wines for our English customers?'

He was unconvinced but agreed to an expedition, and is now delighted with the outcome of what, with crinkling eyes, he refers to as our "Iberian adventure". I'm pleased as well, but the expansion of our business into new territories has been so exhilarating I find I'm now dissatisfied with simply plying the cloth and wine trade, even into Iberia.

It's not enough.

By chance, when we stop for a few days in the splendid city of Barcelona, in north-east Catalonia, we meet some merchants from the republic of Genoa – a place I remember Pa talking of years ago – that lies beyond France’s eastern alps. The Genoese, I discover, travel far and wide, back and forth between their home city and the ports of France, Spain, England and Flanders, bringing goods from countries much further to the east, from strange-sounding places, Byzantium and the Levant, Kaffa and Trebizond. The goods they bring are not just wines, but spices and silks, perfumes and pearls, glassware and gold.

It’s clear there’s a lot of money to be made.

When I discuss it with Hugh, this time he’s convinced but he’s not interested in expanding his own business in that way.

‘I’m too old for such exotic undertakings, Peter. But I suppose these are the adventures you have dreamed of since you were a boy.’ He smiles broadly and pats my arm, as if I still *am* a boy. ‘So perhaps you must follow your ambitions?’

Then his expression changes. ‘But beware, dear boy, for it is dangerous on those routes. There are even more thieves and pirates in those parts than here.’

I shrug. ‘I know that, but Giovanni Alberti seems to do well enough to avoid such trouble.’

‘Ah, yes, Signor Alberti, your new friend,’ says Hugh, the corners of his eyes crinkling.

I nod. ‘Giovanni’s willing to introduce me to people he knows.’

‘He is not afraid you will take his trade away from him?’

I laugh and shake my head. ‘Evidently, there’s trade enough for all. I want to go, Hugh, and you know I can take care of myself.’

My master grins. ‘Indeed. I will be sorry to lose you, my dear Peter, but I cannot stop you, nor should I. So, go, lad, with my blessing.’

XIV.

In the autumn Hugh and I return once more to Southampton. We’ve been away for months – since early spring. As always, I’m sad for him when I see his family seemingly indifferent to his homecoming. I’m convinced Dame Christina’s irritated by her husband’s return, though you’d have thought over the years she’d have become accustomed to the disruption it must always bring. Hugh’s daughters are always a little more excited, but more – I realised some

time ago – from expectations of gifts than from delight at seeing their father once again.

For all the years I've been part of the Godfrey household, the three girls, and in particular Joanna, have treated me largely with disdain. I've always found this galling, even though, when I first came here, Hugh made it clear I should expect his daughters – and especially his wife – to regard me as a servant.

'Regrettably,' he said, with a wink of his eye, 'they're most stubborn in their disdain of what my dear wife calls the "lower orders".'

But, as time's passed and Joanna's grown into the prettiest girl I've ever seen, with the most glorious red-gold hair, I've begun to regard her haughtiness more a challenge than a vexation. And when I discover Dame Christina's still not found a husband for her eldest daughter, even though she's now seventeen, I wonder if the challenge I should be facing is not merely to have Joanna address me politely, but to win her affection – even her hand.

Yet, now, when I study her more closely, I find to my surprise, in the months we've been away, Joanna's changed: she's showing real interest in her father's expeditions, and even in my own exploits.

XV.

The two younger Godfrey girls are huddling in the semi-dark, beneath the big hall table, hidden by the overhanging damask cloth their mother recently insisted must adorn their mealtimes. The space is hardly large enough, for they are no longer children. But they love to gossip, out of the hearing of their older sister, and Mama's new edict about the cloth has given them the privacy impossible to find elsewhere in the house.

It is not that Isabella and Elisabeth dislike Joanna. But rather that they want to talk *about* her. For, since Papa and his assistant came home from their travels, the girls have realised Joanna is no longer treating the peasant boy as the servant that he is.

Isabella touches her sister's arm. 'Have you noticed how she hangs on his every word?'

Her sister agrees. 'She even talks to him.' She plucks at her skirt. 'Asking him questions, of all things.'

Isabella giggles. 'Mind you, he has grown up rather handsome.'

Her sister joins in with a shrill titter. 'And that new cotehardie!' Elisabeth squeals with delight. 'Have you seen his legs?'

Isabella nods. 'And more...' She feels her cheeks flush at the thought of it. 'It must be the French style, don't you think? I'm surprised Papa allowed it, though of course he's quite indulgent where Peter is concerned.'

'Whereas Mama is quite outraged!' Elisabeth's voice becomes quite high and piercing. 'Did you see her face when Peter first came back? I thought she was truly going to burst.'

Isabella puts her hand across her sister's mouth. 'Shhh... Mama will hear us if you talk so loudly.'

Elisabeth nods. 'Sorry, but it's all so thrilling...'

'Anyway, never mind his beauty and the cotehardie, Peter atte Hyl is still just Papa's servant. Do you think Joanna can truly be interested in him?'

Her sister shrugs and nods at the same time. 'You might think so, the way she gazes at him when we are at dinner. But, even though Papa thinks he's a fine fellow, Mama surely won't allow it.'

XVI.

One day at dinner, Hugh announces – with some pride, I feel – that I've decided to branch out on my own and, young as I am, he's happy to support my "adventure", as he puts it with a twinkle in his eye. I'm intrigued by Joanna's response to this news: she looks both startled and delighted, and I'm certain she's looking directly at me when she smiles, even though she says nothing.

It's her sister, Isabella, who speaks, her head tilted slightly to one side.

'Why, Master atte Hyl, how brave you are, to strike out into the unknown.'

I smile. 'It's not quite unknown, Mistress Isabella. Many Englishmen have been there before me.'

‘But not Papa,’ she says, giggling behind her hand, and Hugh coughs loudly and clears his throat.

‘No, not I, daughter. But I warrant I’ve travelled quite far and wide enough to put gowns upon your pretty back and food inside your insatiable belly.’

Dame Christina clicks her tongue. ‘Really, husband, such unsuitable talk at the dinner table.’

Hugh guffaws. ‘Apologies, my dear! But I’ll not have my daughters impugning my expertise.’

Dame Christina laughs lightly and leans across to pat him on the hand. ‘Quite right, husband. I am sure our daughters know well enough you are the most successful merchant – and doting father – in the city.’

1354

XVII.

It’s mid-March and Hugh’s setting out again for Gascony, but I’m not going with him. Instead I’m embarking on my first long journey to Genoa, with two wagons full of fine English cloth, and three strapping fellows to escort me.

We journey first to Kent, to take a ship from the port at Rye across to Dieppe, a short crossing that, even in March, proves much less disagreeable than the long sea journeys to Bordeaux. We hire new carriers at Dieppe and then it’s south to Paris and from there to Lyon, where we embark upon another ship, though not a sea-going merchantman, but a river barge, wide and low. The river Rhône does not buck and rear like the ocean’s waves, but the voyage is not without discomfort, for the river runs very fast, with ferocious currents and erratic depths and shallows. Nonetheless, I find I can mostly ignore the discomfort and appreciate the landscape slipping past us beyond the banks of the broad river: mountainous lands, the like of which we don’t have in England, nor have I seen in Gascony or western France, though I’d marvelled at the peaks of the Pyrenees. The Rhône cities, too, are much to be admired: Vienne and Valence, Avignon and Arles, with their ancient buildings and bridges, fine churches and palaces, and extensive vineyards. What a fine region this would be, I think, for a wine merchant such as Hugh to ply his trade, but it’s a wistful thought, for I

know he'll no longer travel such distances, and my own ambitions now lie well beyond the vineyards of France.

From Arles, we travel overland to Marseilles, where we once more take a sea-going ship to skirt the southern coast of France and on to Genoa. We arrive in early May, after a journey from England of a little over six weeks. If I'd harboured some disquiet for the journey's safety and ease – and I had – I disembark at Genoa in a state of agreeable composure, though my travelling companions assure me our journey was uncommonly free from difficulties.

'I caution you, sir,' says Will Travers, a veteran of numerous expeditions to Italy and beyond, mostly as a soldier, 'not to expect your travels always to be so comfortable.' He grins.

I bow my head in acknowledgment. 'I thank you for your counsel, Will. I do understand. But it was a good route, don't you think, well-suited to transporting our cloth?'

He nods. 'Indeed. Despite its difficulties, the Rhône's a fine route for the burdened traveller. With horses alone, I'd favour the mountains, through the pass at Mount Cenis to Susa and Alessandria. But not with goods.' His face turns gloomy, and maybe Will's had more experience of mountain passes than he cares to remember.



My first sight of Genoa brings almost the same sense of exhilaration I experienced all those years ago when I first saw the ships at Chichester. The city faces the sea, set in a ring of high hills, which rise up behind and around it, covered with thick vegetation and studded with towers and turrets. As we enter the harbour, the buildings gleam white in the bright sunlight, a most beautiful and uplifting sight.

Once we disembark, I find Giovanni Alberti's villa soon enough and he sends men to unload and store the many bolts of cloth that I've brought with me. He then suggests we spend a few days doing no more than walking and talking, so I can recover from my journey.

'And also, my dear Pietro,' says Giovanni, 'to give you an opportunity to admire the villas and gardens of my beautiful city, walk into the hills, and see Genova from above. You'll not regret the exertion, I promise you.'

XVIII.

A week or so later, Giovanni and I embark upon an expedition, at first within the city, then

beyond, to Lucca and Firenze, Bologna and Venezia, meeting clients he knows already, and also finding new ones, both for my English cloth, and for the French wine and other goods Giovanni has to trade.

My journeys with Hugh through France and Gascony, and into Spain, were never entirely without incident: several times brigands attacked us on the road proposing to steal the wool or cloth we had for sale or the wine we'd bought. But Hugh was constantly prepared, hiring well-armed men to protect us, and taking great care with where we camped or stayed overnight. In all my three years travelling with him, we lost not one chest of cloth, nor one cask of wine, though he told me, years before, when he knew less of the ways of brigands, more than once he was robbed of all his stock, and had to start again.

Giovanni's no less prepared. We ordinarily travel in a great caravan of mules or packhorses, though we hire wagons to transport our goods where the roads are fit for wheels. Giovanni knows the best and most convenient stopping places, and it's always a relief to reach our inn for even I, despite my desire for excitement, find the relentless necessity of being watchful of danger a wearisome ordeal.

But the journey from Firenze to Bologna, across the Apennines, is particularly perilous.

Giovanni looks gloomy when he tells me of the Ubaldini family. 'They're rich landowners around these parts, who believe it's their right to possess whatever they find in their territories. They lurk in the forests with their bands of armed ruffians, ready to attack, to steal and to kill.'

'Why travel through these forests, then?'

His face lightens. 'Good question, Pietro!' he says, laughing. 'Why take the risk?' He shrugs. 'It sounds the action of an idiot, but it's what we merchants do, is it not?'

I laugh with him, finding his confidence infectious.

Giovanni climbs into the saddle of his fine black mare. 'Let me tell you a story as we ride, a story of merchants, from a new book I have recently acquired, *Il Decameron*, written by a man from Firenze called Boccaccio. What a merry stir it caused among my merchant friends and acquaintances, for many of the stories, as well as being tales of love and trickery, concern the perils and adventures of travelling merchants. Just like us, Pietro!'

He laughs heartily and claps me on the back. Then, as we ride, he begins to relate from memory one of Signor Boccaccio's stories.

In Palermo, Sicily, there were – still are – many women, beautiful to look at but strangers to virtue. Anyone who does not know them

would think them fine and virtuous ladies. But they are accustomed not merely to fleecing men, but to flaying them. When they see a foreign merchant in the city, they find out how much he is worth. Then, with passionate looks and honeyed words, they trick him into falling in love with them. They convince many to part with most, or even all, of their goods. Worse, some yield not only their goods but also their ships, and even their own flesh and bones, so skilfully do the ladies wield their razors...

The road out of Firenze rises steeply to the grazing lands at the top of the mountain pass and then drops gradually down towards Bologna through dense forests of beech and pine. Giovanni is anxious to keep going, but the weather's unseasonably hot and the carrier insists his men and animals need to rest, just for a while, and my friend reluctantly agrees. We stop in a cool glade, and some of the men lie down, preparing to doze, while others drink thirstily from their flasks. But Giovanni paces up and down, his face twisted with unease. His pacing makes me nervous too, and I move away to the edge of the clearing and sit on a fallen tree trunk, trying to remain composed.

Then, suddenly, from out of the dark densely packed pine trees on the other side of the glade burst thundering horses, their sword-swinging riders whooping and yelling, and other men leap from their hiding places, wielding knives and axes. Those men of ours not quick enough to jump to their feet are murdered where they lie. From where I'm standing, the situation seems impossible to counter. The carrier's men are by no means unaccustomed to such attacks, but this time they've been caught so unawares I doubt any of them can resist with sufficient speed and strength.

But Giovanni draws his sword and, roaring, throws himself at one of the horsemen, hacking off his arm. Then every man is on his feet, sword or dagger in his hand, ready to fight for his life and his companions. I too unsheathe my sword and run back to the glade and launch myself at one ruffian after another, swinging my blade mid-height to slice off their hands, the more quickly to disarm them. But it's soon clear there are more of us than Ubaldinis and – although it had seemed hopeless only moments ago – we overcome them, and the few of them left alive soon flee back into the forest.

When they've gone, what remains of our company sinks gratefully to the ground, cheering a little and laughing a little, before they turn to the grisly business of burying their dead companions – difficult in the root-filled forest ground.

Giovanni is relieved so many of us survived, but he's angry he agreed to the stop, and complains loudly to the leading carrier. I've learned a little Italian in the past few weeks, sufficient for me to talk briefly and haltingly to Giovanni, but I can't understand the dialect of the carriers and can only guess at the nature of their furious argument.

At length the bodies are buried and the arguments cease. I go over to Giovanni and mumble a few words of sympathy.

He nods. 'You handled yourself well, Pietro. You can use a sword – almost as well as a Genoese.' He grins, despite himself, then claps me affectionately on my shoulder. 'But, now, we must continue.'

XIX.

I return to Southampton in November. As yet I've no other home but Master Godfrey's house, and Hugh welcomes me with a great outpouring of affection, clasping me in his arms and calling me "Son". I'm pleased – even a little smug – to be able to show him the exotic goods I've brought back. I can see how impressed he is.

Joanna too seems captivated: her eyes shine with delight as she strokes the glossy silks, letting the delicate fabric slide between her fingertips, and sniffs at jars of perfume, and even when she sneezes after dipping her nose into a bag of pepper.

Like a child finding pleasure in a new toy, she delves into the chests and barrels in which my goods are packed and brings out spices from the East, bright-coloured glazed pottery from Faenza and Firenze, spice jars, apothecaries' pots and vases; a few pieces of creamy ivory, trinket boxes, combs and cups; glassware from Murano and white soap from Venezia.

'Such wonderful things, Master atte Hyl!' she says, clapping her hands. 'Much more exciting than casks of wine.' She presses her lovely lips together and tilts her head slightly to one side.

'I'm so glad you approve, Mistress Joanna,' I say, and she gives me a queer look.

But then she grins. 'You must tell me everything about your travels. Where you have been and what you have seen.'

I wonder for a moment if the challenge I set myself is somehow already being won, without my making any effort. I nod, and she gestures to me to sit on one of the grand new

chairs Dame Christina's bought to add further comfort and refinement to her hall. Joanna sits in the other chair and leans back against the cushion, smiling.

'Everything!'

I laugh. 'I can't tell you everything, but I'll describe some of the beautiful places I've visited.'

Joanna leans forward a little, her eyes widening, and, for the first time, I notice how truly lovely they are – green, with flecks of gold. Then she lifts her shoulders slightly and sinks slowly back against the cushion.

'Tell me, then,' she says, and her parted lips don't close.

'Genoa,' I say, trying to avert my gaze from her mouth. 'I'll tell you about Genoa, the home of my friend Giovanni Alberti, one of the most shrewd and skilful merchants in the world.' I smile broadly and Joanna responds with an expression so warm I can scarcely believe this is the haughty girl I knew not much more than a year ago.

'Genoa's so beautiful. It nestles, a gleaming jewel, into the curve of a crescent of golden hills, thick with vines and fragrant lemon trees and gnarled olives, and studded with the towers and turrets of churches and castles. Up on the hillsides are alpine meadows, a carpet of wild flowers, violets and blue gentians, shining white buttercups and delicate purple crocuses. You can look down upon the city and, from a distance, the buildings shine white in the bright sunlight, but when you come closer you realise some of the walls are decorated with stripes of black and white, giving them a most extraordinary and outlandish appearance.'

Joanna's eyes are wide with delight. 'And what of the houses? Are they like ours here in Southampton, or more like Monsieur Martigny's in France?'

'Neither. The grandest of the villas are outside the city, up on those glorious hillsides, though Giovanni has a smaller house, quite close to the sea. But, though it's small, it's surrounded by the loveliest of gardens, bounded on all sides by a high wall. Walkways criss-cross from side to side, enclosed by arbours heavy with jasmine and roses, whose heady fragrance fills the air on summer evenings. And in the very centre is a white marble statue spouting water into a delightful pool.'

Joanna sighs. 'How enchanting it sounds, Peter,' she says, and I catch my breath as my name falls from her lips for the first time. 'I wish we had a garden here,' she goes on, 'instead of that gloomy little back yard.' She curls her lips into a pout, and I'm light-headed at the sight of it.



Hugh throws himself into the business of finding buyers for the goods I've brought back with me, and his expertise and network of acquaintances garner me customers from among the highest ranks of Hampshire and Dorset society.

To my surprise, Joanna spends most of her days in the shop or in Hugh's warehouse, helping me sort through the goods and repack them for dispatch to our new customers.

'Are you sure you want to do this?' I say. 'Wouldn't you rather be reading, or sewing?'

She giggles. 'Sewing? Not at all! I'm quite hopeless at it, to Mama's deep vexation. "Really, Joanna, why can you not sew a neat row of stitches, instead of that ugly clump?"' Joanna's lovely eyes are shining with delight, as she mimics Dame Christina's voice. "'Look at your sisters' work – how impeccable, how elegant!'" Mama doesn't understand how very much I do hate sewing.' Then she laughs out loud and, though Joanna's far more beautiful, she reminds me of my grandmother Marjory, in her spirit and her sense of fun.

'You have your mother's voice to perfection,' I say, laughing with her. 'I hope she never catches you.'

XX.

One gloomy Sunday afternoon in January, when rain and biting wind make an outing uninviting and sitting in the warmth of the hall much more appealing, the whole family gathers together beside the fire, following a hearty dinner.

Suddenly, Dame Christina stands up, looking flushed. 'This fire is giving me a headache,' she says, pressing her fingers to her forehead. 'I will retire to my bedchamber for a while.'

Hugh heaves himself out of his chair. 'I, on the contrary, find the fire most comforting, but sadly I have paperwork to do.'

'May I assist you, sir?' I say, but he dismisses my offer with a wave of his hand and a grin.

Isabella goes to the bright-painted cupboard by the fireplace and brings out a chessboard and pieces.

'Who'll play with me?' she says, looking at Joanna and me.

Joanna shakes her head and sighs.

‘I’m not in the mood,’ she says, and Isabella pouts, but Elisabeth says happily she’ll play.

Joanna then eases herself languidly from her seat. ‘Master atte Hyl, I believe we still have to pack the items to be sent tomorrow to Sir Hubert de Vere?’

I’m momentarily confused but, catching her eye, I quickly understand Joanna intends us to withdraw from her sisters. I feel sure Dame Christina would disapprove, but Joanna seems often to ignore her mother’s wishes, and I’m reluctant to deny the chance of some time in her sole company.

So I nod. ‘Yes, Mistress Joanna. You’re quite right, we should certainly do it now.’ I spring to my feet and go quickly to the curtained doorway. I hold back the heavy curtain as Joanna glides over and slips through, out into the corridor. We step along the corridor and into the shop, where the various items for Sir Hubert are still in the chests in which they came from Genoa.

The shop’s icy cold by comparison with the cosy hall. Joanna shivers and we exchange grins.

‘I’m not sure this was such a good idea after all,’ Joanna says, and I laugh.

‘Perhaps work will keep us warm?’

We work quickly, searching through the chests for the items Sir Hubert’s bought and repacking them carefully into a separate smaller chest. As we work, I can’t help looking across at Joanna from time to time: she seems happier than I’ve ever known her. So, when the packing’s done, I’m bold enough to ask her how she is, and she’s more willing than I could have hoped to tell me.

She sighs and flops down onto a stool. ‘Mama’s been trying to find me a husband,’ she says, in a low voice.

I gasp, quite involuntarily, and Joanna looks up and grimaces.

‘But they’ve all been awful. I’ve told Mama I won’t marry any of them.’ She grins. ‘She’s furious with me.’ She then gives a coquettish little laugh. ‘And she’s even more furious with Papa, for being away all the time and paying insufficient attention to the most serious matter of his eldest daughter’s marriage prospects.’ She giggles, and looks at me very directly, with a boldness I know her mother would deplore.

‘Master Godfrey has been working very hard,’ I say, thinking I should defend my master, ‘rebuilding his business.’

‘I know he has, dear Papa, and, anyway, he wouldn’t have approved of any of the repulsive creatures Mama’s dredged up for me.’

I smile. ‘They can’t all have been that bad.’

‘Oh, yes, they can!’ She pulls a face and laughs at the same time. ‘Of course they all had property, and one or two even had titles – the most important conditions as far as Mama’s concerned. But they were all so dull! None of them had any spirit – any sense of adventure.’

She looks directly at me again, her eyes finding mine and, for the first time in her presence, I blush.

1355

XXI.

When I embark again on the long journey back to Genoa, I find it a great anguish, saying goodbye to Joanna, knowing I’ll not see her again for eight months. I’m afraid Dame Christina might insist on her accepting one of the suitors she’s found for her, though the last time Joanna and I were alone together, she gave me one of her most candid looks.

‘I will try to resist Mama,’ she said, ‘truly I will.’

But, despite her uncommon boldness and her playful spirit, I know well enough Joanna is not mistress of her future: if her parents decide she must marry, then marry she will. And, though I think now Hugh might look on me with favour as a son-in-law, I’m certain Dame Christina’s not changed her opinion: despite my early success as a merchant, in her eyes I’m still a peasant boy, unworthy of any of her daughters.



In the months that follow my return to Genoa, Giovanni and I travel more widely together, beyond the shores of the peninsula, to Achaea and Athens, along the southern coast of Anatolia, and on to the countries of the Levant. For speed, we make our longer journeys by sea and, except for a few occasions when the winds are wild and the waves threaten to drown us all, I no longer suffer the nausea of my first venture on board ship.

We decide no longer to accompany our goods, but everywhere to hire professional carriers to transport them from and to Genoa and between our ports of call, leaving us free to ride more quickly cross-country, taking lesser roads and tracks, unencumbered by packhorse caravans or wagons. It's a strategy that – surprisingly perhaps – works more often than it doesn't, though we're not without losses, both from sheer mishap and from the incompetence or avarice of some more dishonest carriers.

Giovanni knows well enough the best places to visit and he delights in the opportunity he has to educate me. He shows me wondrous buildings – mosques, with polished marble floors, enamelled tiles and gold and coloured mosaics, and spires topped with crowns the shape of onions.

And we go to booksellers.

Giovanni's eyes light up each time we enter such a shop. I recall how proud he was when he first showed me his collection.

'Books are my passion!' he said, showing me the variety of volumes he had acquired: books of poetry, illustrated with the most charming pictures of daily life, courtly romances and scurrilous yarns, and tales of adventures to the edge of the world.

'See here, Pietro,' he said, handing me a fat manuscript. '*Il Decameron* – remember?'

'How can I forget your wonderful retelling of Signor Boccaccio's tales to wile away the long hours of our travels?'

I picked up another book. 'What's this? *Livres des merveilles du monde* – is that Italian?'

Giovanni smiled. 'No, French – it means "Books of the Marvels of the World", but it was written by an Italian and about the travels of another Italian, a Venetian called Marco Polo. He too was a merchant and travelled huge distances and for many, many years, throughout Asia and as far as China.'

'Can you read French?' I said, thinking how much I'd like to read Marco's adventures.

He nodded. 'I can, though it is not easy. But I so much love to read, Pietro, and I long ago refused to limit myself to Italian writings. So I teach myself.'

'I must do the same,' I said, remembering it was not so long ago I couldn't read at all. But the skill was necessary for me to be a merchant – and to win Joanna's respect. 'I taught myself to read English, so I suppose French and Italian...'

'...are just new challenges!' he said, grinning broadly. 'Why don't you buy yourself a copy, and I will help you read it?'

Baghdad is a very great city, where resides the Caliph of all the world's Saracens, just as Rome is the see of all the world's Christians. Through the city flows a great river, on which you can travel to the Sea of India, and many merchants use it to travel back and forth with their goods...

In Baghdad they weave many different kinds of silk, and gold brocades, elaborately worked with beasts and birds. And in Baghdad they study the laws of Mahomet and also necromancy, physics, astronomy, geomancy and physiognomy and philosophy. It is the noblest and greatest city in all those regions.

XXII.

When I return to England in November, the bulk of what I bought through the long months of our journeying either precedes or follows me by means of a sequence of carriers. Nevertheless, I choose to travel more slowly than I could do had I remained totally unburdened. I want to be sure to see the light in Joanna's lovely eyes when she opens the many gifts I'm bringing her: bolts of the finest silk from the Levant, in shades of green and blue, the colours I've noticed she favours; and ivory – from Genoa, a set of chessmen (for I know she'll happily play with me), and from Paris a pair of writing tablets, most delicately carved with a knight and his lady out hawking on horseback, and a mirror case carved also with a hawking scene and framed by four dragons.

I'm not disappointed.

'Oh, look, Papa!' Joanna cries, as she turns the ivory writing tablets and mirror case over and over in her hands. 'Ladies and gentlemen with hawks!'

Hugh agrees the carving is very fine.

'No, Papa,' she says, wagging her head. 'Of course the carving is very fine, but that's not what I mean. Master atte Hyl's remembered how agreeable we found the hawking when we were visiting at the Chateau de Martigny. Isn't that so?' She turns to me for an answer, her eyes shining with pleasure, just as I'd hoped they'd be.

'I did think you'd like those particular carvings,' I say, smiling happily.

Even Dame Christina seems captivated by their beauty, and I'm glad I chose hawking rather than the scenes of lovers I considered and rejected. It's also just as well, I think, with

relief and some amusement, that the *Il Decameron* I bought is in Italian for, if she could read its contents, Dame Christina would certainly consider the book most unsuitable for her daughter.

Yet Joanna, it seems, finds nothing unsuitable, including me.

At dinner, she now places herself always where she can look at me across the table, and frequently she lifts her eyes and casts her gaze openly at my face. She doesn't move her mouth, but widens her eyes into a smile, and I respond with the smallest of nods and the barest lifting of the corners of my lips. But, despite our attempts at discretion, it's not long before Dame Christina notices and gives me an icy glare.

One afternoon Hugh asks me to join him in the counting room. He closes the door and bids me sit, but does not sit himself. He shuffles papers for a few moments, picks things up and puts them down again.

'Is something amiss, Master Godfrey?' I say, fearful Dame Christina has told him to send me from his house.

Hugh shakes his head, and then nods. 'Not really. Or rather, yes... and no.'

I rise from the stool, concerned. 'Please tell me, sir.'

He shrugs and sighs and slumps into the chair behind the great oak table he uses for counting his money and dealing with his papers. He gestures to me to sit again.

'It's Joanna's mother,' he says. 'She has reason to believe that you and our eldest daughter have an...' he pauses, 'an unsuitable association.' He pauses again. 'She – my wife, that is – is not happy.' Despite the chill in the counting room, Hugh's perspiring, and he takes a linen rag from the folds of his sleeve and wipes it across his forehead.

I feel hot too, afraid Dame Christina really is going to prevent me from winning Joanna. 'Do you think our association unsuitable, sir?'

Hugh does not respond at once, but at length he shakes his head. 'I don't. I'm not such a dullard I haven't noticed the change in Joanna's feelings towards you, Peter. And, if I am honest with myself, it is what I had hoped for.'

My heart leaps. 'Do you truly believe Mistress Joanna is fond of me?'

He nods. 'I know she is. But the problem is, her mother—'

'Still considers me to be a peasant?' I say, knowing it might sound insolent.

But Hugh just grins and sighs again. 'I'm afraid so, dear boy. Christina is a great believer in the power of rank and station. Marrying her daughter to someone from the "lower orders",

as she would have it, is not at all what she intends. On the contrary, she would have all her daughters marry *above* their station, to enhance both their prospects and *her* position in society.’ He shakes his head. ‘And you, my dear Peter, do not fit those plans.’

‘But what of your plans, sir?’

Hugh doesn’t speak for a while. He starts shuffling papers again but at length stills his hands and turns to me once more.

‘I have already said I had hoped Joanna might come round to liking you. The fact is, dear boy, I have found in you the son I do not have. From lowly stock you may well be, but you are not lowly in either intelligence or spirit. I could not have hoped for a more enterprising and intrepid heir to the business I have worked so hard to build.’

I gasp involuntarily at the implications of Hugh’s words. He hears the breath escape from my lips and smiles.

‘My plans,’ he goes on, ‘are to invest the future of my business in your hands, Peter – not yet, you understand, but one day, when I am old.’ And the corners of his eyes crinkle. ‘And to seal the as-yet unwritten agreement we will have between us, I want – yes, I do want – you to take my eldest daughter as your wife. It seems to me that she is willing, indeed eager, and all the signs tell me you are also.’

I nod my head vigorously. ‘But what of Dame Christina?’

Hugh waggles his head from side to side. ‘It will be hard for me to break the news to her. She may never speak to me again.’ His eyes twinkle merrily and then he lets out a great guffaw. ‘Oh dear...’



In the days that follow, as Hugh anticipated, Dame Christina speaks neither to her husband, nor to her eldest daughter, and certainly not to me. She limits her conversations to Isabella and Elisabeth and the servants, and spends much of her days upstairs, the better able to avoid unwanted exchanges. When Hugh and I are alone, in the counting room or shop, or out walking together, he sighs, grins and shakes his head by turns, and tells me not to worry.

‘Christina will come round,’ he says, though I’m not so sure she will.

Joanna, on the other hand, is full of energy and chatter. I court her formally for a week but on the seventh day, when we’re together in the shop, as we often are, packing goods for dispatch to customers, she stops what she’s doing and stands up.

‘Look at me, Peter,’ she says. ‘What do you see?’

I turn to face her. 'The woman I love.'

She grins. 'So why do you not ask Papa for my hand?'

'I thought you'd expect a period of courtship,' I say, but she just shrugs.

'We've been courting for a year. Surely that is long enough?'

I laugh out loud. 'What a very bold young woman you are. I thought I was being sensitive, gentlemanly, giving you time.'

But she shakes her head. 'I don't want any more time. I want to be married!'

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XXIII.

So we are married, on a rare sunny day in early January. We have just two months alone together before I must return to Genoa. But now we can truly be alone for, in December, I bought a house, not far from the Godfreys'. It's larger than we need, but Joanna assures me we'll have many children, and with the house comes a piece of land substantial enough for her to have the garden she so much desires.

They're the happiest two months of my life.

I don't often muse upon my change of fortune. But the day I take my new wife's hand and lead her across the threshold of my own house is noteworthy. It's barely six years since I arrived in Southampton, a peasant boy looking for adventure. I couldn't have imagined then how far I might travel, either in miles or status, in so few years. Even now, I'm forced to pinch myself occasionally, to ensure I'm truly not still that peasant boy, deep in the land of dreams.

The weather becomes chilly and wet and we mostly stay indoors, revelling in each other's company, talking, reading and making plans. Despite the weather, we do occasionally wrap ourselves in layers of clothes, to take a brisk turn about the potential garden. One dry, relatively warm, day, we stroll rather than stride around the plot, and Joanna tells me what she might plant, recalling what I told her about Giovanni's garden in Genoa. I then remember that, somewhere among the few belongings I brought with me when I came to Southampton all those years ago, there was a book. It was my Ma's, given to her when she

was a girl by her uncle William, a priest – it was a gift, she said, to help her read, even though low-born peasant girls were not supposed to read. Ma was proud to own that book. She showed it to me once or twice, when I was a child: it was full of pictures of plants and herbs, and explained how they should be grown. Her uncle taught her how to read, and years later she used the book to cultivate her own garden.

Years later, in the days of the pestilence when Pa and I were alone, he became strangely wistful, remembering the past. One day, for no particular reason, he fetched the book from Ma's chest of treasures. We looked at it together.

Then he told me something I'd never heard before. 'She craved more than being just a villein's wife, you know. She wanted to read books.'

'Not much chance of that on a farm.'

He shook his head. 'It was just a fancy.'

When I left the manor for the last time, I took the plant book with me, in memory of Ma and also of my great-uncle William, a man who took the trouble to teach a little girl to read, to allow her to have a dream, even though, for her, it came to nothing.

And now I'm giving the precious book to my beloved Joanna, who pores over the pictures of the plants and reads out loud the words of description and advice, and her lovely eyes grow wide with excitement, as ideas jostle for position in her mind.

'I want to start right now,' she says, but I laugh and say surely she must wait until the spring. And she blushes then, saying how silly she is to be so impetuous. But it's her impetuosity and her spirit I love so much, the spark that ignites the flames of my own desire both for adventure and for her.

1359

XXIV.

When I left Giovanni last autumn to return home, he suggested that, this year, we should try new markets, beyond those we've milked these past four years.

'What you think, Pietro, shall we go to the Black Sea?' he said, showing me on a map where it was.

Genoa has territories on all shores of the Sea, and Giovanni proposed a trip taking us across the Aegean, through the Dardanelles to Constantinople, and thence around the coast to Trebizond and Kaffa, those places I'd heard about and dreamed of visiting. Giovanni was clearly ready for new adventures and I was eager to explore whatever new horizons he might suggest.

So this time I'm leaving home in the expectation that I'll not be back next autumn, and perhaps not the following spring or even the following autumn. Joanna's being brave – I know she's fearful of me travelling to such faraway places, and saddened I may not see our next child until he or she's already grown.

I'm sad to be leaving her and our three children – Alexander, our first born, and Hugh and Robert – for so long. But my craving for adventure, the thrill of jeopardy – these are what command me, and I can't resist their lure.

'Take extra care, my darling,' says Joanna, 'in those dangerous new places.'

I smile. 'You don't know they're dangerous,' I say cheerfully. 'They're just different. And magnificent, Giovanni says.'

She nods and tries to smile back, but her lovely mouth manages no more than a slight tightening.

I go to her and wrap my arms about her. 'Be strong, my love. I know it's a long time for us to be apart, but think of the riches I'll return with. Look forward to that.'

She rests her head against my chest and, as I lay my hand on her back to draw her close, I feel her shudder slightly.

'Oh, my love, don't cry. You'll break my heart.'

She looks up at me and forces her lips to widen in a slender smile. 'You're already breaking mine.'

And I do wonder if this time I'm asking too much of her.



5: Death

Joanna Godfrey

1359

I.

It is a beautiful April day, the blossom on our little apple trees is a haze of pink-tinged white, and yet again I am saying goodbye to my beloved Peter. The pattern of our lives has been the same since we married: three winter months of shared delight, Peter's departure on his travels in the early spring, to return when each new baby is two months old or so.

Saying good-bye is no easier now than it was that first spring: I still miss him every minute of the long months that he is away from me. And this time, he will be away much longer – twice as long.

Last night, we lay together in each other's arms and I tried not to weep. Peter caressed my newly swelling belly and whispered in my ear.

'Mia moglie cara, quanto ti amo!'

I smiled at him. 'I love you too, my beloved husband,' I said, fighting to keep the tears from springing to my eyes, 'so *very* much.'

'Take good care of our little *bambini*, Alexander...' and he kissed the tip of my first finger, 'and Hugh...' he kissed another fingertip, 'Robert...' another, 'and this new one here.' And he sat up and, leaning over, lowered his face onto my belly and covered it with kisses.



Yet this man I now love so much was, not many years ago, the scruffy, sun-browned country boy Papa brought home with him one evening. He met him by chance on the quayside. I could not imagine what Papa was thinking of, planning to make this boy his apprentice, even though he was too old – sixteen. He seemed to think he could somehow become a merchant like himself.

And he expected me to speak nicely to the little peasant!

‘Peter has left the manor he has lived in all his life,’ said Papa, ‘and the holding he inherited when the last of his family perished in the pestilence. He came all the way to Southampton to look for a new life.’

I found it hard to understand why he showed any interest in such a boy.

‘I think him a brave lad,’ said Papa.

Mama said that, as he was evidently a runaway, Papa should send him straight back to his manor. But Papa just shook his head.

‘I think not, wife. There’s something about the boy – the light of eagerness in his eyes, his remarkably coherent chatter, his determination to better himself – that makes me think he’s much more than a simple peasant.’ He smiled benignly, but Mama raised her eyes to heaven.

‘I cannot understand why you need an apprentice at all,’ she said, wagging her head.

Even I knew Papa’s business, like that of all the Southampton merchants, was suffering. People were only just beginning to recover from the pestilence – it had left us only months before – and many were still reeling from the devastation it had wrought on their lives.

‘After all,’ went on Mama, ‘those two foolish assistants of yours survived. So why do you need another silly boy, when you’ve no work for any of them to do?’

Papa looked hurt by her insinuation. ‘I am assuming, my dear, that there soon will be work for all of us. Else we will *all* be forced to beg...’ he gave her a sharp glare, ‘including you!’

I could see Mama took offence at that. She opened her mouth to give reply but closed it again when Papa creased his brow at her and shook his head. His decision was not hers to dispute.

But Mama did not like it at all when Peter first sat down to dine with us. She wrinkled her nose and looked hard at Papa, but he just smiled back at her and nodded. He gave Peter some new clothes and I had to admit that, cleaned up, he was quite good-looking, with his thick fair hair and bright blue eyes. My younger sister Isabella went pink when he stared at her across the table, and later she giggled furiously and could not stop saying how handsome he was. I told her she was being stupid, and it was ridiculous even to consider a farm boy such as him a suitable match for young ladies such as us.



Peter was away for years – four years going on trips with Papa, and then travelling on his own. For those first four years, in truth I thought little of him while he was away. I had my sisters, and my friends, and I was never bored or seeking tasks or entertainment.

But each time he and Papa came home, I found myself ever more thrilled by their adventures, which Peter related to us over dinner. He found something new, something exciting, to tell us about every trip. And it was clear Papa thought very well of him.

Then later when he brought me precious gifts – ivory and silk, spices and books – I could not fail to be impressed. And then, most perfect of all, he brought me a little book of hours, each page decorated with a miniature painting of angels or ladies at prayer, its leather binding fastened with a tiny metal clasp. Such a book was a special gift, more special than I am sure he realised. I could see Mama understood, for she puckered her brow and pressed her lips tight together.

Papa, too, noticed how I looked at Peter, and how he looked at me, and merrily suggested – as if it had already been a subject of discussion – that perhaps, after his next trip, the time will have come for us to marry.

Mama, of course, was outraged.

‘I do not understand what your Father is thinking of,’ she said to me later, pacing up and down her salon, wringing her hands, ‘to throw you away on an upstart peasant! That cannot possibly be what you want, Joanna?’

Could it not?

Of course, it was true that Peter *was* uneducated, a manor servant, a mere farming boy. When he first came here, I ignored him – was even rude. But Papa was right and Peter did become a merchant – and a very good one. By then I was thinking about him every moment of the day. But I kept my thoughts to myself and just shrugged.

‘How can you shrug, Joanna?’ she said, her face twisted in despair. ‘I cannot let this happen. That boy is so unsuitable! I vow that, before he next returns, I will have moved heaven and earth to find you a more fitting husband!’



For the past three years I have devoted myself to our babies and our home but, before he last returned to Italy, Peter agreed that I should take the unusual step of becoming a merchant myself, selling the goods that he brings home to England, instead of letting my father do it all.

Mama, of course, is furious.

‘It is quite unsuitable!’ she cries. ‘You are the wife of a wealthy and successful merchant, with three young children to care for and carrying a fourth. How do you have the time? What will people think?’

‘It is of no concern to me, Mama, what “people think”, but I am young and full of energy, and I simply cannot sit around at home, doing nothing.’

““Doing nothing”!’ Her voice rises. ‘How can you say you do nothing? Your children—’

‘Are looked after by Hawisa. Of course I see them, play with them, every day, but it is not enough, Mama. My house is tended by our servants, the garden too – all I do is sit and sew, and you know well enough how inept a needlewoman I am.’

But Mama is unyielding in her views. ‘I am proud and happy to be your father’s wife,’ she says, tossing her head so vigorously that her ridiculous headdress threatens to throw itself to the floor. ‘I am grateful not to be a simple townswoman, forced to earn her living by brewing or weaving, proud that your father gave me the responsibility to care for his house and his children while he was away. Why can you not be the same, Joanna?’

‘Because I am not you, Mama. And because Peter is not Papa.’

I might have thought Papa would also disapprove of my decision but, though he is concerned I might overtire myself, especially as the child inside me grows, it seems he is secretly gratified by my enterprising spirit.

‘Do not tell your mother,’ he says, one afternoon when we are strolling in my garden, admiring the verdant lawn and bubbling fountain, the burgeoning beds of flowers and herbs, the rose-covered pergolas and grassy seats, and the still nascent orchard, ‘but I think you will make an excellent merchant, my dear. It is unusual, of course, for a woman, but times are changing.’

I put my hand through his arm and squeeze it tenderly. ‘Thank you, Papa. Mama is so much against it.’

He nods. ‘Christina is much set in her ways. It pains me that you and she should quarrel over this, but you must follow your own instincts, Joanna. Peter approves your plan?’

‘Yes, he does, Papa, truly. I would not embark upon it without his consent.’

Papa nods again, then suddenly raises his other arm in a sweeping gesture. ‘Your garden is quite delightful, my dear.’

We stroll around some more, exulting in the pink-white blossom frothing on the little apples, pears and plums, and bending down to sniff the heady scent of the charming nodding bells of lily of the valley and the delicate fragrance of the carpet of pale yellow primroses.

‘Peter says it is very much like the gardens in Italy,’ I say.

Papa nods. ‘I must say I have seen none other like it in England. You are a clever girl!’

I cannot help but laugh, and take his arm again. ‘But you must know, Papa, that I learned it from a book – the one Peter gave me, that was once his own Mama’s?’

All the words of that lovely book are fixed firm within my memory, I have pored over it so much and often.

In the middle of the garden there should be a meadow, the grass deep green, spangled with a thousand different flowers, violets and periwinkles, primroses and daisies...

And also, perhaps, a clear fountain in a stone basin in the centre of the lawn, for the pureness of the water gives great refreshment...

‘Ah yes,’ says Papa. ‘Strange for a villein woman to own such a book.’

‘As you have said yourself, Papa, there is often more to people than we first expect.’

He squeezes my arm. ‘How right you are, Joanna. How very right.’

1361

II.

It is such lovely weather, warm, dry and endlessly sunny. The children and I spend hours out of doors, I doing a little gentle gardening in our flourishing flower beds; little Eleanor sitting under a shady arbour with her nurse, Hawisa; and the three boys, Alexander, Hugh and Robert, amusing themselves quietly on the lawn with their toy soldiers, or running off to play hide-and-seek in and out of the apples and pears, squealing with delight.

How I wish Peter could stay with us for the summer months, to see how much his children love our garden! But of course they are the travelling months for merchants. Though when he came home last autumn, he had been away more than a year and a half – travelling through our winter months as well but, he said, in countries where the weather is quite different from here in England. He had been abroad so long our little Eleanor was already able to totter towards his open arms.

But in the spring, he left again – in truth, I did expect no other. But, this time, at least, he was planning not to travel so far.

‘Giovanni thinks we should once more confine our efforts to Italy,’ he said. He laid a gentle hand upon my newly burgeoning belly. ‘So I’ll be home again to see this little one before he’s even learned to smile – I promise.’



It is Hawisa who brings the news. She has been out for the day, visiting her poor, sickly mother, who lives in a mean little cottage close to the docks. The old woman’s only pleasure is gossiping with – and about – her neighbours, but the gossip she passes to her daughter this time is something even she wishes she had not heard.

‘Oh, Mistress,’ cries Hawisa, out of breath from running home, but desperate it seems to tell me what she has learned. ‘They say the pestilence ’as come again.’

She finds me pruning roses. I am hot and have removed my wide-brimmed summer hat to mop the moisture from my brow.

‘Who says?’ I say, trying to maintain a calm and dignified air, though I feel anything but dignified with my damp and shiny face, not to mention the pain in my back from standing too long at my pruning, making me stoop like an old woman.

‘Well, Ma, o’course,’ she says, blushing, ‘but not jus’ Ma, Mistress. I ’eard it from others too! They say it’s same as last time, but now it’s boys are dying.’

A sudden icy trickle oozes down my spine, and I shiver, despite the heat of my face. My head begins to spin, from the cold or heat, I cannot tell. ‘Boys?’ I whisper. ‘Are you sure, just boys?’

She nods. ‘Young men too, they say.’ Her eyes are wide. ‘I’m so afraid, mistress, for my Nicholas, and...’ and now it is her turn to whisper, ‘...and for the little ones.’

I am aghast. ‘The little ones...?’



It was supposed to be a treat for us, all those years ago, to stay at the chateau of Monsieur de Martigny, Papa's friend and business partner, for a few months while they travelled around northern France, seeking out new suppliers.

It was so romantic there, and I just loved the elegant French ladies and their fashionable clothes. I was twelve, my sisters younger, and we had such fun with the Monsieur's daughters, Katherine and Marguerite, playing in the chateau gardens, going for picnics on the banks of the Loire, and riding in the huge forests surrounding the estate. And Katherine and I, being older than the others, were even allowed to go hawking. How I loved to watch the falcons being released and cast up into the sky, where they spread their wings, wheeled and sped off after the poor frightened ducks that the servants had beaten up from the lake.

We were supposed to stay until September, but that all changed one horrible July afternoon, when Papa and Monsieur de Martigny returned, riding full pelt through the castle gates, their entourage behind them, almost hidden in the cloud of dust thrown up by the galloping horses and churning wagon wheels. Monsieur de Martigny shouted for the gate to be lowered and it was not opened again for weeks.

By the time we left France, we had been there not months, but more than a year. On that sunny summer day, the chateau was closed to visitors and no one allowed to leave, as the great pestilence raged around us. Weeks later, we learned it was in England too. Bowing his head, Papa said he had heard the pestilence had reached England through the port of Southampton – our home.

'On a merchant ship,' he said, his face twisted with grief. 'Many people have died.'

He said we could not go home until the pestilence had passed on. Mama gasped, and my sisters and I wept, afraid of what we would find if we ever did go home again.



I slept not a wink last night and then, early this morning, Papa hurries over, in a state of high anxiety, to suggest that we all go to the chateau de Martigny again for two or three months, until this new pestilence has passed. At first my heart leaps at the idea of taking my children to a place of safety, just as Papa took us all those years ago. Then I look down at the size of my belly: I am much more than half way through my pregnancy and the thought of crossing the sea is intolerable. As is the thought of my children, all of them so young, suffering the nauseating roll of the ship, the vomiting and weeping, not understanding why they feel so ill.

I shake my head. 'Oh, dear Papa, I could not consider such a journey. Look at the size of me! And Eleanor is so young, and even Alexander is not yet five. How could I subject my little ones to such an ordeal?'

He argues that an uncomfortable sea crossing would be a small price to pay for safety, but I resist. 'Surely we will be safe enough here, Papa, if we all stay indoors and do not go abroad?'

He passes his hand across his eyes. 'Perhaps,' he says.

III.

Young Alice Rolfe is sitting on the kitchen table, her shoulders hunched, twiddling the brown curls that have escaped her coif. She is not a happy girl.

'I can't believe the mistress is staying here! Master Hugh said everyone should go to France, but she won't go.' She twiddles her hair more urgently, and begins to sob. 'We're all going to die!'

Cook shrugs. 'It's up to 'er, isn't it?' He shakes his head and slaps the girl's arm to make her move.

'But don't you remember what happened last time?' Alice's voice rises to a squeak. 'It were before I was born, but you must be old enough.'

Cook cuffs her ear. 'Less of your cheek, girl. But I remember it very well: I was the only one of my family to survive. And that was because my master took his household away to the country.'

'That's it, then, isn't it? We do need to leave...'



It is only three weeks ago Papa said we should leave. But now I am standing by the family grave in the churchyard of Saint John's, burying two of my little boys: Hugh, who was three, a brave and bold explorer, and two-year-old Robert, solid and sweet natured. Our first born Alexander and his little sister Eleanor did not fall sick – why I do not understand. For Hawisa and her Nicholas also gave up their souls to God, and I wonder if it was she who brought the sickness to my family. Yet Eleanor spent as much time with her as the others.

All our other servants have survived. Papa and Mama too, and my two sisters.

So why my little boys?

Papa and Mama stand with me at the graveside, Papa wrapping his arm around my shoulders, as my tears flow and my whole body aches with grief. It is another hot summer's day, but it might be the depths of January for the icy coldness that has taken hold of me.

I rail against God's cruelty. Daily I pray for my children's souls but my prayers of hope turn often to bitterness against a God who has denied my children their chance of life. Surely this was not what Christ meant by "Suffer little children"?

Through these dark days of misery and grief, I am separated from the one person with whom I want – no, need – to share my suffering. Papa, bless him, does his best to comfort me, but it is not the same. I cry myself to sleep each night, hugging the pillow to my breast and churning over and over again the terrible fact that Peter does not know two of his beloved sons are dead. Sometimes I almost choke on the heaving swell of my sobs, and have to press the pillow against my face to muffle my grief, so as not to upset Alexander and Eleanor – both sleeping in my chamber – any more than they already are.

I long for Peter's return, and yet I dread it. How can I tell him it was I who put our children in danger by refusing my father's offer for us to flee? That it is my fault our little boys are dead? Surely he will blame me for my recklessness?

Mama certainly does. Although she and Papa did not leave Southampton themselves, as they might have done, now she is venomous in her accusation that I failed in my duty as a mother.

'Your father told you what you should do,' she says, her eyes narrowed and steely, 'but you ignored his advice. You think you are so modern and independent, and do not need the advice of your elders.'

I shake my head, weeping still. 'That is not true, Mama,' I whisper. 'I just thought—'

She flies at me. 'You just thought you could defy God's will – you arrogant, irresponsible girl.'

IV.

On All Hallows' Day, our so precious little Eloise bursts, red-faced and raucous, into the world, and I have my hands full once again, but with no Hawisa to help me. The pestilence

seems to have passed on, a numbed calm returned to the city. I decide not to engage another nurse, but to care for Eloise myself, with help from my new little maid Alice. Despite her noisy arrival, Eloise is an easy, happy baby. Eleanor dotes on her little sister, and even Alexander spends much more time with both than he would have done a few months ago.

Weeks pass, and I am becoming nervous as the time for Peter's return draws near. I barely see Mama, though Papa comes often to the house to play with his grandchildren. We talk, too, for hours, about Peter's return and what I will say to him. We talk too about the business I set up two years ago but am now no longer running – and have not been for months. I agree to let Papa pass the goods I have not yet sold to my sister Isabella's husband, Andrew, who is now taking more and more of Papa's work upon himself.

December arrives, and we begin preparations for the Christmas festivities. I try to appear excited for the children's sakes. But the expected date of Peter's return, early in the month, comes and goes, and I cannot concentrate for wondering when he will come.

To please Papa, I make a sort of reconciliation with Mama. We still talk little, but at least we can be in the same room without her criticising me for some failing or act of irresponsibility. I suspect Papa has insisted she make her peace with me, and although our relationship continues to be brittle, Alexander and Eleanor enjoy her company as much as that of their devoted grandfather, and I can hardly deny them that.

1362

V.

By the time Giovanni Alberti arrives in Southampton, I am beside myself with worry, as week after week goes by and still Peter does not come. Christmas passed by in a blur – I could not enjoy it, hard as I tried to do so. I relied on Papa to keep the children occupied, though, of course, Alexander wondered why his father had not come home for Christmas.

‘Doesn't Papa want to be with us?’ he said, his eyes those of a doleful puppy's.

I was thinking much the same, though I knew Peter's failure to come home was nothing to do with what he did or did not want. I knelt down and gave Alexander a hug.

‘Oh, darling, of course he wants to be with us. Something must have delayed him.’

‘What sort of something?’ he said, pouting.

‘Oh, I don’t know. Bad weather, most likely, or perhaps...’ I suppressed the dreadful thought that came unbidden into my head, and searched for something optimistic. At length, trying to smile, I hugged my son again. ‘Perhaps he has found *so* many new customers he has just had to spend a lot longer than usual negotiating?’

He frowned. ‘Nego-shing?’

I smiled properly. ‘Agreeing how much to pay them; making arrangements to bring all those wonderful things back home.’

He nodded but pouted again. ‘But I want Papa to come home now.’

‘So do I, my darling,’ I said, giving him a squeeze. ‘So do I.’



It is a miracle Signor Alberti has arrived at all for, last month, southern England was ravaged by the most ferocious of storms: violent gales swept across the country, toppling church steeples and destroying buildings. What it must have been like on the sea I do not like to imagine. The very memory of the tumultuous waves and the ship’s unceasing pitching and plunging when we returned from France all those years ago still brings nausea to my throat.

It is late in the day, and already quite dark outside, when Papa comes to the house, bringing his Italian visitor with him. Papa’s face is grey, and he seems to be shivering, though the weather is quite mild for February. He introduces Signor Alberti to me, and I start to tremble too – because of course I know at once why it is *he* who has come, and not my beloved Peter.

How I hold myself together, as Giovanni relates his story to us, I have no idea. I am numbed with shock at the horror of his first announcement, but am anxious to miss nothing of what he knows of my beloved’s final days, and make a great effort to listen carefully to his words.

‘Pietro was a brave man,’ he says. ‘Full of courage, fearless, always seeking new ways, new opportunities for his business – our business – to succeed.’

Papa nods. ‘It is what I saw in him all those years ago. Such enthusiasm! Such a bold and daring spirit! I always knew he would be a success.’

‘And so he was, Signor Godfrey – a great success.’ Giovanni heaves a deep sigh. ‘Also a great friend to me. I miss him deeply.’ He wipes his eyes and presses his thumb and

forefinger against his eyelids, and cannot speak again until Papa pours him a mazer of red wine.

As Giovanni's story unfolds, Papa nods and shakes his head by turns, as if he understands only too well the dangers that so many merchants face in their quest for business. On his last journey, Giovanni says, Peter was on his way back to England, having started out from a place called Napoli.

'He had only recently recovered from the pestilence.'

I gasp. 'The pestilence?' I whisper. 'Last year?'

Giovanni nods. 'He had only recently arrived in Genoa. I thought I would lose him, he was so sick, his poor body so wracked with pain. But, as he lay there, writhing, yet gritting his teeth against the pain, Pietro plucked at my sleeve and bade me bend down so I could hear his feeble words. What he said, Signora, was "I cannot – must not – die, for four, no, it must be five children await my return to Southampton, as well as my beloved wife, and I will not let them down." Perhaps God heard his heartfelt avowal as a prayer, and spared him, for two days later his boils burst and slowly he got better.'

I cannot stop the tears and do not try to. I have not yet told him those five children are now only three.

Signor Alberti then smiles a little, perhaps recalling the passion of his friend's fight for life. But then his brow furrows once again, and he takes a large draught of Papa's good red Gascon wine.

'This last time I was travelling with Pietro. I planned to make some new contacts for myself in London. We were making good progress but then, in the hills of the Apennines – not for the first time – a band of *briganti* attacked the caravan of wagons, and two of Pietro's servants were quickly killed.'

He tells us how skilful Peter was with his sword and how brave, as he had proved on many such occasions.

'The fighting was fierce and he had killed many of the robbers – as had I – before he was jumped on from behind by one of the two survivors. I ran to help him, but one of them parried Pietro's sword and thrust his own into his chest. My dear friend, my courageous companion, was murdered before my eyes. In my grief, I threw myself upon the brute and plunged my knife into his throat. Then I turned around and went after the other fellow, but he ran off and I did not give chase. Instead I returned to Pietro's side.'

I am weeping – how can I not be? Giovanni leans forward from his chair and lays his hand tenderly on mine. ‘This is too much to bear, Signora atte Hyl? You wish me to stop?’

‘No, no,’ I say, sounding much braver than I feel. ‘I have to know.’

He nods and gulps down his own distress. ‘I knelt down and cradled my dear friend in my arms. He was mortally wounded but not yet dead. I held him to my breast until he took his last breath and closed his eyes.’

Giovanni looks up and I can see tears glistening on his eyelashes. He leans forward again and takes my hand in his. ‘He asked me to say how *very* much he loved you, Signora – “*mia moglie cara*” he called you – and how very, very, sorry he would not see you or his dearest children again.’ Giovanni swallows hard. ‘Then he asked you to forgive him for leaving you.’ His voice becomes a whisper and he no longer tries to stem his tears.



I sink into the darkest of places in the days following Giovanni’s visit. I leave it to Papa to tell the children what has happened to their father. Alexander sets his lips firmly together and nods bravely, but Eleanor, being only two, turns back to her wooden animals with something like a shrug. I feel the same – I cannot believe I will never see him again. But, unlike Eleanor, I cannot just shrug it off, because I know the truth: I will not see that beloved face, nor run my fingers lightly over his golden skin, ever again. I throw myself upon our bed, bury my face in the pillow and weep until I have no more tears to shed.



We were married six years ago, just weeks after Peter returned from his travels. He was delighted when Papa agreed to him proposing marriage to me, and Papa was full of cheer. Mama, on the other hand, at first refused to attend the wedding, but Papa told her she must, and was so uncommonly insistent that finally she obeyed him. She wore an elaborate headdress, with a veil that obscured her face, but I could tell it was dark with fury the whole day.

Peter was still only twenty-four, but his travels had wrought a great change in him: the uneducated, rustic boy he had been seven years before replaced by a confident, cultured and successful man. We spent hours together, poring over the books in Papa’s library and those Peter brought home from his travels – books of poetry and romance he thought I would love, though at first he did not realise many were written in a language I couldn’t read: Italian. But I did know a little Latin, and gradually we learned to make sense of the words.

For our first two months alone together, we spent more time than I might have thought proper in our new bed, with its frame of walnut, the hangings and coverlet of green damask embroidered with gillyflowers and bees, and its smooth white linen sheets and soft feather pillows.

Passion took me unawares: although I had been longing to be his wife, I had not known until our first night alone together quite what it was I had been longing for. That night, Peter quickly stripped off all his clothes and stood before me naked. I gasped at the beauty and strength of his body, and could not stop myself reaching out to touch his smooth golden skin, running my finger lightly along the silvery scar upon his thigh that spoke of courage and adventure.

Then, gently and carefully, he removed my headdress and gown, leaving me standing in my chemise. I realised that I was quaking, whether from fear or yearning I did not then know, and, needing his strength, I stepped forward and laid my head against his chest. He wrapped his arms around me and held me tight, and I felt that queer sensation inside me that I later knew to be desire.

In the weeks that followed, we made love often, at night and during the day – I found myself as eager as he was to unite our bodies time and time again. And, when we were not making love, we talked – both in bed, lying side by side, naked and completely at ease with each other, and out of it, dining downstairs in our elegant, if sparsely furnished, hall or, often, wrapped up warmly, walking in the space behind the house that would one day be our garden.

Peter could talk for hours about his travels and the wonderful sights he had seen, and he described the lovely houses in Genoa and Venice, and their gardens – and in particular the garden of his friend Giovanni Alberti.

‘It’s completely enclosed by a wall, with wide walkways running along each wall, all covered by pergolas laden with grape vines and climbing roses. In the middle of the garden is a bright green lawn that in summer is studded all over with flowers of every colour and shape, and in its centre is a statue throwing water high into the air in a marvellous fountain.’

He sketched an outline of Signor Alberti’s garden on a small fragment of parchment, and I was thrilled by the wondrous depiction he conjured up.

‘Could we have a garden like that here?’ I said, full of excitement already for turning our bare little plot into such a lovely paradise.

He laughed. ‘I’m not sure we could have marble fountains, my love. But rose-covered pergolas and a flowery mead, yes, perhaps we could.’

As the time approached for Peter to leave, I wished and wished he did not have to go. But I did not say so: I had to be brave and accept the life of a merchant's wife I had chosen.



Now I lean heavily on my parents – even Mama. Papa and I talk often of what Giovanni told us. He passes his hand across his eyes when he recalls his concern for Peter's safety.

'But he paid no heed to my warnings. He was determined to find new sources of the kind of exotic and costly goods he believed would make him a wealthy man.'

Then he pulls a sad sort of grin. 'Giovanni was right. Peter *was* fearless. And he relished the jeopardy of it all.'

I return a smile, knowing part of what made up the man I loved were his courage and his passion for adventure. More than once, he spoke to me proudly of his own father, a man whose bravery on the battlefield he admired, even though he knew that he failed to provide support for his family. He told me how ashamed his father was that the pestilence took his life, instead of an enemy's sword – a humiliating death instead of an honourable one.

'But I think if Peter had known,' continues Papa, 'it was going to end that way for him, and it meant he would never see you again, he might have thought twice about it.'

I shake my head. 'No, Papa, I am not sure you are right. I know he loved me – of course he did – but the adventurous life was what he always wanted, and I have no doubt he enjoyed it hugely. I am proud to have been his wife and the mother of his children. I have no regrets, Papa, except that I did not have the chance to say goodbye to him, nor to bury his body here in Southampton.'

'But Giovanni made sure he had a decent, Christian, burial,' says Papa. 'Maybe, one day, we will make a sort of pilgrimage to see it?'

'Perhaps, Papa – one day.'

As spring moves into summer, with dry, warm weather once again, I throw myself into gardening, spending nearly all of my time, sometimes until well after dusk, working in what I now think of as my memorial to my beloved Peter.

1364

VI.

I am twenty-seven years old, with three young children, servants and little means of supporting my household. I have the house, of course, and the wealth that my husband accumulated in the few years of his adventures, but I am a comfortable widow rather than a rich one, and cannot live forever on what I have. Papa, I think, would let the situation linger – but Mama is not so sanguine.

‘It is high time you remarried, Joanna,’ she says, in the tone that makes me feel like a naughty child. ‘You cannot expect your father to continue paying your household expenses, year in, year out.’

‘He has not been doing so, Mama.’ I am exasperated she should suggest I have been cadging off them all this time. ‘And I do not expect him to.’

‘As I am sure you know,’ she says, ignoring my reply, ‘Andrew is keen to take over the business entirely, and your father is more than willing.’

I did not know, but it is not a surprise to hear it. Andrew is ambitious, not with Peter’s adventurous style of ambition, but with a determination to expand the business and move away from the wine trade – which has been in decline ever since the first great wave of pestilence wrought such damage – and to dip his fingers into various lucrative new pies. His wife, my sister Isabella, is forever urging him on, the gleam of future riches in her eyes.

Of course it is not unreasonable that Mama sees it as her duty to support her husband in his declining years but, although I know Andrew has taken much of the day-to-day burden of the business from Papa’s shoulders, it has not occurred to me Papa might want to give it up altogether.

But, according to Mama, that is exactly what he wants. ‘So, you, my darling daughter, must take another husband to your bed.’

I flinch. The idea that I could love another man is preposterous. The idea of sharing another man’s bed is almost abhorrent. Yet I know Mama is right: the present arrangement of my life and household cannot continue.

Next time I see Papa, only a day or two later, I look at him more carefully and see what perhaps I have been denying to myself for months. His face is grey and his back bent. He

wheezes a little as he speaks and, when he puts his arm around me, as he often does, it seems lighter than I remember only a short while ago.



So, yet again, Mama is setting out to find me a husband. Of course she wants a man who is wealthy and well connected – age and appearance she thinks of little consequence, as well as my views on the matter. I have to suffer the advances of a number of likely – and unlikely – suitors. Most of them I cannot bring myself even to consider: the fat and sweating hog, the prattling baboon, the feeble-minded donkey.

I bring Papa onto my side in rejecting them as unsuitable substitutes for Peter. Not that any man could replace him. Mama is frustrated when Papa thwarts her efforts, but in July she is rewarded when she finds a man whom even I think might just be acceptable.

Sir Ralph Burleigh, a baronet from Dorset, is much more than ten years my senior, well into his forties, but, despite his age, he is a good-looking man, tall and lusty, with a fine head of black hair and steely blue eyes. He seems charming and affable, and makes me laugh more than once during the brief weeks of his courtship. Sir Ralph is a widower, with no children, and he meets one of Mama's most important conditions: he is wealthy, owning not only a large estate close to the New Forest, but several others in Dorset, Devon and other counties throughout the south of England.

Apprehensive as I am to marry anyone, I am sufficiently attracted to Sir Ralph to accept his advances, though I am bold enough to make it clear to him there would always be a very large place in my heart for my first husband. This seems not to bother him.

'My dear Joanna,' he says, taking my hand and caressing it tenderly. 'I feel the same about my first wife, God rest her gentle soul. When Editha died, the fire went out of my life and I thought never to rekindle it. But I know now I was wrong.' He cocks his head and his blue eyes latch onto mine. 'Editha and I,' he goes on, 'did not have children, so to yours, my dear, I bring a father's love and a prosperous future. And for you, Joanna, I can provide a fine home, a life of ease and elegance, and of course my undying affection.'

I lower my face, in a gesture of modest gratitude, charmed by his little speech.

'And, who knows,' he says, 'I am not too old for us perhaps to have one or two little ones of our own?' He shoots me the broadest of smiles, then squeezes my hand before raising it to his lips and kissing the tips of my fingers, slowly, one by one.

That single tender act quite turns my head. It has been nearly four years since I experienced the queer sensation that signals the onset of desire. Despite insisting to myself

that I would never – could never – crave the body of any other man, my kissed fingertips are sending little tremors to my loins and my breath is coming in short gasps. I find myself leaning my head against Ralph's chest, and am happy when he folds his arms around me.

'So, do you agree to be my wife, Joanna?' I nod my head against the soft red velvet of his cotehardie. He kisses the top of my head and, unfolding his arms, takes my shoulders and holds me apart from him.

'I will surely be the happiest and most fortunate of men, to have such a beautiful and accomplished wife. Burleigh has lacked a mistress for many years. You, my dear Joanna, are the bright star that will bring back light and life to my gloomy citadel.'



Just a month later we are married and I take my children to live in Sir Ralph's rambling, half-fortified, manor house on the edge of the New Forest. The children, or rather Alexander and Eleanor, for Eloise is still too young to have an opinion, do not want to go. Eleanor cries bitterly and beats her little hands against my breast, as I try to convince her of the happiness we will find in our new home. But she is not persuaded, and Alexander, stoical in the face of what I think he considers my betrayal of his father, tries to persuade me to change my mind.

But of course it is too late for that.

It is also too late when I discover how heart-broken I am to be leaving Peter's house and the garden I have so lovingly created for him. I thought I could be stoic too, but I cannot and struggle to keep my distress to myself – not letting the children see how I feel and, critically, not allowing Ralph to believe I am anything but entirely content to become his wife.

Ralph makes a great effort to make me feel welcome at Burleigh, and to feel loved and desired. Despite my grief at leaving all my wonderful memories of Peter behind, I find it easy enough to fall for Ralph's undoubted charms and my body blossoms eagerly at his touch. Night after night he plies me with wine and carries me to our bed, gently stripping me of my clothes and covering me with moist kisses and tantalizing caresses so tender and so skilfully placed that, each day, I wander the castle grounds distracted and alone, yearning for night to come again.

VII.

It is a dreadful wet and dreary day when my sister's husband, Andrew Marchant, rides into

Burleigh. He rarely visits and when I see his long face I know it cannot be good news that he brings.

I greet him in the hall. He removes his sodden cloak and hood and hands them to a servant. Then he takes my hand and squeezes it. But his smile is thin.

‘Sister, I bring unhappy news,’ he says, still holding fast to my hand. ‘Perhaps you should sit down?’

All of a sudden my legs feel weak and I almost fall into the nearest chair. ‘Papa?’

He nods. ‘I am afraid so. He has succumbed at last.’

My darling Papa has been declining since the beginning of the year. But, when I left Southampton merely three months ago, he seemed better than he had been for weeks and I hoped that, since Andrew had relieved him entirely of the burden of work, he was recovering his old vigour. I can see now I was deluded, perhaps by a childish wish to believe my father would live forever.

Andrew sits by me and takes my hand again. ‘Hugh’s illness worsened in the last few weeks, and the physician could do nothing to help him.’

I nod and we sit quietly together for a while.

But then Andrew clears his throat and, letting go my hand, stands up. He paces around the room for a few moments before coming back to me.

‘I have some other news,’ he says, and his face is tight. He hesitates then says all in a rush, ‘Christina is to come and live at Burleigh.’

I am stunned by this apparent *fait accompli*. ‘Why here? Why not with you and Isabella, or Elisabeth?’

Andrew blushes and prevaricates, clearly the unwilling bearer of awkward news, as well as sad.

‘Elisabeth is in Bristol,’ he says at length, ‘and Christina will not go so far away from Hugh’s grave.’

‘So what of Isabella, and yourself?’ I fix him with a glare.

He shuffles and coughs. ‘We do not have room to accommodate your mother in the comfort she deserves—’

‘Nonsense! Your house is plenty large enough.’ Then I have another thought. ‘Anyway, you could move your family into Papa’s house, so Mama would not have to go anywhere.’

He coughs again and purses his lips. 'I am afraid Isabella insists Christina comes to you.' He struggles a little with the words. 'You know they do not get on.'

I shake my head in disbelief. 'And you think I *do* get on with our Mama!'

But my views are of no account. When Ralph by chance arrives in the hall and Andrew appeals his case, my husband agrees readily that my mother can have a suite of rooms at Burleigh, and he will be delighted to accommodate her here. I am defeated by numbers and, a week later, Mama arrives, with her maid, Jane, sour as a gooseberry and just as prickly, and a wagon full of her possessions.



Mama and I are getting on passably well, to my surprise, and hers. She misses Papa as much as I do – more so, of course, for they were married for nearly thirty years – and we draw comfort from each other. We seem able to put our former differences aside. She walks with me occasionally in the gardens and we talk only of happy times and precious memories.

In early December I find I am with child. It is a rare sunny morning when I break the news to Ralph. The low winter sun is streaming cheerfully through the window of my chamber, where we are breaking our fast together. It should set the mood for a happy moment, but Ralph is, as usual, anxious to be away. However, when I say I have something of importance to tell him, he agrees to hear me out.

His reaction is not at all as I expected. Peter's response was to take me in his arms and whirl me around, laughing with sheer delight and excitement at the news. But Ralph does not do that. He seems pleased enough with my announcement, but there is no excitement. I thought him eager for an heir and yet, to my surprise, his face seems to turn a little pale and he looks away.

Yet he is decorous in his response: after a few moments he takes my hand and kisses it.

'Thank you, my dear Joanna,' he says, looking up at me again and banishing the coldness in his eyes with the warmest of smiles, 'for at last bringing me the chance of fatherhood.' He kisses my hand again and then my cheek. And then he leaves.

VIII.

Alice Rolfe is perching on one end of the big kitchen table, swinging her legs and picking the maggots from one of the windfall

apples gathered by the gardeners for the servants to eat. Around her, the kitchen staff are bustling about, starting to prepare the main meal of the day.

Her eyes alight, she makes an announcement to the room. 'The mistress is going to have a baby!'

Old Marion, who once was a lady's maid but now mostly dozes by the fire, looks up sharply. 'You shouldn't've said. Her ladyship would've wanted it kept quiet a while.'

Alice shrugs, then blushes, remembering only then her mistress's specific request. But it is too late now.

Marion continues. 'And the master certainly would, given what happened afore...' Then she stops and bites her lip.

But Alice's ears are ever alert to gossip. 'What d'you mean?'

Marion shakes her greying head. 'Never you mind.' But it is hopeless, with several pairs of eyes now staring at her. And, in truth, she is as much in love with gossip as young Alice. So she sighs and shrugs. 'Years ago, the master had a lady – my lady, though they weren't yet wed.' Marion purses her lips and shakes her head. 'Lady Editha were a young widow he were courting.' Then she lowers her voice, and everyone moves a little closer. 'She got with child, but lost it after six months.'

Alice sighs. 'Poor lady!'

Marion nods. 'The master was right upset, but Lady Editha quickly got with child again, and the master was so happy he threw a great party here at Burleigh.'

'But he doesn't have a child!' says Alice.

Marion shakes her head again. 'No. The second one died too, but that time so did my lady.' A collective sigh purrs round the room. 'The master were that wretched, he gave up all thought of getting heirs. Till now.'

'But why wouldn't the master be pleased we know about the baby now?'

Marion shakes her head for the fourth time, her dirty wimple quivering. She beckons to the eager listeners to come a little closer. 'For all his bluff and bluster, Sir Ralph'll be scared a baby might kill Lady Joanna too.' She lowers her voice still more. 'And it's why he'll be leaving her alone, if you get my meaning. He couldn't keep his hands off Lady Editha, and afterwards decided it must've been his lust killed her and the babes.' She winks then.

'You mark my words, this time, he'll be getting his needs met elsewhere...'

IX.

I do not see my husband again for four days. My own joy at the prospect of another baby is already flown. Peter was never there during my pregnancies or at the births of any of his children, but I always felt he was thinking of me, loving me – albeit from a great distance.

With me in spirit, if not in body.

Ralph, it seems, is not going to be there either, for his true self is already beginning to emerge: he is away from Burleigh, not for months like Peter, but for days at a time. And each time he returns, we meet only at mealtimes and he never comes to my bed. Our nights of passion, and indeed Ralph's declared undying affection for me, seem to be over: his thrilling desire for my body has melted away, and I spend my nights alone, while he carouses with his cronies.

I do not understand why he has changed towards me and one day I am bold enough to ask him if my body no longer pleases him. He shakes his head, his eyes rolling and a queer smirk upon his lips.

'Of course it still pleases me, Joanna,' he says, and cups my breasts in his hands. 'But I have decided to come to your bed no longer...' I open my mouth to protest, but he holds up his hand to stop me. '...for fear of harming my son.' Then he clasps me by the shoulders and, leaning forward, kisses my forehead and then my lips.

At first I miss his nightly caresses, but my body soon forgets, even when I once catch Ralph naked, preparing for a bath. He turns to face me, and grins, knowing how aroused his naked body is. I smile back but my own body does not react. For it is already responding to a

different pleasure – the child growing inside me. I have already learned to be content with that.

There are times, though, when I am not sure I am glad to be carrying Ralph Burleigh's child, as I come to realise what his true self means. For what he enjoys most in life is confrontation, with his neighbours as well as his long-suffering tenants, on his other estates as well as here. Nothing gives him so much pleasure as contriving some sort of conflict, where he can cause general mayhem and come out the richer or the owner of more land.

I am no longer sure whether he cares for me or not, and regret falling for his fleeting charms.

Surprisingly perhaps, I confide in my mother and – unsurprisingly – I soon wish I had not.

'Ralph has plenty of money,' she says, 'and every intention of keeping you in the manner he believes appropriate to his wife. You will lack for nothing, Joanna.'

'Except love?'

'Pah!' cries Mama, her eyes flashing. 'I thought you loved Peter atte Hyl.'

I gasp at her implication. 'Yes, of course I loved Peter.' I stumble over my words, trying to explain. 'I did not mean I want Ralph's *love*, but his affection.'

Mama shakes her head. 'Ralph Burleigh is not an affectionate man,' I am surprised, thinking of the first nights of our marriage.

'You are wrong, Mama. Ralph has shown me great affection.'

'Pah!' she says again. 'Maybe he has, to ensure you give him what he wants – a beautiful wife to grace his table and show off to his cronies, and a vessel for his seed.'

Her words seem heartless, but she has more to say. 'I do not doubt he will plant many others before he has done with you. But it is not from affection, but because he wants to ensure he has an heir to his estates. Your job is to be the mistress of this manor, and mother to whatever children he sires on you. I suggest you make the most of what he can bring to you, and to your atte Hyl children.'

Mama is right. If Ralph is ungenerous with the time he gives me, he is not so with his money – he encourages me to buy clothes for myself and for the children, and to refurnish any number of rooms in the castle if it takes my fancy. So I busy myself with my life as mistress of this manor, and one of the first things I plan to do, when spring arrives, is to bring the gardens into better shape. Ralph has no interest in the manor's grounds, though

there is already a productive potager and fine orchard, both tended by a team of gardeners. But Ralph has no time for flowers, so the gardens are completely devoid of colour and scent.

‘Would you object to my creating a flower garden?’ I say one day, having screwed up my courage against a possible rebuff. ‘Building one or two arbours, and perhaps a fountain?’

I need not have worried. Ralph cares not at all for what I do. Or rather if what I do enhances the splendour of his “citadel” and gains him the admiration of his friends at his clever choice of wife, he cares not how much of his money I spend achieving it.

‘Do as you wish, Joanna. I trust your judgement.’

So I take him at his word.

What I want is to recreate the Italian garden I made in Southampton, but on a larger scale. The gardeners, though, are simple rustics, who know much about vegetables and fruit, but have never even heard of arbours and fountains, let alone have any idea how to construct them. But I am confident that, with a little encouragement and firm guidance – and of course the knowledge I will glean once more from Peter’s book – even they can be persuaded to enhance Burleigh’s workaday potagers and orchards with the most elegant and celebrated pleasure garden in the whole of Dorset.

Pleasure gardens are devised for the satisfaction of both sight and smell...so, around the lawn should be planted every sweet-smelling herb, such as rue and sage and basil, and all sorts of flowers, such as violet and columbine, lily, rose and iris.

1365

X.

Ralph has ordered a New Year banquet for his cronies and their wives, insisting it will be a grand affair, with numerous dishes and the best of everything. Our cook Nicholas is accustomed to preparing feasts, but the weather is cold and miserable, and for days it has been difficult to keep the fires going in the kitchens, with the wind howling under doors and through window shutters. He is in a stew about how to get everything prepared in time. I am trying to advise him, but Gilbert Wragge, Ralph’s wily seneschal, arrives and puts in his few

farthings' worth, bullying poor Nicholas as he always does. The cook's face is constantly red and shiny with sweat, but now the red is becoming purple, as he argues with Master Wragge and tries to plead his case with me.

The air is thick with belching fumes from the fires and warm with Nicholas's agitation. The poor man tries to keep his temper in the face of the harrying seneschal, whose word is law among the household servants. Indeed he rarely meets resistance, for Ralph has given Master Wragge full authority to run the manor household as he sees fit, and his idea of what is fitting means all the servants fear him. Even Nicholas is cowed, despite having twice Gilbert's girth and fought bravely for the king at both Crécy and Poitiers.

As the argument continues, a knock comes on the kitchen's outer door, so quiet I barely hear it, but a scullery maid runs forward. She draws back the heavy door with caution but the gusting wind blows it open wide, knocking the poor girl off her feet and letting in a shower of rain. Gilbert Wragge shouts at her to close the door, and in two long strides bears down upon her. She begins to cry and stammers there are folk outside. He swings round and, giving a cursory glance outside, makes to close the door. But I cry out to him to stop and run to the doorway myself, and even he is not so arrogant as to defy his mistress. I peer into the darkness and see a girl, bedraggled from the rain, her clothes mere rags, and beside her a child, skinny and filthy, holding tightly to her hand.

'Beggars, my lady,' says the seneschal. 'I always send them packing.' Again he makes to close the door, but I step between him and the waifs standing in the rain and gesture to them to come inside. Gilbert lets out a contemptuous snort behind me but I ignore it.

The girl, I can now see, is older than I thought, for her face bears the lines of experience. Beneath them, though, I think she might have once been pretty, and the boy looks much like her.

'Are you lost?' I say. 'Or do you need shelter?'

The girl looks up at me. 'Not lost, m'lady, but somewhere dry to sleep'd be welcome.' Master Wragge clears his throat noisily, but I again ignore him. The girl, though, lets the hood of her threadbare cloak fall across her face. She shivers and withdraws into the cloak, though I suspect it is providing little warmth.

But the boy coughs and puts out a hand to touch my arm.

'M'lady?' he says, in a whisper.

I bend down and smile at him. 'Yes, child?'

His eyes are bright and he directs his gaze at mine. Though he's a lot older, his look reminds me of my darling little Hugh, with his bold eyes and the firm set of his chin. I find myself enchanted by his courage and nod at him to speak.

'Ma and me need work too, m'lady. Anything'll do.'

Master Wragge gives a loud harrumph. 'This is too much, my lady! We are not a charity, to take in any beggar that comes knocking at our door.'

I spin round. 'We, Master Wragge, *we*?' I keep control of my voice despite my fury at the man's arrogance. 'You are not the master of this house, but I am its mistress! How dare you presume to judge how this house will treat the poor and needy who come to us for help.'

Gilbert Wragge narrows his eyes and sets his mouth in a hard line, clearly incensed that I have spoken to him so in the face of all the kitchen servants. And they indeed, I can see, are exchanging smiles with one another.

I give orders that mother and son – Emma and Tom – are found a place to sleep, and given a meal and some clean clothes. I tell Nicholas that, when they have rested, he is to put both to work in the kitchens. I know these poor cottars will do nothing to solve the cook's immediate problems, and I fancy I see a grimace briefly cross his sweaty face, but then he shrugs and nods and, muttering 'As you will, m'lady,' turns back to his work.

Master Wragge, too, has no choice but to accept my orders, though I suspect he will complain to his master that I have undermined his authority. Ralph, I think, will chastise me for my actions, but I deem the reprimand a fair price to pay for the light I saw in young Tom's eyes and the strange feeling I have that God has sent this child to me.



Only weeks later it is obvious to anyone how much bonnier Tom and his mother have become. My maid, Alice, is an incorrigible gossip and cannot help but tell me what drove Emma to Burleigh's doors.

'She's had an horrible time, m'lady,' she says, as we walk together in the garden, away from eavesdropping ears. 'Her parents died when she was fourteen, but Emma soon married a good man, a carpenter. He was Tom's father, but he died, leaving Emma alone with her baby. But a so-called friend of his, a mason, twice Emma's age, took her in, seeming to be kind. But he treated her worse than a servant, beating her day in day out.'

'Poor girl!' I say. 'So she ran away from him?'

She shakes her head. ‘No, m’lady. He was always getting into brawls and was killed in a fight. Without him, Emma’d nowhere to live, and decided to throw herself and her child on the mercy of her lord.’

I sigh. ‘I am so glad I was there when they came, else they would have been sent away. Young Tom seems such a bright little boy. It is terrible to think they could have perished, frozen from the cold or drowned in a ditch.’

Alice nods. ‘You did the right thing, m’lady. Everyone loves Tom – except old Wragge of course. He’s forever finding fault and cuffing his ear for no reason at all.’

I grimace. ‘I do not think I can do much about him. Sir Ralph is much displeased with me for making Master Wragge look a fool in front of the servants, so I had best not interfere again.’

XI.

I walk every day in the gardens. I do not mind the weather: rain or shine, it makes no difference. I just dress fittingly. When it is fine, my mother sometimes comes with me, but today is cool, with dark clouds and a brisk breeze, and Mama is feeling out of sorts.

‘Neither should you go walking, Joanna,’ she says, crotchety from a pain in her belly occasioned, she insists, by some fowl that Nicholas failed to cook properly. ‘Just look at the size of you! It is not suitable, nor safe, for you to go walking alone.’

I shrug. My time is near and it is true my belly has swollen into a great hummock that threatens at every moment to topple me forward. But I feel full of energy and dismiss Mama’s concerns.

‘I shall be fine,’ I say, patting her hand. ‘I will keep to the main paths, within earshot if I need to call for help.’

She flicks away my hand. ‘Goodness knows what Ralph would say. You are putting his son in danger!’

I shrug again. ‘I am not, Mama. I just need some air. I will be back before you know it.’

I do not of course keep to the main paths – I never do. It is autumn and, despite a rather cool summer, the orchard is burgeoning with fruit and I love to walk among the pears and apples, picking a fruit here and there and sinking my teeth into its crisp, juicy flesh. Mama of

course does not approve of eating fruit straight from the tree, but as she is not here I indulge myself.

But I am not alone in the orchard, for young Tom emerges from behind an apple tree, carrying an enormous basket. It is the first time I have seen the boy to speak to since he and his mother arrived. Ralph was so very angry with me for overruling Wragge's authority, I decided to keep my distance from both Tom and Emma. But there is no one else around, so I go over and ask him why he is here.

'To pick some pears for cook, m'lady,' he says, keeping his eyes down.

'Cook must trust you, Tom, to give you such a responsible task.'

He lifts his eyes then and smiles. 'Yes, m'lady. And I'm glad of it.'

Then he tells me how much he likes being out of doors and especially in the orchard. He loves trees, he says, and I think how strange and charming it is that a boy so young should be excited by trees rather than games or fighting. Despite an initial reticence to talk – proper enough in a servant's conversation with his mistress – Tom soon becomes less guarded, and the brightness and boldness I saw in his eyes that first evening bubble up again and he chats happily about his mother and their life at Burleigh. I am astonished at the ease and fluency with which Tom talks – he is, after all, only ten years old and known only the fathering of a brutish man who used his fists to explain himself. Yet this boy can think, describe, and find joy in the world around him. Then I recall he is the true son of a carpenter, a good man, Alice said – perhaps that is the reason.

As we talk, I help him pick the fruit, though I find it hard to reach up without losing my balance, with my hummock pulling me over. Once or twice I topple forward and have to put my hand against the tree trunk to stop myself from falling. I must look comical, for little Tom loses his reticence altogether and collapses into giggles. If I were Mama, or indeed my sister Isabella, I would be deeply affronted that a servant boy should find his lady's indignity so amusing, and would box his ears. But I am not them. Instead, I find myself giggling with this charming child, enjoying his company, oblivious to the many reasons that my mother would undoubtedly find for the unsuitability of such behaviour.

At length I leave Tom to fill his basket and continue with my walk. I want to go to the edge of the orchard and look beyond it, where fields of grazing cattle and sheep, and the forest where Ralph hunts for deer, are laid out in a long wide arc that seems to stretch for miles. I know well enough that, just at the edge, the ground falls away steeply, making a sort of chalky wall, put there to stop the cattle getting into the orchard. But, as I pass the last few

trees, looking up at the hanging fruit instead of where I am walking, I bring my foot down and meet nothing but air, and cannot stop myself tumbling heavily into the ditch below.

At first, the breath is knocked out of me and I am confused by what has happened. But soon I realise I cannot move – I feel like one of those great black beetles that has flipped onto its back and cannot right itself – and I am frightened I will not be able to get up. Then I become truly alarmed when sharp pains shoot through my belly and I have the shocking thought that I might give birth here in this ditch, alone. I begin to weep at my helplessness, and at my foolishness for ignoring both my mother's warnings and my own sense of responsibility.

But then I think of little Tom – how long ago was it that I left him? Perhaps he will have gone back to the kitchen by now with his great basket of pears? Or maybe he has lingered, still enjoying being out of doors? Hoping against hope, I take a deep breath and shout as loudly as I possibly can.

But Tom does not come and I weep again, thinking he must have left the orchard and there is no one else to hear my calls. Even so, I continue to cry out, though my voice gets weaker with the effort of calling from so awkward a position. A long time seems to pass. I close my eyes, from exhaustion and despair, as the chance of rescue seems hopeless, and I lay there unmoving yet wracked with pain and discomfort, unable even to push my skirts down to cover my legs.

When I hear a small voice above me, I imagine I am dreaming, but open my eyes to see the concerned little face of Tom peering down at me from the top of the ditch.

'M'lady?' he is saying. 'What's 'appened?'

'Where have you been, Tom?' I say, sounding peevish, though I am relieved beyond measure to see him.

Tom goes a bit red and shuffles his feet. 'I was watching the bees, m'lady, and the butterflies, on the rotten fruit. They're so pretty.'

I cannot help myself but smile. 'Oh, Tom, how glad I am you *were* watching them, and did not run straight back to the kitchen with your basket of pears.'

He thinks a moment, as if confused, and then says, 'I knew I'd get into trouble for being late back, but the butterflies were so pretty.'

'And so they are, Tom. But, for now, you can surely see I need your help?'

He looks down at me and I can tell that only at that moment does he notice the precise nature of my predicament, for he blushes crimson and turns his face away. For my skirts are

in such disarray I think the poor child must have seen, not just the white flesh of the tops of my legs, but also the dark hair between them.

Tom shifts his gaze to somewhere above my head, out to the fields of cows. 'How can I help, m'lady? I'm too little to lift you up.'

'Yes, of course you are, Tom, but you are not too little to run back to the house and ask Master Wragge to bring some men and a litter, so they can pull me out of here.'

XII.

As Alice runs down to the kitchen to report her missing mistress, she stops by the doorway to eavesdrop on the commotion going on within. Peering round the opening into the room, she sees Nicholas the cook, red-faced and furious, shouting at little Tom, berating him for being late, and being muddy, and coming back without the pears he'd been sent to pick. As he shouts, he boxes the child's ears. Then Master Wragge grabs one of those poor smarting ears and looms over the boy. Little Tom is weeping, trying both to wriggle from the seneschal's cruel fingers, and to explain himself. But Master Wragge is not listening.

Alice then sees her chance to stop Tom's pain and rushes in, flapping her hands and shouting at the seneschal to let Tom go.

Gilbert Wragge does not let go, but turns his dark and furrowed brow towards the brave little maid. 'How dare you!' His voice is low and harsh.

But Alice just shakes her head and flaps some more. 'No, sir, please, sir, you don't understand. It's her ladyship – she's not back from her walk, and it's been hours since she left.'

When Tom hears this, he makes a frantic wriggle and escapes the seneschal. Then, wiping his teary face along his sleeve, he shouts. 'I told you so!' And he spills out his story all in a rush, how her ladyship has had an accident and he has run back to get help, and they were all making things worse.

He begins to cry. 'She needs help fast, else she'll be having her baby in the ditch. So you'd better do something quick!'

The seneschal cannot resist boxing poor Tom's ears again for his insolence, but then rounds up some men and finds a litter, and orders Tom to take him to their mistress.

XIII.

It is getting dark by the time Gilbert Wragge turns up with half a dozen men. Despite my discomfort, I am angry to see he has Tom by the ear, and the boy has clearly been crying, so I guess the seneschal – or perhaps Nicholas – has punished him. But I am in no position to protest at the child's treatment, for I am weak and light-headed, and want only to get back to the manor and my bed. I try not to think about the indignity of my position – it was bad enough for Tom to see it, but for all these men to see their mistress in such disarray and, even worse, for the seneschal to see me so humiliated, is deeply mortifying. Yet, despite my embarrassment, my principal concern is how angry Ralph will be, for I know he considers my insistence on walking out of doors in all weathers both unbecoming and headstrong.

When, at last, I am lying upon the litter, a warm blanket thrown over me to staunch my shivering, I pluck at Gilbert's sleeve, gesturing him to bend down so I can whisper in his ear.

'Please, Master Wragge, I beg you not to tell Sir Ralph of this.'

Gilbert nods and assures me of his loyalty, but I then bite my lip. I must have lost my wits, lying there so long, for why I imagine he will keep my counsel I cannot imagine, for of course he is loyal only to his master.

The men carry me to my chamber, and Alice and two of the women servants help put me to bed. Now I at least am safe, I am forced to confess how quiet it has become inside my belly. The babe that, only hours before, was apparently trying to kick its way out, has become very still. I am certain it has died.

Mama of course is full of self-righteousness and chastisement, dismissing my contrite tears. But her anger is nothing compared to that of my husband. Ralph has been away for a few days and when he returns home to news of his wife's foolhardiness, he storms into my chamber, shouting at Alice to get out. He strides over to the bed, where I lie still weak from my ordeal and inconsolable at the thought that I have killed my own child. But Ralph has no sympathy for my frailty or my misery. Looming over me, he thumps his fist down on the bed.

‘How dare you, madam, disobey my instructions!’ he cries. ‘You stupid, irresponsible vixen, risking the life of my unborn son!’

Then he raises a hand high above his head and, for one terrifying moment, I think he is going to punch me, but when he brings it down again it is merely to slap my face – a punishment I feel I probably deserve.

When Ralph storms out again, Alice creeps back in. She bathes my face with cool water and mops up my tears. Then she sits on the bed and tells me what happened when Tom got back to the manor after finding me in the ditch.

‘How glad I was to see him again!’ I say.

‘And to see Gilbert Wragge?’ says Alice, shooting me a mischievous girlish grin.

I cannot help grinning too.

‘Well, yes, because at least I knew then I was not going to have my baby in the ditch.’

But saying that brings a hard lump to my throat and I start to cry again. ‘But perhaps I am not going to have my baby at all.’ I turn my face into my pillow, to stifle my heaving sobs.

Alice leans over and strokes my hair. ‘Try not to worry, m’lady. Perhaps you haven’t lost him? They’re tough little creatures, babies.’

I know she is trying to reassure me, but I cannot be comforted and soak my pillow with my guilty tears before eventually sleep brings me relief.



The next morning, it is still early when Alice bustles into my chamber, insisting I get up and walk, to loosen my limbs. I rise most unwillingly from my bed.

‘You’re a bully,’ I say, grimacing.

But Alice just shakes her head and tuts like an old crone. ‘It’s for your own good, m’lady.’

I cannot help smiling at her boldness and persistence – she is, after all, my servant, and still a child – but this is one of those times when she seems much more like a friend. In truth, my body is stiff and sore from my shoulders to my toes, and simply heaving myself out of bed is a struggle. But, with Alice’s help, I haul myself to my feet and take a few difficult, breathless steps from bed to window. I lean against the wall, gazing out across the orchard towards the edge of the field where I fell, and trying to catch my breath. For long moments, I ache so much I cannot summon the fortitude to walk back to my bed.

But my courage returns, and the pain and discomfort seem to melt away, when I feel the baby somersault inside me and then deliver three sharp kicks against my belly wall. I gasp and crumple with the shock, but then cry out with joy.

‘Oh, Alice! It is alive! The baby is alive. Look.’ Through the thin fabric of my chemise, it is easy to see the bulge where the little foot is pushing against my belly. Alice grins at me and I, smiling and weeping, take her hand and squeeze it. Then I place her fingers against the lump, as it bulges time and again, and she cannot help but laugh at the strangeness of it.

I know my time is near and, although I agree with Alice I will walk every day around my chamber, I will not now leave the room until the baby is delivered. Alice and the women servants attend me, and Mama comes daily to give me advice I do not want.

Two weeks later Margaret is born, none the worse for her inadvertent part in my recklessness. She comes quickly and easily, and is so full of life I forget all about my foolishness.

XIV.

Once the tedious rituals of lying in and churching are done and I am ready to re-join the world, I ask Alice to bring Emma and Tom to my chamber. Emma looks scared as Alice ushers her into the room, but I gesture to her to sit down in the chair opposite mine, beside the blazing fire, and for Tom to stand at her side. The young woman, though certainly rosier-faced than when she first came here, is still pale of spirit, and perches on the edge of the chair, her eyes directed at her lap, where her fingers chafe at the folds of her brown woollen kirtle.

‘You should be proud of your son, Emma,’ I say, giving her a broad smile she does not see. But then she raises her eyes and I smile again.

‘Yes, m’lady,’ she says, with a listless nod. ‘He’s a good boy.’

‘Oh, Emma, Tom is far more than a good boy. He is a brave, splendid boy!’

She allows herself a weak smile and nods again.

I turn to Tom. ‘I have something for you, Tom.’ I take a small tool from my purse and hold it out to him. He hesitates for a moment before stepping forward and taking it.

‘For me, m’lady?’ he says, and turns it over in his hands. ‘A knife?’

‘It is a special knife, Tom. I have decided you are going to learn how to use it, and all the other tools the gardeners use at Burleigh.’

‘I’m to be a gardener?’ he says, looking at his mother in seeming disbelief. His bright eyes shine and he looks so delighted I cannot help but laugh.

‘So, young Tom, you are pleased with my decision. With your love of trees and butterflies, I thought it more suitable for you than kitchen work.’

The seneschal, however, does not think my decision suitable at all and is infuriated, yet again, that I have made it over his head. Mama also thinks it most unsuitable that I should show preference to such a lowly child.

As for Ralph, he is aggrieved that the boy has, as he puts it, wormed himself into my affections. But of course Tom has done nothing of the sort, and my decision to move him into the gardens is for no reason other than my appreciation of his courage.



Ralph is annoyed, and absurdly astonished, to discover his first child is not a boy. When Alice brings Margaret to show him, he takes one look at her and snorts.

‘I was expecting a son,’ he says, his unbelieving eyes staring at his daughter, his lips an ugly pout.

I am saddened by his disappointment and try to hearten him by pointing out how pretty the child is, but he is unmoved.

‘Take her away!’ he says to Alice, ‘I have no use for girls.’

Ralph does not come to my bed until I have been churched, but one night soon after he appears unexpectedly in my chamber. At first I am vexed that he should come to me so soon, for I am not ready for it, either in my body or my mind. But he makes such tender love to me, it is just as he was when we first were married – carrying me to the bed, gliding his fingertips gently over my skin, covering me with soft kisses and whispering words of love in my ear. When he has coaxed me into submission, he takes me with passion, and I do not resist.

‘You will make sure it is a boy this time?’ he says, smiling broadly at me, as we lay naked side by side. I smile back and caress the still taut skin of his belly. Yet, despite his gentleness and apparent affection, I know this is not a teasing enquiry but a stern command.

I am delighted when I realise Ralph's seed has taken root, but I do not tell him at once, not wanting his nightly visits to stop too soon. When I do tell him, just as before, he takes me in his arms, kisses me and says he will not come to my bed again.

I tilt my head. 'So as not to harm your son?' I say and he nods, smiling.

He takes my chin in his hand and fixes his eyes on mine. 'And you, my lady, will please do your part by not gallivanting around outdoors.' Although his eyes twinkle as he says it, again I know it is an order, though not one I will necessarily obey.

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XV.

Edmund comes into the world in August, as lustily, though not as prettily, as his sister. But, as far as Ralph is concerned, prettiness is of little consequence. Most notably, he has a son.

I wonder if, now we have a boy, Ralph will no longer bother making love to me. I have known for some time – thanks to Mama – that, while he has shunned my bed for the supposed safety of his unborn son, he has found consolation between the legs of other women, most of them our servant girls.

'Some of them are willing, or obedient enough,' says Mama, 'to let him take them whenever it pleases him, in the buttery, a barn, or even sometimes in a bed.' She grins and I am astonished to see how unperturbed she is by this, while I am far less sanguine.

'But it is normal,' she says, waving her hand in the air. 'A man must meet his needs, Joanna.'

She smirks, and I can hardly believe this is my mother speaking, the world authority on unsuitability. I am aggrieved at what she is telling me, but I suppose she is right. Anyway, I have no choice but to accept that it has happened.

'But, surely,' Mama goes on, 'he will want to safeguard his line by fathering another son?'

'Do you really think so?' I say, at once forgetting about the servant girls and remembering Ralph's tender kisses, his tantalising caresses. I soon find my body longing for them again.



Some weeks after Edmund's birth, Ralph is enjoying an evening of drunken carousing, following one of his more exhilarating and triumphant escapades. I join him and his cronies for an hour or so, but I have no love of revelry and soon retreat to my bed.

It is still dark, though I can see a trace of dawn's light through the shutters, when I wake suddenly to find Ralph blundering around in my chamber. I have no time to protest before he takes down his hose and braies and, flinging the bedcovers off me, pushes my chemise brusquely up to my waist. Then he just takes me, without any kisses or caresses. I plead with him to treat me more gently, but he seems not to hear. He is inebriated and out of control.

His brutality leaves me confused, raw and resentful. I do not understand how this drunken boor is the same man who once made such tender love to me.

But, next morning, his memory of what occurred seems hazy.

'My darling Joanna,' he says, taking my hands in his and kissing them over and over, 'if I hurt you, please forgive me. What was I thinking of?' He swears upon my eyes it will never happen again.

And the next few weeks see the return of the Ralph I married. We share again those lovely nights I longed for. But of course, there is a price to pay: soon I am with child again, and my husband once more spends his nights elsewhere.

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XVI.

Our fourth child – and third son – Anthony, is as lusty and full of life as his two older brothers, Edmund and Giles – and indeed his sister Margaret. After the usual tedious weeks following the baby's birth, I find myself looking forward once more to Ralph's return to my bed, eager as ever to resume our lovemaking.

It is late one fine May evening when Ralph comes to my chamber. The evening is deliciously warm and I am sitting on the window seat, with the window open, so I can enjoy the breeze wafting the scent of early honeysuckle into the room. I stand up when he enters and go towards him.

It is a curious thing that, although I do not like Ralph very much – his violent and boorish treatment of his tenants and his neighbours appals me – nonetheless I am still eager for the sweet press of his lips and the touch of his caressing fingers. Sometimes I feel my body is betraying me by responding to his charms, when in truth he is a most unpleasant man.

But I cannot help myself.

So I come forward smiling, expecting him to take me in his arms, as he has before. But Ralph's arms stay by his side. He gestures me to return to the window seat and sits down beside me. He does not speak for a long while, and I find myself trembling as I wait. At length he takes my hand, but does not kiss it.

'Joanna, you have given me three fine sons, enough to secure the Burleigh line.' I smile, glad that he is pleased with me. 'So I am sure, my dear, you have had enough of carrying babies in your belly and bringing them to birth.'

It is a statement, not a question. And I realise with a sinking heart the implication of his words.

'It is true that pregnancy and childbirth are burdensome,' I say, my voice shaky with disquiet and at once I wish I had not said it.

Ralph grins. 'I thought as much. The time has come, lady—'

'For what?' I whisper.

He purses his lips. 'For me to release you from your burden. I will miss our nights together, but I must no longer impose my desires upon you.'

I shake my head. 'But they are not an imposition.' My heartbeat quickens with my grasp of what this means.

He stands up and lets go of my hand. 'But they lead to babies, and we are agreed we need no more.'

He turns to go, but hesitates and takes my hand again. 'You have done your duty in the marriage bed, my dear, and now are free. You can spend more time in your precious garden.' He grins again and then bends down to kiss my hand, first the palm and then the fingertips. How could he be so cruel!

He turns again and this time reaches the door. 'Sleep well, my dear,' he says, closing the door behind him.

XVII.

Alice is helping in the kitchen. Sir Ralph is giving a dinner for his cronies – a men-only affair – served with even more dishes and courses than usual and a copious amount of wine. The servers are running around in great agitation, so Alice has offered to help by putting food onto the serving dishes. She enjoys making the dishes pretty, though she suspects the master cares little how they look.

Being there also gives her the chance to see more of Robert Spycer, if only as he rushes back and forth between kitchen and hall. Anyway, she hopes they can snatch a few moments alone together later, once all the dishes have been cleared.

It is hours before Robert finishes his work and is given leave by Master Wragge for a short break before it is time to bed down in the hall with the other men.

As always, Alice waits for him in the garden. She sits on a turf seat beneath a bower of sweet-smelling honeysuckle – one of her ladyship's favourite spots. It is dark when Robert comes to find her, though a bright moon lights his way. But the seat is in deep shadow, so they can embrace and kiss without being seen.

They can talk in private too, and tonight Robert is bursting to tell Alice something he overheard in the hall, for he knows how much she loves to gossip, especially about her master.

After a decent spell of kissing and fondling Alice's little breasts – she allows him that but nothing more – he whispers in her ear. 'You'll never guess.'

She reties the lacing of her kirtle. 'What?'

'I heard the master tell one of his cronies, joking like, he don't fancy her ladyship no more, now her body's old and flabby.'

Alice gasps. 'The pig!' Then she flaps at her face to cool her temper. 'How dare he say that.'

'Well, he did. Then he laughed and said, these days, he prefers younger, firmer flesh. And his friend guffawed and banged the table with his mazer, and said "especially little whores, eh, Ralph?"'

And the master guffawed back. "Ah yes," he said, "they give you what you want, and no little difficulties afterwards."

Alice growls. 'The horrible, horrible pig!'

Robert wonders if he should not have after all told Alice. 'You won't tell her ladyship, will you, Ali?'

Alice's voice rises. 'No!' Robert puts his hand across her mouth, and she giggles, nods and pulls his hand away. Then she whispers. 'No, 'course not. My poor lady – she don't need to know.'

XVIII.

Tom has blossomed along with the burgeoning flowerbeds and climbing roses. He is fourteen now and a fine-looking lad. He reminds me of Peter, not only the spark in his eyes but also his appearance, with his fair wavy hair and tall, strong body. He is not as handsome as Peter, but has the same blue eyes and straight nose, and his cheerful temperament ensures everybody likes him.

Poor Emma has been ill for months, with a disease that has wasted her to a skeleton, and wracked her with constant pain and a perpetual blood-spewing cough. She dies on the most delightful of spring days, just when it was getting warmer. Tom is so distraught that the confident young man he had been growing into slips back into a whimpering child. My heart aches so much for his anguish I want to hold him in my arms.

But of course I cannot.

I can, though, help him to regain his confidence. I think of ways of spending time with him, so I can encourage his evident desire to learn. Although Burleigh has a team of gardeners, I myself work often in the garden, tending to the herbs, pruning the roses, dead-heading the flowers in the borders, tasks the men feel are too dainty for them and are glad enough for me to do. I love being out of doors, particularly in the Italian garden. But it is not fitting for me to carry my own basket of prunings, so I ask for Tom to accompany me. He comes gladly, and I teach him all I have learned about flowers and plants, and sometimes I bring with me the book that belonged to Peter's mother, so I can show him the pictures and perhaps teach him his letters, just as Agnes' uncle, the priest William, once taught her. He's captivated by the book, but passes over the pages of flowers and herbs, resting his eyes on those that show the trees.

‘What do the words say?’ he asks, and I know them so well, I can recite them by heart.

*Trees should be planted or vines trained, so the lawn may have
a delightful and cooling shade...sweet trees with perfumed flowers
and agreeable shade, like grapevines, pears, apples, sweet bay...*

‘I like trees best,’ he says, and runs his finger carefully over the pictures on the page.

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XIX.

When Ralph set me aside – in practice if not in name – I took his advice and spent much more of my time in the garden. I also decided to give more attention to my children – my remaining atte Hyl children as well as our four young Burleighs. And I do so, despite the fact that the Burleighs, and particularly Edmund, seem to be heir to the worst aspects of their father’s nature, for they are ever argumentative and rude. Of course they are my children too, but they are so different from their atte Hyl siblings, Alexander, Eleanor and Eloise, who exhibit their father’s high spirits, but also a kindly nature, in everything they do.

Yet, of my three atte Hyl children, it is only the girls I am allowed to nurture. For now Alexander has turned fourteen, his stepfather insists he accompanies him wherever he goes – and that means when he engages in encounters with his neighbours.

So now I see little of my eldest son though, when I do, he still bears that stoic look that tells me he is being brave in the face of something he abhors. I do not want to shame the boy by belittling his budding manhood, but time and again I plead with Ralph not to involve him in his skirmishes. But he dismisses my fears.

‘He is nearly a man, Joanna,’ he says, rolling his eyes. ‘You cannot keep him clinging to your skirts for ever.’



April is chilly but mostly without rain, and I wrap myself up warm and spend every dry day in the garden. Today, with Tom’s help, I am weeding the flowerbeds and herbers, and dividing clumps of primroses to multiply their numbers. Tom and I are laughing quietly

together, absurdly amused by the huge number of little primrose plants we are creating and wondering where on earth we are going to put them all, when suddenly a cry goes up from one of the other gardeners that the master has returned. I look up and strain my eyes across the wide expanse of garden towards the long winding track that leads up from the village and through the manor grounds. I am relieved Ralph has returned and excited that my darling Alexander is home again at last.

But there are only four riders, their mounts not galloping but walking slow-paced towards the castle gate – and none of them is riding Alexander’s small grey palfrey.

I turn to Tom and, grabbing his sleeve, shake his arm. ‘Look, Tom, look,’ I say, feeling the panic rising. ‘Can you see only four? Oh, sweet Mary, where are all the others?’

I do not wait for Tom to answer, but lift my skirts and start to run towards the gate, realising as I run that Ralph’s black charger is among the four. I reach the gate long before the riders and, for a few moments, stand there, pacing back and forth. But it seems Ralph is in no hurry to greet me, and, unable to bear waiting, I set off down the track towards him. As I approach he holds up his hand to bring the pathetic little troupe to a halt, and, swinging himself down stiffly from the saddle, he hands the reins to one of the men and comes over to me. His gait is slow, his right leg dragging. His face is grey and I can see blood on his tunic and his cloak.

‘Where are the others?’ I say. My heart is thumping and I feel very cold. ‘Where’s Alexander?’

To my astonishment, Ralph throws himself onto his knees in front of me and bows his head. His whole body is quivering.

‘Tell me,’ I say, choking on the words, as my heart tightens and my breath comes in short and painful gasps.

Ralph shakes his still bowed head. ‘Alexander is coming,’ he says in an unaccustomed whisper. ‘Robert and Simon are bringing them all home. We four came on ahead.’ And for the first time ever I hear my husband sob.

He stretches out his hands and tries to grasp my knees, but I recoil from the prospect of his touch and step back sharply, so that he falls forward slightly and has to recover his balance. He looks up then, and his face has darkened and his eyes narrowed. Then he tosses his head and hauls himself to his feet. Straightening his back, he fixes his eyes on me.

‘I was seeking your forgiveness, lady,’ he says, in a petulant tone. ‘But I see you are in no mood for compassion.’ He turns back towards his charger and snatches the reins out of the squire’s hands.

I am shaking my head in disbelief, and my timorous reticence flies away.

‘Compassion!’ I cry. ‘Compassion? For *you*...?’ I run at him and hammer at his breast with my fists, ‘...for you, who have murdered my beloved son!’

Hot tears then burst from my eyes and a long-drawn-out wail erupts from my mouth. As the horror of what I now realise he has done sinks in, I recoil for the second time from contact with this man I now loathe beyond measure. I snatch back my fists and reel away from him, my arms flailing wildly.

Then someone is at my side. It is Alice, with her arms around me, holding me, trying to calm me. I submit like a lamb as she leads me away, back towards the castle gate, into the house and up to my chamber, where she lays me down upon my bed and draws the counterpane over me. Then she sits by my pillow and, as I sob, she strokes my hair and bids me sleep. And, at length, fatigue and oblivion overtake me.

How can I forgive Ralph his most devastating irresponsibility? I cannot, and do not. The enmity between us becomes so bitter I wonder if I can continue to fulfil my duties as the mistress of his household and the mother of his children.

Mama, of course, insists I have no option, if only for the sake of my two last atte Hyl children, for Eleanor and Eloise. And, even though I rail against it in my head, I accept her advice once more and steel myself to life as mistress of Burleigh.

I think often of my first-born son. We bury his poor broken body in Burleigh’s pretty churchyard, which is set on a slight rise and has a fine view out over the estate to the forest beyond. I insist Ralph builds a chantry chapel and hires a priest to sing masses in perpetuity for Alexander’s soul – and he does not demur. It is a price he has to pay for my continuing acquiescence.

I hope that causing the death of my son, and of so many of his men, might persuade my husband to put an end to his belligerent behaviour, but it does not. After a brief pause for the observance of the rituals, and to pay some sort of respect to the families of his dead retainers, Ralph simply replenishes his company and resumes hostilities.

I am sickened by it – by him – but I determine to pay no heed: I have my life to live, and the lives of my children – all my remaining children – to nurture. That has to be enough for me, and Ralph Burleigh can go to the Devil.

XX.

It is Mama's view that I spend too much of my time in the garden – and with Tom.

'You have set that boy above his station. All the other servants resent it.'

I am surprised by that and wonder if it is really true. As I often do, I ask Alice what she knows. She denies the truth of Mama's words.

'One person does, and that's Master Wragge. Not that I know why.' She pulls a face and shrugs. 'But everyone else likes Tom – they always have – and they don't mind at all when he helps you out.'

I nod. It is of course what I want to hear.

But Mama has something else to say.

'Perhaps that boy has supplanted Alexander in your heart?' she says, in a rather aggrieved tone. 'Can you forget your own son so quickly?'

I round on her. 'How dare you, Mama! How could he possibly take Alexander's place? It is a ridiculous notion and utterly untrue. Alexander is ever in my heart, as are my other lost little ones, and their father. It is wicked and unworthy of you to suggest otherwise.'

Mama gives a little shrug and purses her lips.

Later, when I am alone, I force myself to think more about what Tom means to me. I realise that, despite him being quite close in age to Alexander, I do not think of him as a son. Rather, I see him as a new embodiment of my beloved Peter – and I catch my breath as that notion forms itself inside my head.

Tom is like Peter in so many ways – in appearance and manner, but also in his eagerness to learn and to better himself. I see in Tom the same scruffy boy I saw in Peter all those years ago when Papa first brought him home. I recall, with shame, how disdainful I was, how condescending, towards Peter, and how, in the years that followed – years in which I grew from a girl into a woman – my disdain turned utterly around and was transformed into the most passionate love.

I stand at the window of my chamber, looking out over the orchard Tom loves so much, across the fields and meadows towards the dense, dark forest that is Burleigh's furthest boundary to the west, behind which the sun is setting in a pink and orange glow. I watch until the glow has faded and the sky becomes a counterpane of darkest blue, pinpricked with the first of the evening stars, and then I close the shutters and prepare myself for bed.

I draw the curtains close around the bed, and pull the blanket over me. It is chilly, and I long for the comforting warmth of another's body. As I lie unsleeping, I try to conjure Peter's face, out there in the dark, before my eyes, and am grief-stricken to find that it refuses to take shape. Peter keeps slipping away from me but, in his place, unbidden, Tom's face appears, smiling.

Confused and weeping, I turn and bury my face in the pillow.

Next morning, I determine to avoid seeing Tom. I will still spend much of my time in the garden, pottering about, snipping off dead flowers and tying in rampant vines and roses. But I will not ask Tom to help me.

He has plenty of other work to do.



The Italian garden – a much more extensive copy of the one I first created for Peter at our house in Southampton – is growing well, according to the guidance in our beloved book.

*Between the herbs and turf, at the edge of the lawn set square,
there should be a higher bench of turf flowering and lovely and,
somewhere in the middle, seats so that a man may sit down there
to take his rest when his senses need refreshment.*

Sometimes, when I am in “the middle” of my garden, I try to conjure a picture in my mind of *my* man – my only true love – resting on the seat I have put there. He smiles at me and nods approval, and I smile back, catching my mournful tears with my fingertips.

But I have had a notion for some time to create within the garden a covered walkway: a tunnel made from willow or hazel and planted with vines and white roses. At its centre, there would be a secret shady arbour with a soft turf seat, and more roses of yellow, white and deepest red and sweet-smelling honeysuckle to clamber over.

I smile to myself as I wonder if such a shady structure is quite needed for our English summers, but I like to imagine my garden is in Genoa, with the sun and the warmth and Peter's arms enfolding me.

The tunnel arbour is evidently a project for Tom. For, though he is not yet seventeen, he has turned his hand for years to many of the building tasks needed in the garden, laying paths, constructing walls and building pools and fountains. And he is proving to be most

skilled – more so than any of the others – at making structures out of wood: fences, gates and garden seats, and raised beds for herbs and flowers.

I noticed years ago how much Tom enjoyed working with wood, remembering his own father was a carpenter. I knew then I should have him apprenticed to a master carpenter, so he could learn the trade and cultivate his skill. One day I asked him if he would like that, and it was obvious from the light in his eyes and the grin on his face that he would. He was about thirteen then. But, to my shame, I did nothing to achieve it. I let time pass, and Tom grew older, beyond the age when any master craftsman would take him on.

I suppose the truth is I could not bring myself to let him go.

I ask Old Ned, the head gardener, if I can borrow Tom for a few days, to do some carpentry. My desire for the arbour prevails over any lingering anxiety I might be harbouring. I convince myself there is no impropriety in a mistress asking one of her servants to carry out a task.

Mama, though, takes pleasure in trying to shatter my delusions. She returns to her homily about the servants.

‘You creep about together in quiet places, away from the general hubbub of the manor.’

Her gossip mongering exasperates me. ‘But our meetings are not secret. We are always in the Italian garden – how is that away from the manor?’

Mama gives me one of her irritating little shrugs. ‘What I have heard, is that even the servants suspect more to your relationship than that of mistress and servant.’

When I later ask Alice if Mama is right, she blushes and prevaricates a little before admitting that perhaps there is some talk in the kitchens that Tom, young as he is, is cuckolding his master.

‘But most of them care little for his lordship, m’lady,’ she says, keeping her face averted, ‘and even if they do think that, they’ll keep it to themselves.’

I nod and give her a thin smile. Ralph seems oblivious to everything that happens on his Burleigh estate, apart from his plans to defraud his neighbours and the feasts he provides to distract them from his trickery. I doubt he would bother to listen to his servants’ gossip.

‘But, m’lady,’ says Alice, looking up, ‘I think you should be wary of Master Wragge. I’m sure he’s beginning to pick up the gossip, and he won’t keep it to himself.’

XXI.

September is usually my favourite month, but this year it is wet, after a miserable, drenching August. Old Ned is worrying about the orchard's fruit, which has swelled with the rain but is now rotting on the trees. He frets and fusses over whether to try picking in the wet or wait for a dry day, and for days cannot decide. But then the rain eases and a few dry days in the middle of the month give him and the gardeners the chance they need to harvest what good fruit is left.

It is a harvest marred by tragedy, when a cottar boy, sent up a tree, as boys always are, to pick the topmost fruit, loses his grip on a branch still slippery from the rain. Tom who, with his friend John Reede, is in charge of the youngsters come in from the village to help with the harvest, blames himself for the boy's death.

The next day, when everyone stops for dinner, I see Tom slip away. I follow and find him, as I thought I might, hidden in the ditch that I fell into almost exactly six years ago.

'Help me down, Tom,' I say, looking down at him from the top of the ditch. He looks alarmed but takes my hand and I begin to climb down. My skirts get in the way and I slip and fall against him. He grasps my waist to steady me and, flushing crimson, quickly lets me go. But Tom's body is now that of a man, and the act of falling, and of being touched, prompts a stirring I have not felt for years. I cannot help fixing Tom's eyes with mine.

For a few moments he returns my gaze, before lowering his face. His ears are pink.

We sit down on the chalky surface and, checking myself, I return to my original purpose of trying to console him about the accident in the orchard. But I am unable to ignore what I am feeling and find myself alluding to my own accident and how he saved me. I can see Tom is remembering it too, for he will not look at me, fixing his eyes on the distant forest. Yet his body is betraying him. I reach out and lay my hand against his thigh, and then I take his hand and draw it onto my lap. He turns and smiles boldly at me, but at the same time tries to pull his hand away. At first I will not let it go, but then I realise he must think I want something more than he is prepared to give.

'Forgive me, Tom,' I say, releasing his hand. 'I don't know what I was thinking.' I can feel a flush rising on my face and it is my turn to twist my head away.

Tom shakes his head and, saying nothing, again stares out across the fields.

We sit in silence for a long while, before Tom suddenly stands up and brushes the chalk off from his hose and tunic.

‘I must go, m’lady. They must’ve started picking again now, and I’ll be missed.’

I do not move, wanting him to stay but knowing he cannot and should not. At length I nod.

‘Yes, Tom, you must go.’

His hand is hanging at his side, close to my shoulder, and I take it again and squeeze it.

‘Do not think badly of me, Tom,’ I say, looking up at him.

He shakes his head. ‘I’d never do that, m’lady.’

He clammers up the chalk wall, then, taking my hands, shows me where to put my foot, in a little step in the wall, and pulls me up to the top of the bank. Then, with a brief nod, he walks away, back through the trees to where the picking is undoubtedly already under way.



Back in my chamber, I am sitting quietly by the fire with Eleanor. We are talking together and straining our eyes in the fading light, trying to finish the stitching of some cushions. Suddenly Mama bursts through the door, intruding without my leave as she so often does. She brusquely gestures Eleanor to go, and the child looks hurt and appeals to me to let her stay.

‘No, child,’ says Mama, her tone uncompromising. ‘I would speak to your mother in private.’

Eleanor pouts but I shrug and mouth ‘Come back later’, and she nods and leaves the room.

I sigh: Mama is undoubtedly about to regale me with her latest gossip, and indeed she plunges straight in without pleasantries or preamble.

‘You were seen!’ she says, with a dramatic toss of her head. ‘You and that peasant boy. Leaving the ha-ha.’ She is almost smirking.

‘By whom?’ I ask, but she just shrugs, and yet again I am exasperated by my mother’s evident delight in upbraiding me for my behaviour. As, it seems to me now, she always has.

‘Have you spies watching my every move, Mama?’ I say, my voice becoming shrill.

Then she definitely smirks. ‘Do not be ridiculous, Joanna. Set spies on my own daughter?’

‘Well, someone is clearly watching me.’

‘Perhaps it is your husband?’ Her eyes glitter.

I snort. ‘Ralph is away, as you well know.’

She tosses her head again. ‘It would hardly be Ralph himself who kept a watch. But maybe that slippery seneschal of his?’

I try not to let my sudden fear show on my face. If Gilbert Wragge is truly watching me, he will no doubt pass his intelligence to his master, and will not scruple to paint what he thought he saw in the blackest of colours.

When Mama flounces from the room, saying she wants to lie down before supper, I follow her out at once, intending to go in search of Eleanor. She is a sweet, gentle child, and I find her company relaxing as well as agreeable. But, to my surprise, I do not have far to look, for she is just at the top of the solar stairs, about to descend. I call to her and she turns, a look of dismay on her face, and then turns back as if to run downstairs. But I call to her again.

‘Elly! Why are you running away?’

She hovers for a moment on the top step, but then turns again and comes towards me. The dismay is replaced by anger.

‘What is wrong, Elly?’ I say, but she says nothing and just stands there, staring at me. I realise she must have lingered at the door and overheard my irritable exchange with my mother. She is bound to think the worst: at twelve, she is probably perfectly aware of manor gossip, something I have not even considered until this moment.

‘Come back into my chamber,’ I say, and she follows me in. We sit down again in our chairs by the fire.

‘Did you overhear Grandmama and I talking?’

She snorts. ‘Hardly talking. More like arguing. You do it all the time with Grandmama.’

‘Do you often listen in on my conversations, young lady?’

‘What if I do? I’ve a right to know when my mother is betraying my father!’

I am astonished she should bear any loyalty towards Ralph. ‘But Ralph cares nothing for me.’

She blinks. ‘Ralph? I’m not talking about *him*,’ she says, raising her voice. ‘I hate him. It’s *my father* I’m talking about. You are b-betraying my f-father with that...that g-gardening boy.’ As she stammers over her words, tears spring to her eyes.

They spring to mine too.

I am stunned. I am not being untruthful when I then insist to Eleanor that nothing improper has ever taken place. And how grateful I am at that moment that Tom did not fall for my ridiculous flirtatious behaviour. But I know I am guilty of betraying Peter in my heart, by my affection for Tom, by seeing him as a re-embodiment of Peter.

I have simply been refusing to admit it.

XXII.

Alice goes out of her way to catch Tom alone. 'You know Wragge's on the warpath.'

Tom shrugs. 'What d'you mean?'

She clicks her tongue. 'Oh, don't be dull, Tom. You know well enough he's trying to catch you with her ladyship.'

Tom's cheeks go a little pink. 'But that's stupid.'

'Stupid it may be, but I think he's told the master you're cuckolding him. It doesn't matter if it's true or not.'

Tom's eyes grow wide and he begins to shake. 'But it isn't true! You know I'd not do anything like that.'

Alice nods. 'I know it Tom, but the master doesn't. And you can't deny her ladyship is pretty fond of you.'

Tom pouts. 'I can't help that.'

'Oh, grow up, Tom! I can hardly warn her ladyship off seeing you. But you can stop meeting her alone. You must, for both your sakes.'

XXIII.

Since our encounter in the ha-ha, Tom has been avoiding me. Several times I have sent Old Ned a message asking for Tom to help me with something in the garden, but Tom never comes. Ned sends me one excuse after another why he cannot come, and I begin to think it is

Tom himself who is making the excuses, to avoid finding himself in another awkward situation. This goes on for weeks and, though I know well enough how foolish I am being, I become agitated that I have not seen him for so long.

So, when by chance I come across him, alone in the orchard, I am absurdly desperate to take advantage of the opportunity, and ask him to go to the ha-ha with me. But he refuses.

‘It’s not safe, m’lady. You surely know old Wragge’s watching us?’

I gasp. So Mama was right, as always. ‘I did not know,’ I say, shamed by the notion of that lackey spying on me.

‘If he catches us together, even if we’re doing nothing improper...’

I nod. He has no need to say more.

‘So, no more meetings, m’lady.’

I think he looks relieved as he says it.

I force a smile. ‘Strictly mistress and servant, then?’ I say, as lightly as I can manage.

He nods. ‘Yes, m’lady.’ His face is uncharacteristically serious.

‘But I still need you to help me in the Italian garden. The new arbour.’

He purses his lips. ‘Then John Reede or one of the others’ll have to help too.’

I smile again, despite myself. ‘You are prudent beyond your years, Tom, while I am clearly as irresponsible as a maid.’

‘It’s as well one of us is wise, m’lady.’ He hesitates for a few moments. ‘I must get back to my work.’ He turns, preparing to leave.

I feel a sudden panic and put my hand on his arm. ‘Tom?’

‘Yes, m’lady?’

But I shake my head. There is nothing more I can, or should, say. ‘Yes, you must go.’

He picks up his tools and walks away, out of the orchard and back towards the manor house. I feel bereft, and stand as lifeless as a statue for a long while before I realise it is raining and am forced to retreat indoors.



When I arrive back at the house, I am wet through to my chemise and in a miserable mood. The day has turned dark and the hall is gloomy despite the fire blazing in the hearth. It is chaos in the hall: servants are running this way and that, and in the midst of the *mêlée* is

Mama, waving her arms and shouting for more candles. The sight of Mama giving orders in my house further blackens my humour, and I cannot stop myself from striding over.

‘What do you think you are doing, Mama?’ I grasp her arm, scattering raindrops from my cloak.

She spins round and pulls her arm free. ‘Joanna, you are all wet,’ she says, frantically flicking at the beads of water on her gown.

‘What are you doing, Mama?’ I say again. ‘You have no right to command my servants.’

‘I would not have to if you were here, instead of out gallivanting all the time.’

I am incensed by her insinuation and, tossing my head, turn on my heel. ‘I am going to get dry.’ I walk briskly to the solar stairs.

I hope Mama might stay downstairs, so I will be spared a conversation that I am sure would become tetchy. But only moments later she appears at the door of my chamber and, as always, comes in uninvited.

‘What is wrong with you?’ she says, her tone accusatory rather than inquisitive.

I raise my eyebrows. ‘I am wet from the rain.’

She notices the scorn in my voice, and bridles. ‘Apart from that. You are upset about something, Joanna.’

I say nothing but begin to dry my hair on a towel.

‘So,’ she says, adopting her absurd conspiratorial air, ‘as you have just been out, I surmise you have been with that *boy*.’ She almost spits the word in my face. ‘Perhaps he has told you at last that you are old enough to be his mother.’

I want to slap her venomous mouth but of course I would not – one can hardly strike one’s own mother. So I stay my hand and confine my anger to words.

‘That is not your concern, Mama,’ I say, winding myself up to tell her exactly where I think the limits of her concern should lie. But she just snorts and advances towards me, a finger wagging in my face.

‘Not my concern! How is it not my concern when my daughter acts like a whore?’ Her eyes are sparking, her headdress quivering.

I am forced to deny yet again that anything improper has occurred between Tom and me. I sigh. ‘He is just a boy, a boy who is clever at making things from wood. Whatever you still insist on believing, Mama, there is nothing more between us than mistress and servant.’

But Mama shakes her head. 'You are deluding yourself, Joanna. You are behaving like a bitch on heat, and it is time you stopped.'

I am furious at my mother's constant interference. It seems worse now than it has ever been. Even when I was a girl on the cusp of womanhood, she allowed me more privacy than she does now.

'You have no right to talk to me that way.' I try to keep my voice calm. 'You are a guest in my house.'

'Not *your* house,' says Mama, in a spiteful tone, 'but your husband's. The husband you are cuckolding.'

As she speaks, she turns suddenly and lunges towards me, her jabbing finger ahead of her. But if the finger is intended for me, it does not find its mark, for Mama's foot must have caught in the hem of her gown, and she trips over the leg of the chair that stands at the end of my bed. I dart forward to try and catch her but she falls heavily against the bedpost, hitting her head hard on the unyielding oak. Then she drops to the floor, the gash on her head bleeding profusely. She lies on the floor, moaning, and when I speak to her she seems unable to hear. I run for help and some servants come and take her to her own bed, where her maid Jane bathes her head and weeps.

I send immediately for a physician from Southampton and he comes with speed, but when he looks at Mama's head, he pronounces the wound shallow and of little consequence. He prescribes a poultice of Saint John's Wort and departs, and I feel heartened by his visit, for it seems Mama is strong and will soon recover. I apply the poultice to Mama's head myself, and then sit with her, stroking her hand, though she is asleep and does not know I am there.

I visit Mama every day, sitting with her sleeping body and renewing the poultice. The wound heals but Mama does not wake up. Early in the morning of the fifth day, Jane comes hammering on my chamber door, weeping and wailing that Lady Christina is cold. I don my night cloak and run with her to Mama's chamber, grumbling that it is her job to ensure Mama is kept warm and comfortable. But Jane cannot speak for wailing and, when I arrive at Mama's bedside, I realise I have misunderstood: Mama's body is very cold, and her flesh has stiffened.

I sink to my knees by Mama's bed and weep. The death of yet another of those I loved the most. For, despite our constant bickering, I did love her. In the last few years she seems to have become so bitter and spiteful towards me. But, in my grief, I wonder whether in truth

it has always been I who has been in the wrong, and she always in the right. I am certain that, if we had not been arguing so bitterly, she would not have tripped and hit her head.

Eleanor too, distraught at her grandmother's death, blames me for it.

XXIV.

I have not seen Tom for weeks. There is little incentive to go into the garden anyway, for the rain continues to fall, day in, day out.

I spend those days and weeks indoors, with Eleanor and Eloise, sewing and reading, or, when the light inside the solar becomes too dim and we have to lay aside our embroidery and books, talking – and laughing. They are happy days. Eleanor seems to have forgiven me, and both she and her sister want to hear stories about their father, and it gives me such pleasure to tell them about his travels, and show them the books he brought home for me, and the pretty trinkets I love so much, the carved ivory mirror and the writing tablet.

Leafing through the pages of the book of plants reminds me that the secret arbour I had planned back in the summer is still only a picture in my head. I wonder if time enough has passed, and if my determination is still strong enough, for me to ask again for Tom to come and talk about my plans.

I hesitate for days, frightened both of provoking Eleanor and of laying myself open once more to suspicion. But then the weather changes and it becomes unusually warm for November, and my urge to go into the garden intensifies. I wander despondently down every path and around every bed, full of regret for the wreckage that the weeks of rain have wrought. The herbers and the flower gardens present a cheerless scene, with most of their blooms blackened, hanging their heads from soft, twisted stems, the fallen leaves wet and rotting on the ground. The gardeners should have cleared away this debris but, without my urging, Old Ned ignores the flower gardens and has them tend to other parts of the estate, clearing ditches or repairing fences, and of course all through October they were picking grapes and helping with the winemaking. Tidying up my lady's flowerbeds is not high on Ned's list of priorities.

At first I am content just to note the condition of my flower gardens and make plans for getting them into better order, but I cannot stop myself looking forward to seeing Tom again. I have sent Ned a message asking if Tom can come to the Italian garden to talk about the new arbour and Ned has replied that he can, today, when all the gardeners will be nearby,

tending to the yards of fencing that surround the formal gardens. He can spare Tom from this work for half an hour, he says.

So I make my way to the Italian garden, where I grieve again at the same poignant scene: the little box hedges overgrown, the fountain basin full of brown and rotting leaves and the pergolas that, in the summer, were so fragrant with roses and honeysuckle, now a tangle of tendrils and thorns, though I do find a few late-flowering blooms of my favourite yellow rose, protected from the rain, their petals fading to the colour of dirty under-linen.

My spirits lift when, in the corner where the arbour is to start, I see Tom. He seems to be waiting for me. As I approach, to my surprise, I see the structure for the arbour is already begun. I thought the conversation we had back in the summer had been just that, a conversation, but it seems Tom understood what I wanted and has somehow found the time to build it.

I am a few feet away from him when he beams at me, and my heart seems to turn over. I have to steel myself to smile back without reaching out to touch him. But I am thrilled by the work he has already done and can concentrate on that.

‘I did not imagine you might have made a start.’

He lowers his head respectfully. ‘I had a bit of time, m’lady, and Old Ned said it’d keep me out of mischief.’ He grins and I nod.

‘Not that I did it alone,’ he goes on. ‘John helped me put it up.’ He cocks his head over to where the other gardeners are hard at work repairing fences.

‘John Reede?’ I say, and he nods.

Our conversation is so irreproachable, and my heart has returned so quickly to its usual rhythm, I realise with immense relief that I can, after all, be close to Tom without any improper feelings intruding. But, just as that thought comes to me, there is a sudden vigorous rustling in the tall yew hedge that bounds this side of the Italian garden and Ralph springs out beside us.

I let out a cry, more from surprise, I think, than fear. But I soon realise Ralph must have caught up with the gossip and has misconstrued why Tom and I are here, no doubt influenced by the poison Master Wragge has been dripping into his ear.

Ralph’s already purple in the face as he squares up to Tom, as if challenging him to a fist fight.

‘So, gardener,’ he says, his voice loud and harsh, ‘Wragge said you were cuckolding me, and I see he was right.’

I spring forward. ‘No, my lord, he is *not*,’ I say, placing myself between him and Tom. ‘Tom is just a gardener. He has built all this.’ I gesture at the arbour. ‘He is clever with his hands—’

Ralph lets out a roar of derision. ‘I don’t doubt it, madam,’ he says, losing control. ‘And what, I wonder, have his clever *gardener’s* hands done to you?’

I cannot suppress a gasp. But then, straightening my back and lifting my head high, I square myself up to him.

‘How dare you insinuate impropriety! Tom is just a gardener, a carpenter, and his skill is in handling wood not women...’

But Ralph ignores my words. Shoving me aside, he falls upon Tom, thrashing at him with his stick. He is like a madman, raining blow after blow on Tom’s poor body.

‘Damn your bitch of a mother for bringing her vile spawn to Burleigh,’ he roars. ‘And damn you, madam, for encouraging this wretch to think himself better than he is.’

Tom crumples under the torrent of vicious blows and falls to his knees.

I cry out. ‘That is enough, my lord! You have punished him enough...’

But Ralph just roars. ‘You may think it enough, madam, but I will not stop until I am avenged for the insult he has given me!’

Then he throws down his stick and, drawing his dagger from the sheath at his waist, lunges at Tom. With one arm crooked tight around Tom’s head, he presses the point of the dagger to his throat.

‘Shall I kill you now?’ he says, hissing the words into his ear.

I throw myself to my knees and beg him to spare Tom’s life.

Suddenly he lets go of poor Tom’s head and rams the dagger back into its sheath before giving him a hefty kick that makes him cry out. Then Ralph turns to me and grabs me by my hair, knocking my headdress from my head.

‘You, madam, are a whore, and I’ll deal with you in private.’

He hauls me to my feet and drags me away, out of the Italian garden and back down the long path to the house, with all the gardeners and servants looking on, witnesses to my shame.

He drags me up the narrow solar stairs to my chamber. Then slamming the door shut, he slaps me hard across the face and throws me onto the bed. Seizing the bottom of my gown,

he flings it up to my waist and, climbing on top of me, he takes me. I struggle but he holds my arms, pinning me to the bed, and carries on until he is done. When he has finished, he slaps me again.

I beg him to believe I have not cuckolded him, but he roars that I am a liar.

‘I will take back what is mine from that lecherous lout! And I’ll have no more of your gallivanting, my lady.’

He storms out of the room, shouting to one of his retainers to stand guard outside the door and locking it. No one, he says, is to come to my chamber save Alice.

Poor Alice! She was watching Ralph’s brutal attack on me, from behind a curtain, too afraid to try and help me.

‘Oh, m’lady, I’m so sorry I didn’t try and stop him.’

I shake my head. ‘There was nothing you could have done. Sir Ralph is far too strong.’

She nods, weeping, and dabs at the bruises on my face with a towel dipped in a concoction of comfrey juice.

Next morning when she comes to see me, she has bruises of her own.

‘Sir Ralph’s been questioning all the servants. He’s trying to make us admit you and Tom behaved improperly.’ She touches her face cautiously with her fingers. ‘Master Wragge’s been helping him with the questions. He seems to enjoy it.’

I sigh deeply. ‘Oh, Alice, I’m so sorry you should all have to suffer because of me.’

She smiles weakly. ‘We’ve all just said you care for Tom as a son, m’lady.’

Of course Ralph does not believe them, choosing to believe instead his household is plotting against him.

‘How is Tom?’ I say.

‘He’s in the infirmary. He’s sore but he’s got no broken bones.’

‘That is a relief,’ I say, my heart churning with grief at what I am about to say. ‘But, Alice, he cannot stay here. I am afraid Ralph will kill him. Indeed I am surprised he has not already done so.’

Alice nods. ‘I think you’re right, m’lady.’

I heave myself painfully off the bed and go over to a decorated chest Peter brought back from his travels. I unlock it and take out a purse of money.

‘Go to Tom, and give him this. Tell him he must leave Burleigh immediately – tonight. He must go far away from here. Tell him to become a carpenter. It is what he has always wanted.’

Then I think of something else and point to the table by the window. ‘Alice, fetch that book.’ She brings over Peter’s book of plants. ‘Give this to him too. I know he cannot read it but I want him to have it – to remember me by.’

The following morning Alice tells me Tom has gone, reluctantly.

‘He wanted to stay and help you, m’lady.’

I shake my head. ‘There is nothing he could have done. He would simply have lost his life.’

When I am alone again, I lie down on the bed and draw the coverlet over my head. I weep and weep until I have no more tears left. I will never see Tom again. He was some sort of link with my beloved Peter, and that link is now destroyed forever.

XXV.

Ralph keeps me locked up in my chamber all and every day, except when he commands me to play the chatelaine for his cronies. He abuses me whenever it takes his fancy, but takes care now not to leave evidence of his violence on my face. The Burleigh household knows of his cruel treatment but, to the world outside, everything is normal.

I know I have cuckolded Ralph in my heart, and that knowledge keeps me compliant, even submissive, awaiting the moment when he might acknowledge I am no longer a threat to his honour, and allow me my freedom.

If that moment ever comes.

But tonight, Ralph comes to my chamber in a drunken rage. He is roaring and flailing his stick around in his fury. Alice told me this morning that Ralph’s roving eye has most recently fallen upon the young wife of a knight who bought an estate bordering Burleigh, but the knight has discovered the incipient affair and threatened Ralph with death if he does not leave his wife alone. Ralph is, said Alice, reportedly beside himself with indignation.

And now he seems to have completely lost his wits.

Over the past few weeks I have become almost accustomed to his assaults, but now I am afraid. Brandishing his stick, he grabs me with his other hand and pulls me close, then

grasping the front of my night chemise he tears it open, leaving me naked and shivering. He raises the stick high in the air, as if to strike me, but instead brings it down slowly and rests it against my neck. Then, pressing the shaft of the stick against my throat, choking me, he forces me back and down onto the bed.

This time I am frightened for my life.

Pressing on the stick with one hand, Ralph loosens his braies with the other and forces himself upon me. Hardly able to breathe, I thrash around with my arms and, during those few moments when he is most distracted, I manage to knock the stick away. Gasping, and then taking a few deep breaths, I scream as loudly as my voice allows. But Ralph rapidly regains his wits and his hands are on my throat.

‘Be quiet, whore!’ he yells, but I will not stop if it will save my life.

With all my strength I claw at his hands, trying to prise them away from my neck, and I thrash with my legs trying to put my knee into his crotch. But he construes my intention and quickly manoeuvres himself so he is kneeling on my thighs, pinning me to the bed. And in his fury he presses his thumbs harder against my windpipe, squeezing the breath out of me.

No one is answering my cries for help. Where is Alice? Eleanor? Can no one hear me?

Ralph is mad with rage and resentment, seemingly determined to wring my life from me. But in truth, even as I am fighting for my life, I wonder if I really want it. All those I loved best are now gone from me – my most beloved husband Peter, dearest Papa, my first-born Alexander, to say nothing of my two darling little ones and even Mama, dear to me despite our differences, and finally, of course, Tom Godewryght, not dead but lost to me for ever.

So much loss, my own life seems not worth living.

I stop struggling and, as I do so, Ralph releases his grip upon my neck. Involuntarily I gasp and take a deep shuddering breath but then, almost unwillingly, I resume my screams for help. Ralph roars and grasps my throat tightly between his sweating hands. Then he squeezes, and squeezes again, until darkness threatens to overwhelm me.



6: Disorder

Tom Godewryght

1371

I.

We've been on the road for days. Rain falls daily from a blackened sky and I'm wearing every piece of clothing I've brought with me to try to keep out the cold. But Master Goldynge and his company of pilgrims give out such warmth of humour and brightness of spirit it's almost possible to forget my numbed toes and fingers.

My guardian angel must've been guiding my footsteps when I found my way to Winchester. The state I was in when I ran away from Burleigh, it'd have not been a surprise if I'd ended in a ditch. For, when Alice came to see me in the infirmary with a message from her ladyship, she sent me into a panic.

'Her ladyship thinks Sir Ralph's going to kill you,' she said.

I wasn't surprised – he'd already tried to earlier that day.

'You must go, Tom, right now.'

I stared at her. My heart was racing.

'Do I really have to? What about my leg?'

I could see my cold breath and hers, wisping smoke-like from our lips, yet my hands were warm and clammy.

She shook her head. 'You can't wait for it to heal, Tom.'

'But how can I leave her ladyship? Sir Ralph might kill *her*.'

Alice shook her head again. 'You can't protect her, Tom. He can do what he wants, you know that.'

Then she turned away from me and lifted the skirt of her kirtle. She drew out a small purse and put it in my hand.

‘Here, this is from her ladyship.’ The purse was heavy. ‘It’s not a lot, she said, but enough to help you start a new life. She said you should go far away and become a carpenter.’

Then she bent down and, heaving a battered scrip up from the floor, took out a book and put it on the pallet.

‘She wants you to have this too. D’you know what it is?’

I nodded. ‘It’s her ladyship’s garden book. Sometimes we looked at it together.’ I felt tears pricking behind my eyelids. ‘She began to teach me my letters...’ I looked up at Alice. ‘But I can’t read it.’

Alice laid her hand on mine. ‘She knows that, but wants you to have it anyway. To remind you...’

She left the scrip with me and, when she’d gone, I shoved my few belongings inside it and stole away, leaving behind everything, and everyone, I knew.

That night was black, with no moon to betray me – a good time to go, if any was. But it was hard. I needed to run, yet my bad leg hurt so much I couldn’t walk many paces before I had to rest. I slept in barns, scavenged food as best I could, looking behind me every moment, scared I’d be caught and taken back to face Sir Ralph’s justice.

But my angel was at my side: after a week or so my wounds began to heal and I found myself near Winchester, still free from the manor’s bonds. Perhaps Sir Ralph didn’t care what happened to me after all? But the weather had turned cold and wet, and I so ached for a hot meal and a night in a dry bed, I took my chance at a tavern in the middle of the town.

The meat pie was tasty, and my first mazer of ale an almost forgotten pleasure. But I was looking forward to the bed and hoping my bedmates wouldn’t be too fat or drunk, their snoring not too noisy. I was just thinking of going to find my quarters when a throng of folk burst through the door, showering raindrops as they threw off their cloaks and shook them out. Despite the weather, they seemed a merry crowd, chattering and laughing. A lofty burly man with a cheery face called loudly to the tavern keeper.

‘Your best ale, my man!’ he said. ‘And pies and gravy for all my friends.’ The tavern keeper, a miserable fellow, I’d been thinking, at once became a different man. He smiled and bowed and, bringing the ale right away – no waiting for them! – begged them to be seated.

‘The pies won’t be a moment, masters and dames,’ he said, beaming at this great crowd of paying customers. ‘And you’ll be wanting beds as well as board?’

‘Indeed we will,’ said the cheerful man, who seemed to be their leader, beaming back. ‘I trust you can accommodate us all?’

‘Of course, of course!’ cried the tavern keeper, though I wondered how that could be true. For, when I arrived, he’d claimed he had no room.

‘But mebbe I can squeeze you in,’ he’d said to me, ‘as you’re only little.’

It turned out the crowd of folk were travelling to a place called Canterbury, far away from here. The leader, introducing himself as Edmund Goldynge, sat down beside me – obliging me to shuffle along the bench – keen to tell me of their expedition.

‘We’re pilgrims, young fellow, on our way to the shrine of our blessed Saint Thomas Becket. Why don’t you join us? Come with us to Canterbury.’ I wondered why they were making such a journey in this awful weather, but didn’t ask.

Putting a friendly arm around my shoulder, Master Goldynge explained the purpose of a pilgrimage, drawing from his scrip some metal badges to show me where he and Dame Cecily had been. A few were crudely wrought, one in the shape of a scallop shell, the symbol of Saint James, said Master Goldynge, and mentioned the name of some foreign place I’d never heard of. Another was a rough stamping of what I thought was a letter ‘A’, but some were more finely made, like the one of Saint Christopher carrying the child Jesus on his shoulder, and a delightful little ship, with many figures.

‘That’s the cog,’ said Master Goldynge, ‘in which our blessed Saint Thomas returned to England from his exile in France.’ He pointed to a figure wearing a bishop’s hat, with his hand aloft in blessing.

‘I’m not sure I *want* to be a pilgrim, Master Goldynge,’ I said at last, having listened to his words and admired his collection.

He laughed. ‘No matter! Come anyway. It’s lonely travelling without company.’

I knew how true that was: for days I’d been entirely alone, which I’d not been in all my life before. These seemed kind people and I was tempted by their company, and by the chance to get far away from Burleigh. Yet I wondered at their fervour: I didn’t share it, and wasn’t sure I wanted to. I wavered for a while but, by the time I at last went off to bed, I’d agreed with Master Goldynge to leave with them at first light.



Master Goldynge’s wife, Dame Cecily, fusses and frets over me just like I’m a child. Even Master Goldynge himself often joins me on the road, wanting to talk, to find out more about

me, he says. But I'm nervous of telling him all the truth, in case he thinks badly of me or even calls a constable to seize me and take me back to Burleigh.

'I've always wanted to be a carpenter,' I say, 'but there was no chance of it on the manor, so her ladyship said I should try my fortune elsewhere.'

I say it with a grin and Master Goldynge nods and smiles back. Perhaps it sounds an unlikely tale, but he doesn't say so. And he doesn't ask me any awkward questions. Though in truth I suspect he's not much fooled by my story.

'We had a son,' he says, his eyes dimming, 'our only child. He was training to be a goldsmith, in London. So clever with his hands...'

Just at that moment Dame Cecily catches up with us and lets out a sob. Her husband puts his arm around her waist.

'He died,' he says, and Dame Cecily sighs deeply, 'in a tavern, of all places, and a disreputable one at that. Set upon by a gang of other apprentices. Some argument between the guilds. But he wasn't a violent boy – he just got caught up in the dispute.'

I can see tears brimming in his eyes. I don't understand what he means by guilds and ask him to explain. I decide London must be a dangerous place to live, maybe even more so than a manor run by Sir Ralph Burleigh.

Master Goldynge agrees. 'I don't advise it,' he says, wiping his eyes on a fine piece of cloth he keeps tucked into his sleeve. He transfers his arm from his wife's waist to my shoulder. 'Find your living in a small town, Tom. Much the safer choice.'



As we journey, the rain eases. Despite his constant cheeriness, even Master Goldynge agrees walking is far less disagreeable in the dry. Nonetheless, our progress is slow because, he says, two members of his party are old and frail.

'Perhaps I should not have brought them. But they begged to join us, and how could I refuse?'

'Could you not ride?' I say. 'It would be much quicker.'

He laughs. 'It's not about speed, Tom. The journey is an important part of the pilgrimage. If it is arduous, the pilgrimage is all the more beneficial.'

I nod though, in truth, their devotion seems to me a sort of madness.



One dark night close to Christmas time, we stop at a tavern in the small town of Dorking. Our company makes quite a crowd in the little inn and, with our chattering and laughter, it is soon a merry place. I'm always grateful for the roaring fire and the steaming stew or hot meat pie. The beds at these taverns are seldom as agreeable – invariably scratchy and uncomfortable, the other sleepers stinking and snoring like pigs – but I'm usually too tired to care.

As always, Edmund orders food and ale for us all, then goes off with the landlord to check the sleeping quarters. I sit close to the fire with Dame Cecily and some of the others, to await the arrival of our meal. We are enjoying the warmth and comfort after another day of icy feet and deadened fingers, when suddenly a gang of men bursts in, led by a fearsome-looking fellow with close-set eyes and a purple swollen nose. He stands in the middle of the room, a truncheon in his hand, his stick-wielding henchman spread out behind him.

'Listen up!' he shouts, loud enough to quell the din, then fixes a smile on his face. 'Perhaps you good people can give us some assistance?'

He says he's seeking a felon, a fugitive and thief, run away from a manor some twenty miles north of here.

'We've got evidence,' he says, the smile changing to a grimace, 'the scoundrel came this way.'

He scans the assembled company, who all shake their heads and declare their ignorance of the runaway. Then he comes closer to get a better look at each person. He disregards the women and all the older men, but stares intently at each young man and lad. I feel nervous as at length he turns his gaze on me – with good reason, for at once he points a quivering finger.

'You!' he shouts. 'Stand up!'

He lunges forward and grabs my arm, pulling me roughly past Dame Cecily, who cries out that I cannot be the runaway. But the constable ignores her and signals to two henchman to bind my wrists.

My fellow pilgrims leap to their feet, protesting. 'He's been with us since Winchester,' says one, and the others all agree. 'How can he be your man?'

But the constable takes no notice and I'm terrified I'll be dragged off.

'It *is* him, ain't it?' says the constable to his henchman, but they shrug and waggle their heads.

My heart's pounding in my chest and I'm finding it hard to breathe. 'I'm *not* him,' I cry, my voice harsh with panic. 'Truly I'm not!'

But the constable just grimaces again. 'You would say that, wouldn't you?'

Soon the tavern's a place of bedlam, with my fellow travellers haranguing the constable and trying to pull me from the henchmen's grasp. But the henchmen are pulling harder and I'm being dragged towards the door.

But suddenly there's a roar above the hubbub and Edmund is towering over the constable, demanding to know what he thinks he's doing. Edmund's very size and the tone of authority in his voice seem to command the constable's attention, for he spins round to face his accuser.

'My job,' he says, scowling. 'So who's asking?'

'The boy's father!' says Edmund, his face flushed and his nostrils flaring.

I hear a gasp come from the pilgrims and the constable notices it too.

'Is that so?' he says slowly, glaring beyond Edmund to his companions.

But they all nod and declare it to be the truth.

'So why didn't you say so before?' asks the constable, shouting.

Dame Cecily steps forward, wagging her head. 'Because you gave us no chance!' she cries. 'You and these...these...bullies!' She clutches at the table edge, as if she's about to swoon.

The constable narrows his eyes. I'm certain he's not persuaded. But Edmund continues to insist he's mistaken, and perhaps it's his air of nobility and command that makes the constable at length give up. He orders me to be untied, and he and his henchmen go on their way.

I collapse into a tearful heap, and Edmund comes and puts his arm around my shoulder. When the noisy chatter in the tavern has risen once more into a din, he lets out a great sigh.

'I'll have to spend many hours upon my knees in prayer,' he says, his voice low, '*and* give up the pleasures of meat and wine' – he grins at me – 'and perhaps donate much more in the way of alms, if God's to forgive me such great falsehood!'

I gulp. 'You lied for me?' He nods and gives my shoulder a squeeze.

'Well, yes, Tom, I did, but I could hardly let them take you. And how else could I convince the constable you weren't his man?'

I try to smile my gratitude. But I'm shivering. 'I could do with a bowl of that stew.'

Edmund nods. 'Me too, lad, me too.'

II.

It's dry, yet still bitterly cold, the night we stop in Maidstone. The tavern's warm and welcoming and full of local men taking advantage of the blazing fire and hot food. It's so busy Master Goldynge's company can't all sit together.

'I'll sit over there,' I say to Edmund, seeing a space on a bench next to a long-faced man with a grubby craftsman's coif crammed over his grey hair. He's hunched over his ale and I suspect he's unwilling for conversation. But I'm wrong. When my pie is put before me, he looks up.

'You get that inside you, young fellow,' he says. 'It'll warm you up a treat.'

I nod. 'I *am* quite cold.'

'Ay, it's a raw ol' night. Raw ol' day too. Plays havoc with me hands, this weather.'

He shows me his hands. They're red and chapped, covered in scars. 'Not good in my business.'

I ask him what he does, and my heart turns over when he tells me.

At that moment Edmund comes over, asking if there's room for him on my bench, and I shuffle up. He introduces himself to the craftsman. 'Edmund Goldynge, master goldsmith, retired.'

The craftsman nods. 'Jack Simkins, master carpenter.' Edmund grins at me and calls for some more ale. After a slurp or two, Master Simkins starts to talk. He tells us he's just lost his apprentice.

'The best I ever had,' he says, shaking his head. 'Caught a fever.'

I'm sorry for the apprentice, but I feel my angel's at my side again. Yet I hesitate to say what's in my mind.

But Master Goldynge's not so shy. He puts down his knife and spoon, and slaps the table with his hand. 'Well, well!' he cries. 'Young Tom here's looking for an apprenticeship,' and I can't help my mouth dropping open at his boldness.

Master Simkins purses his lips. 'Is that right?'

‘Indeed!’ says Master Goldynge and nudges me. ‘Tell Master Simkins something about yourself, Tom.’

So I do, with Edmund interrupting every so often with an encouraging word. But of course I only tell him “something”, missing out the bits I think might spoil my chances. Master Simkins listens well but then pulls at his beard.

‘You’re a bit old for an apprentice, lad,’ he says, frowning his brow. My heart sinks. When her ladyship said to go away and become a carpenter, I’d thought it a doubtful plan, for what master would take me on at seventeen? But Master Goldynge interjects.

‘No, not at all, Master Simkins!’ he cries. ‘Plenty apprentices start later these days. And in Tom here you’ve got someone already conversant with the craft.’

Master Simkins nods and shakes his head by turns, then gulps down his ale. Edmund calls the brewster over and demands some more, and the carpenter is silent and his face is grave as he slurps at his refilled cup. As he scratches underneath his grimy coif, I can’t help fidgeting on the hard wooden bench, and my hands are becoming damp. But when I look sideways at Edmund, he grins at me again, and winks.

‘Master Simkins,’ he says, leaning forward. ‘I’ll be sponsoring Tom, if it helps you make up your mind.’

I can scarce believe I’ve heard him aright. But the carpenter looks up, his eyes wide. ‘You will?’

‘Why not? He’s a good lad.’

I feel bad neither of them know the whole truth about me, but I’m too scared to confess it.

After a wait that seems as long as Mass on Sundays, Master Simkins nods and looks up, fixing his steely grey eyes on mine. ‘From what I’ve seen and heard, you do seem a good lad. An’ if Master Goldynge here’s prepared to sponsor you, I’m minded to give you a go. But you’ll have to prove your worth to me afore I do.’

At first light the next morning, I go to his workshop and he sets me a task to test my skill. If my angel’s truly with me, he’s guiding my hands, for Master Simkins agrees to take me on.

III.

I’ve loved trees since I was a boy. Pa and me’d stand at the foot of the great oaks in the

woods and look up, trying to see through the tangle of branches and leaves right up to the very top. I'd stare so long and hard my eyes went blurry and my head all dizzy, and I'd have to sit down to clear my head. I'd press my back against the tree's hard furrowed trunk and feel how solid and strong it was, and I'd wonder how many years it'd been standing there, though I knew it was so many I couldn't imagine it.

My Pa told me all about the trees – he loved them too.

'They're why I'm a carpenter,' he said.

But he died when I was small, so he never got to teach me his craft, and Ma and me had to leave the village and live with that vile mason.

When, years later, at Burleigh, I learned how to fell a tree and cut the planks and plane them smooth, then turn the timber into something useful, I knew it was what I wanted – following in my own Pa's footsteps, which made me proud. And the delight I saw on her ladyship's face when I showed her what I'd made was all I needed to confirm my contentment with the craft.

She seemed to know how good I was, right from when I started.

'Perhaps you should train properly, Tom,' she said one day, when I was still a boy with much to learn. 'Become a master craftsman, like your Pa.' I nodded, beaming, not knowing it might be possible.

'I must find you an apprenticeship,' she said, smiling. 'Would you like that, Tom?'

Of course I said yes and looked forward to the day when she found a master to take me.

I was just past thirteen when her ladyship first spoke to me about it but, though she mentioned it once or twice again, nothing changed. I grew older, beyond the age when I thought any master would take me, and I was disappointed. But I was content enough at Burleigh. I thought maybe one day I'd marry one of the other servants – Alice Rolfe maybe – and we'd bring up a family there. And mostly I reckoned it'd not be such a bad life.

But now I know this is the life I want, here in Maidstone, building houses, making furniture. Jack Simkins is the best of masters. He's surprised how much I already know. There was a skilled carpenter at Burleigh, and I went to him often for advice about how to shape the wood or make a joint. That way I learned a lot. I think the master's pleased to find I'm not quite a novice.

IV.

Jack Simkins is forced to reprove his wife's suspicions. 'Nay, Ellen, Tom's a good lad. Nice manners. More skilful than I expected. He even knows his letters—'

Dame Ellen sniffs and shakes her head. 'Yes, yes, I know all that, but you know nothing about him, his background. You took him on, a complete stranger, at the say-so of another complete stranger—'

'A very *honourable* stranger, willing to give a good lad a chance in life.'

Ellen scowls. 'So you say. But the boy could be a cottar for all we know.'

Jack grins. 'He said his Pa were a carpenter. But it matters not to me – it's what he will become that matters now.'

His wife is not persuaded, but Jack does not care. He is keen that Tom learns fast, to catch up with other apprentices of his age, already half way through their terms. So he attends to him daily, teaching him new skills, and leaving much of his shop's day-to-day work to his journeymen.

It is Tom's good fortune that the journeymen do not begrudge their master's devotion to the lad.

But Dame Ellen still has her doubts. 'You sure you're not letting him cut corners? You've got your reputation to consider. What happens if his work proves wanting?'

Jack shakes his head. 'It won't happen, wife. I'm keeping a close eye.'

But Dame Ellen finds another reason to reproach her husband. The generous-hearted journeymen take to the new apprentice, and want to show him a good time. Two or three nights a week they can be found in one or other of Maidstone's taverns, drinking ale, playing dice and eyeing up the women with painted faces and striped hoods.

Dame Ellen is aghast. 'He's an apprentice, Jack! You should keep a tighter rein.'

But Jack just laughs. 'The lad needs a life outside the workshop.' He grins at fond memories of his own youth. 'And there's naught wrong with his work.'

Dame Ellen clicks her tongue. She thinks her man a fool for being so easy-going with the lad. What was he thinking of, taking on such a boy?

1379

V.

It's true to say I'm now a happy man.

By rights I should've stayed with Master Simkins seven years, but after five he said I'd learned enough to make a go of it. When he told her I was going, Dame Ellen couldn't decide if to be pleased or not. At first, she clicked her tongue and wagged her finger at him.

'It isn't right to let him go when he hasn't served his time,' she said, flapping her apron. 'What does the guild think of such flouting of the rules?'

Her husband chuckled. 'It's all agreed, Ellen. The guild master's well acquainted with Tom's skills. He's said himself the lad'll make a fine journeyman.'

Dame Ellen snorted, but then Jack said she should look on the bright side. 'You won't have to worry about his mortal soul no more,' he said, giving me a big wink.

In an instant her face relaxed and she almost smiled.

When Jack Simkins let me go, he put my name about amongst the other masters, and, in the years since, I've scarcely had a day when I've not had some job or other to keep me busy. After three years a journeyman, I decided to give all my attention to furniture making. It was a risk, for building work is always in demand, while only the rich can afford to buy fine furniture. But Maidstone is prosperous and my reputation's already growing.

Of course I'm yet years away from becoming a master, but even so I am a *carpenter*, and I couldn't be prouder of, or more grateful for, Master Simkin's trust in me. And for Master Goldynge's generosity to a lad he knew naught about.

Yet, content as I am with my work, there's something missing in my life, but it was only a few weeks ago I realised what it was.

For that day I met the blacksmith's daughter. I went to a forge newly established in the neighbourhood, to have my broken adze repaired. I was discussing the repair with the smith, Stephen Bellows, a broad-chested fellow in his middle years, amiable enough though weary-seeming. It was a simple repair, he said, and he'd do it now if I could wait. I was thinking I would when a young woman slipped into the workshop from a room behind.

'Father,' she said, 'I've brought your dinner,' and set down on the bench a metal bowl containing a piece of dark bread and a large lump of yellow cheese, and a cup of what I guessed was ale.

The smith turned and, despite the gloom, I could see the shining in his eyes.

'Ah, Amice,' he said, smiling. 'Thank you, child.'

She nodded, but her lips were pressed tight and turned down at the corners.

Master Bellows had just told me he'd recently lost his wife. Now he held out his hand towards his daughter. 'Amice is taking her mother's place in the business,' he said.

But Amice shook her head. 'I could never take Ma's place,' she said, and looked away.

Moments passed but, when she looked up again, she turned and smiled warmly at me, a smile that brightened her face. This was the first time, for as long as I could remember, a girl – a respectable girl, that is – had looked at me that way. I felt suddenly pleased, and smiled back, a foolish grin I dare to say, and I could feel my hands becoming damp.

Many times since that first meeting Master Bellows has permitted me to walk out with his daughter. Amice is beautiful, her face not unlike Lady Joanna's. And when she tilts her head and smiles at me with parted lips, or stumbles and falls heavily against my arm, I realise then how much *more* like Joanna she is, and not just in her beauty, and I become afraid.

For I'm being drawn – almost, it seems, against my will – into a passionate, if chaste, attachment, and it's clear that Amice is making plans.

I'm avoiding Master Bellows' forge, for fear of what he'll say to me. Last time he winked at me and slapped me on the shoulder.

‘My girl’ll make a fine wife to a craftsman,’ he said, and I had to turn away to hide my reddening face.

I know well enough a wife would be a boon. But I’m still young, and it’s commonplace for artisans to wait until they’re well established before they marry. That’s what I tell myself.

And it’s what I’m forced to tell Amice, though I confess only to myself it’s not the real reason for my apparent change of mind. Amice is distraught, her father disappointed. I wonder if I’m imperilling my career, gaining a reputation for inconstancy.

But I can’t go through with marriage.

Master Bellows comes to see me, a tearful Amice at his side.

‘You can see for yourself,’ he says, putting his arm around her shoulders, ‘the pain you’re causing my little girl.’

I nod, wishing it could be different but not knowing how to make it so.

‘I’m so sorry for what must seem my improper, heartless behaviour. I beg for your understanding, sir, and, dearest Amice, your forgiveness if you think I led you on.’

She sniffs and wipes her cheeks with the edge of her hood. ‘I do think that.’

‘I didn’t mean to, but I’ve come to realise I’m not ready yet for marriage. I’ve no father to guide me and must make my own decisions.’

My chest is tight and my hands are clammy. ‘It’s been a hard decision. Truly, I didn’t want to hurt you or mislead...’

I trail off, not knowing what more to say. I’m feeling dizzy now and would gladly run from my workshop. Instead I look away from Amice’s teary face.

But she steps forward and takes my hand in hers.

‘Dear Tom, you’re a good, kind man. I know you didn’t mean to hurt me.’ She turns then to her father. ‘Pa, we must forgive Tom for his seeming thoughtlessness. It was not cruelly meant.’

Master Bellows shrugs and strokes his beard, but his brow is creased, and his eyes are watering a little. ‘I don’t agree but if you say so, daughter, so be it.’

‘I do,’ she says then, leaning forward, gives my cheek the lightest of kisses. ‘Fare well, Tom dear.’

Then she and her father are gone, and I feel the heaviness lift away from my chest.

I determine to avoid respectable young women for a while. Tavern girls are not nearly so demanding.

1381

VI.

The guildhall's in an uproar. The official come to collect the taxes is red in the face, and it's not just the heat of the day that's making him sweat – he's finding it difficult to make himself heard above our protests. We paid our taxes in January, never mind the two lots before that, and we don't understand why this man – Sir John Hoo, one of the king's new taxmen – has come here only five months later to collect yet more.

'Too many failed last time to pay their dues,' he says. 'I'm here to collect what's owed.' He casts a dark scowl across the assembled company. 'And I'm not leaving until I've got what I came for.'

But we're not making it easy for him. And who can blame us? We all know the country's being run by charlatans. They're throwing money away on disaster after disaster in the war with France. King Richard might as well stand on the deck of his ship and cast gold into the sea. But it's *our* money being wasted, and we've had enough of it.

And it isn't only the war money.

Some weeks ago I heard a sermon by one of those hedge priests – John Ball, this one's name was. He's really ruffling the Church's feathers. So much so that, after he'd been preaching for a while in the churches hereabouts, Archbishop Sudbury banned him from Canterbury. But it didn't stop John Ball – he just gathers his flock together on village greens.

You could understand why the archbishop wanted to stop him talking. For John Ball said it was all wrong some people were very rich while others could hardly feed themselves, and it was especially wrong that the Church and its bishops were wealthy when most of their flock were starving.

I've always thought that the way we are – a few rich folk and lots of poor, and the three orders of nobles, priests and us workers – is God's will, His plan for us all. But John Ball put us right about that. Some people call him the mad priest and he did look a bit wild, with his

staring eyes and flailing arms, but what he was saying is true and his words made me seethe with anger – and quake with excitement.

‘My good friends,’ he said, ‘things do not go well in England. And they never will until everything is held in common, and there is neither villein nor lord, but we are all one, and lords are no more masters than we are. Why are we kept in servitude? We all come from the same father and mother, from Adam and Eve. So how can our masters say they are greater than us? They wear velvet and fur, while we wear coarse cloth; they drink wine, while we have to make do with water; they live in fine houses, while our cots are dark and damp and let in the wind and the rain. And, worst of all, all the work we do, we do for *them*, so they can live in luxury and ease, and what do we get out of it? What’s more, we’re bondsmen – not free either to choose our masters or to complain about the way we’re treated. Where’s the justice in that?’

You can imagine the cry, and cheers, that went up from the crowd.

In truth, like most of those around me, I’m not a bondsman. I’m free, because I became a craftsman in Kent, a place where even the rustic labouring folk are no longer tied to their manors. Not like it was at Burleigh, where nearly everyone I knew was bound fast to Sir Ralph, forced to do his bidding on pain of losing their home, and forbidden ever to leave and seek a living somewhere else.

For years I’ve thought little of the difference between rich and poor. Ever since I came to Maidstone, life’s been good to me. I learned my trade fast under my master, and I’m already on my way to becoming a master myself, with my own shop and a lad who works for me.

But I think often of Lady Joanna. Hearing John Ball made me remember how she encouraged me to believe I could better myself, as her husband Peter had. She always smiled, her eyes alight, when she talked of her first husband.

‘Peter was just a bondsman, you know, Tom, like you. But when he was a little boy, much younger than you, he saw something that made him realise he did not want to be tied to the manor for the rest of his life.’

‘What was it?’

‘One day his brother took him to Chichester, a little town down by the sea. There he saw the ocean stretching far away into the distance, far beyond what he could see, and Peter wanted to know what was on the other side of the ocean. He saw ships on the ocean too and, realising the men who sailed in them *did* know, he wanted to be one of them.’

‘So did he go in the ships?’ I said, wondering what a “ship” might look like. I’d heard this “ocean” was like a huge river of salty water, but I’d never seen it and couldn’t imagine anything stretching so far you couldn’t see the other side of it.

‘He had to wait for many years. By then his mother, his father and his brother had all died, but Peter did not want to inherit the family holding and become a tenant farmer. So he ran away from his manor.’

‘But how could he?’ I said. ‘It’s not allowed.’

Her ladyship nodded. ‘You are right, Tom. It’s not. But Peter wanted a different life for himself, and was determined to have it.’

‘He must’ve been brave.’ I knew how frightening it was to leave everything I’d ever known.

She smiled. ‘He was.’ I could tell how proud she was of him. ‘Though of course it was not right to defy the law,’ she went on, and then paused. ‘But sometimes you have to be bold.’

I nodded, wondering why she was telling me all this.

Then she rested her hand lightly on the top of my head. ‘You can be brave too, Tom,’ she said, looking straight into my eyes. ‘You *were* brave, do you remember? You were just a little boy, yet you defied Master Wragge and insisted he come to find me?’

I nodded again, remembering.

‘I always knew you would be a bold and clever boy. I could see it in your eyes, when poor Emma first knocked on the kitchen door and asked for work. You were so small and scrawny, Tom, but I could see a spark in your eyes. And I was right.’

Sometimes now I wish she could see what I’ve become.

I realise now how remarkable she was. The lady of a great manor, she seemed to understand common folk weren’t some inferior kind of men, fit only to be used and taxed by their rich masters.

Here in Kent, the labouring folk, bondsmen or not, are still mostly poor. And this new tax is a great injustice, for it demands the same three groats from everyone, rich or poor, noble or labourer. It’s a lot even for me to find – three days’ wages or thereabouts. But for my neighbour, Elias Parker, and his family, with his wife and three grown children all living at home, fifteen groats is impossible – they’ll have nothing left for food.

Five months ago, in January, Elias's two girls, Jane and Maud, went missing the day the tax collector came, as did all manner of youngsters, *and* elderly parents. It was a shock to see how many God-fearing folk were willing to swear their daughters were working somewhere the other side of the county, or their senile old mother had just died without any warning. But no one blamed them for their desperate lies and indeed all us neighbours rallied round.

Jane and Maud have gone missing today too, which is just as well, for Sir John Hoo's determined to collect all the taxes still unpaid, and he's not so much of a gentleman he won't stoop to some pretty low practices to ensure he does.

Everyone's been summoned to the guildhall to be accounted for. Elias Parker and his wife and son have come along and, when asked by the clerk, Elias, his face gaunt and grey, insists both his daughters no longer live at home.

'Our Jane's in service Canterbury way, and Maud's 'prenticed to a weaver up in Essex.' His hands are twitching, and it's obvious he's lying to anyone who knows him. The clerk presses him further but Sir John, maybe realising the two girls are lost to him this time, sighs and, waving Elias away, moves on to the next family, the Webbes.

I know Geoffrey Webbe by sight, though not to speak to. He's a weaver, and his wife, Anne, and oldest daughter, Isabel, work with him. But he's got two other younger daughters, as well as a boy of about seven. The tax collector's henchmen herded the whole family here from their home two streets away, and now they've all been called to stand before Sir John. In January, Geoffrey paid what he could but now still owes two groats each for himself, his wife and Isabel. Grudgingly, he steps forward, takes the coins from the purse on his belt and drops them noisily, one by one, onto the table.

'Your war money, sir,' he says, almost spitting the words into the taxman's face. A buzz of alarm flies round the hall, for these are rebellious words from a man who, by all accounts, is a gentle soul who shuns any sort of dissent.

Sir John certainly seems to consider Geoffrey's behaviour offensive, for his face grows dark and, growling, he puts his heavy, gold-ringed hands on the edge of the table and levers himself to his feet. Then, patting his rotund velvet-covered paunch, he slowly moves out from behind the table and, allowing a smirk to twist his mouth, comes to stand in front of Geoffrey's two younger daughters.

'You are blessed, Master Webbe, to have three lovely daughters, *three* helpmeets in your weaving shop. A fortunate man indeed!'

Beads of sweat are breaking out on Geoffrey's brow. 'Oh, no, sir!' he says, his defiance suddenly gone. 'Only Isabel works with us. The others are too young, still children—'

‘Surely not, Master Webbe,’ interrupts Sir John, his smile fading. ‘These girls are quite grown. More than enough grown, I warrant, to pay their taxes to their king.’

Then he leans towards the taller of the girls and, grasping the hem of her kirtle, lifts it sharply upwards, exposing her thin little legs. The girl bursts into tears, her mother screams and cries of disbelief race around the assembled company. Sir John takes no notice of the hubbub but lifts the kirtle a little higher and then peers closely beneath it for a few seconds. Then, nodding, he slowly lets it fall again. The girl runs wailing to her mother as Sir John turns to Geoffrey, whose expression seems to be hovering between shock, disbelief and rage.

‘I will let you off this year, Master Webbe,’ says Sir John, smirking again. ‘Perhaps your daughters are not yet fifteen after all.’

Anne Webbe cries out, ‘No, she’s not yet *fourteen*, sir, and you’ve shamed her in front of all this company!’

Sir John inclines his head towards her, maybe in a gesture of apology, but she spits upon the floor in front of him. Geoffrey takes a step towards the tax collector, one fist raised, but Anne grabs at her husband’s sleeve and pulls him back, and then pushes and shepherds her weeping family through the crowd and out of the guildhall.



The events in the guildhall leave a bitter taste in my mouth, and in those of my friends and neighbours. Several decamp to the tavern after the tax collector’s completed his business for the day. All consider the assault on the Webbe girl to be loathsome and demeaning, proving the contempt men like Sir John Hoo hold for working people such as us. It adds fuel to the fire of resentment already burning in our hearts over the injustice of the taxes. Tempers boil and voices are raised as debate rages about what we should or could do, not only to get justice for ourselves, but to change the way things are for ever.

‘Have you heard the priest, John Ball?’ I ask. One or two nod, though most shake their heads.

‘I’ll tell you what *he* says about all this,’ I say, and try to recall as best I can the words of the many sermons I’ve heard.

‘He talked about what he called the Great Society. Some folk in Essex, where John Ball comes from, believe there can be a new way. That the king’ll listen to his people if we take our plight direct to him.’

My companions raise their eyebrows or shake their heads at this, and one fellow snorts and scoffs.

‘You really think the king’ll take any notice of the likes of us?’

I shrug. ‘John Ball was certain, once the young king heard what we had to say, he’d be sure to help us.’

The fellow frowns, his disbelief unmoved. But the others nod and murmur: they want to believe in John Ball’s words as much as I do. By the end of the evening we’ve drunk a lot of ale and are all agreed – even the doubting fellow – we should go and ask the priest to be our leader.

But, only days later, we hear Archbishop Sudbury’s had enough of the mad priest and thrown him into Maidstone jail. Our plans for rebellion and justice are turned to dust.

VII.

I’m putting the finishing touches to an oak table for Richard Griggs, one of Maidstone’s most prosperous merchants. He’s bagged himself a fine young bride, the daughter of an alderman, and, to please her, is fitting out his whole house with new furniture. This table’s the first piece of fine furniture I’ve been asked to make and I’m anxious to make it well, for I find far more pleasure and reward in building furniture than roof trusses and plank doors.

I reckon myself fortunate to have my workshop in a good part of town, not far from the archbishop’s palace and the river, but the street, though narrow, is busy and noisy. I’m accustomed to the constant clatter of carts and horses, and the buzz of people passing to and fro. But my concentration’s disturbed when I realise there’s much more noise than usual, and it seems to be getting louder and closer.

‘Go and see what the row’s about,’ I call out to Adam, my young assistant.

The boy opens the workshop door a little way and peers out, then immediately lets out a shriek and bangs the door shut again.

I look up, irritated. ‘God’s eyes, lad, what the matter?’ I say, more gruffly than I meant.

He’s standing with his back to the door, his eyes wide. ‘Lots ’n’ lots of people! Like a great ’erd of ’ogs charging down the street.’

‘Which way are they going?’

‘Towards the palace.’

Annoyed at being interrupted, yet unable to resist seeing what’s afoot, I put down my chisel and mallet and go over, pushing Adam gently aside and opening the door again. It’s an astonishing sight: the narrow street is filled with hurrying people, mostly men but a few women too. All are brandishing weapons of some sort, knives, hammers, sickles, but also a few lances and bows, and they’re shouting and yelling, though I can’t make out their words. I grab the arm of a man as he passes close to my door and ask him what’s happening.

‘Ain’t you heard?’ he says, pulling away from my grasp. ‘We’re going to spring that priest from Sudbury’s jail.’

I let him go, excited by this news. They’re going to free John Ball! Maybe he can lead us after all? I go back in, glance over the tools upon my workbench and choose the adze, then push my way into the great crowd still streaming past my door. At once I’m swept along, and my heart’s soon beating, as much with disquiet as with excitement. For I know none of these people running alongside me: I know lots of folk in Maidstone but all of these are strangers.

‘Where’re you from?’ I say to the man closest to me.

‘Rochester,’ he says. ‘Weren’t you with us there?’

I shake my head, and he roars with laughter, his face red, his wild black hair escaping from his craftsman’s coif.

‘Ah, it were grand sport,’ he says, his eyes shining, ‘sacking the castle, letting all the prisoners out and giving old Sir John a taste of his own medicine.’

“Old Sir John” turns out to be Sir John Newton, the keeper of Rochester Castle. The man says he tried to stop them setting free his prisoners and ransacking the castle, but was himself seized and forced to join the mob as they hurried here to Maidstone to free the most important prisoner of all.

Moments later there’s nowhere left to run. The crowd’s grinding to a halt, squeezed into a narrow alleyway close by the archbishop’s palace. Not that my laughing friend and me are anywhere near the palace. We’re right at the back of the crowd and can’t see the front of it, though we can hear a great deal of shouting and jeering up ahead. We continue to press forward, despite complaints from those in front, and soon the dam bursts and we find ourselves swept forward once again, a great wave of bodies surging down towards the river’s banks.

As we near the palace, we find ourselves herded together on the grassy plain laid out before the towering building. All faces are turned in one direction, towards a man standing at the top of the grand stone staircase rising up to the palace entrance. He's preaching to the crowd, waving his arms wildly about his head. I can't see who the man is, and wonder if he's John Ball, released already from the palace dungeon. But this man's dressed not as a priest but in the hose and tunic of a working man.

'Who's that?' I say to my companion.

'Where've you been these past few days, mate?' he says, laughing again and slapping me on the back. 'That's Walter Tyghler, him who's brought us here to free John Ball.'

'What sort of man is he?'

'A tiler of course!' he says, raising his eyes to heaven, 'a working man, like you and me.'

Seconds later a great cheer goes up and the crowd surges forward once again.

But I don't rush forward to join those storming the palace, even though they're going to free John Ball. I'm excited by what's happening, but suddenly I'm fearful of it too. Despite my fighting talk in the tavern a few days ago, I'm not a brave man, or at least I'm not reckless. I've worked hard for what I've got and don't want to risk losing it by associating with a riotous mob. So I push my way back out of the crowd.

As I slip back into the workshop, closing the door firmly behind me, I see young Adam's crouching on his pallet, his eyes huge, their edges red and shiny. I go and put an arm around his shoulders.

'No need to be afraid. The mob's down at the palace. They're freeing that priest I told you about.'

Adam nods and sniffs.

'Let's get on with our work now, eh?' I say, ruffling his hair. He nods again and, grinning, picks up his broom and starts to sweep.

We work on together well into the evening, until the light's gone too much for me to see what my hands are doing. We eat a meal and, soon after, Adam lies down on his pallet beneath a bench and falls asleep. I sit on by a feeble fire, until the rush lights burn away completely. All evening long and well into the night, I can hear the sounds of shouting and jeering, the crash of masonry and the crackle of flames. Once or twice I look out of the door, afraid the attacks are coming closer, but I can see no one and the light of the fires is in the distance, on the other side of town, where the richer men of Maidstone live and work. I

remember John Ball urging his followers to rebel against the rich, and against the officials and lawyers who keep the common folk in servitude. Perhaps that's what they're doing now?

I think on what I saw today and wonder if I wish I'd stayed with the mob that stormed the palace – and was there with them now. I sleep little, restless on my pallet in the loft, even after the noise of rioting has died down. I doze off just as the sun's starting to rise and send its first rays winking through the shutters, and I'm awoken only moments later by Adam, shaking my shoulder and whispering 'Master!' in my ear.

'I've made up my mind,' I say to the lad, as I cut some bread and pour two cups of small ale. 'You stay here and mind the shop, but I'm going to find out what's afoot with Master Tyghler and that priest.'

'Ain't you afraid, master?' says Adam, his eyes wide again.

I nod. 'But I know what that priest said was right. And if this rebellion's going to win justice for folk like us, I want to play my part.'

VIII.

The rebels are not hard to find, camped out in the palace grounds, planning their next move. I go amongst them trying, in vain, to find my laughing companion from yesterday. But I'm close by the palace building when Master Tyghler comes forward from the crowd and, climbing the stone staircase, calls for silence. I see what a strong-looking man he is, a leader indeed, with an alert and noble face and a sturdy build.

'My friends,' he says, 'we must finish what we've started. Our course is clear. We must seek out all officers of the Crown, all servants of the traitor Gaunt, and all those Kentish lords who've so long forced us to submit unjustly to their demands.'

A cheer goes up and, grinning and, nodding, he raises his hand for quiet.

'We must demolish their property, ill-gotten from the riches they've gained at our expense! And we must find and destroy all the records of our subjugation. Then we can go to the king and, throwing ourselves down before him, swear allegiance to him alone. We'll ask him to restore the *natural* order that God ordained for the world: the world of king and commons, without need of self-serving, greedy so-called royal servants, whose only interest is to line their own pockets.'

All around me men are scrambling to their feet, their faces flushed with excitement, and, dousing fires, they gather together their scant belongings into bundles.

But Walter Tyghler speaks again.

‘First, my friends, we go to Canterbury. Let’s find the traitor Sudbury and call *him* to account!’

A huge cheer goes up, for Archbishop Sudbury is the chancellor of England and accountable for imposing the king’s taxes on his people. But many men here are his tenants too, on his Canterbury manors, and have other reasons to despise him. Once more, I’m swept along by the great crowd setting off on the road to Canterbury, eager to be part of it all.

At every village on the way, the locals come to greet us, asking the reasons for our march. Then one of them cries out this is the manor of Sir Somebody-or-Other or that’s the house of Lawyer So-and-So, and the mob falls upon the house, breaking down the doors and smashing windows. Then, bursting in, they fetch out the poor man and his family, along with their valuable belongings, and demand he hands over any documents that record his tenants’ servitude. A great fire’s lit upon the road outside the house and everything’s piled up and burned to ashes. And Sir Somebody-or-Other or Lawyer So-and-So is threatened with beheading, or their wives and daughters with violation, if they don’t swear loyalty to our cause and join us in our march for justice. Most of them at first protest but all at length agree, leaving their wives and children behind, weeping with fear and distress.

I confess I stand back somewhat from all this mayhem for, despite my keenness for the cause, I find myself faint-hearted. For I’m nervous of finding myself a felon, even if the cause is just, and I couldn’t bear to lose all I’ve achieved – my craft, my workshop, my future. Yet I continue on to Canterbury, marvelling at, yet sickened by, the trail of destruction we leave in our wake. I try all the time to bolster my own courage to play a proper part, for fear of being thought a traitor by my comrades.

This evening, I’m camped with a group of Maidstone men, some craftsmen like me, and labourers of course, but also a few men of means, tenants of large holdings or even land owners – all manner of men are come together in this march.

We gather round a fire, gratefully consuming the bread and ale we bought earlier, and debating the day’s events. I say little, keeping my disquiet to myself, though I’m careful to join in when my comrades show their approval for what occurred.

Then one of the yeomen, by the name of Humphrey Ware, a big, bluff man with a loud voice and a ruddy, cheerful face, digs in his pocket and pulls out a piece of paper.

‘You’ve heard of the priest, John Ball,’ he says.

Many nod. ‘We sprung him from Sudbury’s jail,’ says one, grinning and swigging back his ale.

I nod too, pleased to hear the “mad” priest’s name. ‘I saw him preach a while ago,’ I say, and some of the others say, ‘Aye! Me too!’

‘Well, since he was sprung,’ says Humphrey Ware, ‘he’s been sending letters around the place, urging men to rise up and join the cause.’ He waves the paper in the air. ‘I have one here.’

He begins to read.

*John Ball, priest of Saint Mary's, York, greets all men warmly
and, in the name of Father, Son and Holy Ghost, bids them
stand bravely side-by-side in truth. Uphold truth, and truth
shall be your aid.*

For now pride in wealth is prized, and greed considered wise.

Lechery bears no shame, and gluttony invites no blame.

Envy is in league with treason and sloth revels in high season.

But God will provide the answer, and now is the time. Amen

When he’s finished reading, we all raise our cups and hail the priest’s wise words. I feel a little cheered: all he says is surely true.



The morning of the third day after leaving Maidstone, we arrive at the great city of Canterbury. As in all the villages we’ve already passed through, the city folk welcome us with open arms and, hearing it’s their archbishop we want, guide us straight to the great church of Saint Thomas, where Edmund Goldynge and his company of pilgrims had been heading all those years ago.

Our church of Saint Mary in Maidstone – a short walk from my workshop, close by the archbishop’s palace – is a fine building. I’ve always thought it grand – grand indeed when I recall the little chapel at Burleigh – but, now I’m here in Canterbury, I can see how small Saint Mary’s is. For this cathedral of Saint Thomas is not just a church, but an altogether more magnificent construction. One end of the building is demolished, with huge piles of

masonry and timber, waiting to be rebuilt I suppose. But what's left is vast and wonderful, with a tall tower, a steeple on its roof, topped by a shining golden angel. I wish I could go inside, but gawping is not why we're here – we've come not as pilgrims but as seekers after justice.

I've seen little of Walter Tyghler since we left Maidstone and am disappointed that maybe he's no longer with us. But, as we near the cathedral, my heart lifts when he appears before the crowd. This time John Ball's with him – the first time I've seen the priest since he was freed from the archbishop's jail. The two men stand side by side at the great entrance door, facing the throng, who are yelling and brandishing their weapons, eager to burst through the door and track down the hated Sudbury. But when Master Tyghler raises his hand high into the air, silence falls and all turn towards their leaders.

It's John Ball who speaks.

'My friends, at last we've come to Sudbury's great church.' A raucous cheer goes up, but he quells it quickly with a solemn stare and then raises his hands in a gesture of prayer. 'But it is a holy place,' he goes on, and briefly bows his head. 'It's the traitor *Sudbury* we've come here to destroy, not God's holy church.'

A few voices of dissension rumble around the crowd, but most call out a fervent 'Aye!'

Walter Tyghler then steps forward and says only a small force will enter the cathedral and demand Sudbury be brought out and, as eager volunteers leap to their feet and hold up their hands, he chooses those who are to join him. I'm sorry not to be among them – to miss the chance of seeing inside.

IX.

Inside Canterbury's great cathedral of Saint Thomas, the monks are celebrating Mass. So, when the band of rebels invades the holy sanctum with their weapons, Master Tyghler insists they do not burst headlong and raucous through the door. Instead, he gestures to John Ball, who is wearing his priestly cassock, to open the door quietly and lead the rebels inside with the reverence they would feel in any of God's houses.

Approaching the high altar, they all kneel before the monks and bow their heads. A monk comes forward, his face red with

indignation at their interruption of the holy rituals. He demands to know what they want.

John Ball keeps his voice low. 'Brother, we mean those of you here no harm. It's the archbishop himself we seek.'

'Then your quest is in vain.' The monk's face takes on an unseemly smirk. 'For His Grace is not in Canterbury, but London.'

The still kneeling rebels exchange jeers of frustration and Walter Tyghler's face flushes dark. But he thinks for a moment before speaking to the monk.

'Well, Father, it matters not. We'll catch up with His Grace soon enough.'

The monk's smirk disappears as Walter continues.

'But I counsel you to elect a new archbishop from amongst yourselves. For Sudbury's a traitor: to the king he professes to serve, and most especially to the people whose welfare he, as chancellor and archbishop, is supposed to defend.'

The monk's face reddens and he starts to protest, but Master Tyghler shakes his head and holds up his hand to stop him speaking. 'It's our intention that Sudbury'll pay the highest penalty for his treachery.' He draws out his long knife from his belt and, lifting the blade to a few inches below his throat, sweeps it sideways.

The other monks, who have ceased their prayers and are listening to the exchange in shocked silence, gasp at the heartless gesture and cross themselves, and one or two cry out and fall quaking to their knees.

Walter Tyghler looks up at the rows of distraught monks, their mouths agape in horror. He grins, then returns his knife to its sheath, rises to his feet and signals to his men to do the same.

'We'll leave you, Father. We've plenty other traitors to hunt down today.'

X.

A huge bonfire's blazing in the cathedral square. Some of my comrades are ransacking another of the archbishop's palaces – the one standing next to Saint Thomas's great church – and are throwing valuables and documents onto the flames, cheering as each silver chalice blackens and melts, and each parchment shrivels up and flutters aloft in ashy scraps. Craftsmen and other Canterbury folk have joined us here, describing with great glee the other bonfires burning outside the homes of lawyers and other city worthies, their owners having fled in fear.

When Walter and his band of rebels emerge from the cathedral, he sends messengers to the leading men of Canterbury – the mayor, the bailiffs and several of the richer citizens – demanding they come without delay here to the cathedral square. While we wait, Walter paces up and down, a scowl upon his face. He stops from time to time to speak to John Ball or another of his rebel army, and then resumes his agitated marching.

But we don't have long to wait for, shortly, amidst a great commotion of shouting and jeering, a number of the summonsed citizens come into view, herded along the street by an angry yet excited crowd of townsfolk. Walter Tyghler stops his pacing and a thin smile brightens his gloomy face.

'Aha!' he cries. 'At last, the worthies of this fair city have graced us with their presence!'

The men are pushed forward by their drovers and made to kneel before him. He demands to know their names and titles. One or two resist answering at first, but the townsfolk are in no mood for prevarication and, with a few blows to their captives' heads, persuade them all to speak. I'm discomfited yet exhilarated to see these men, dressed in velvet and fine cloth and wearing the baubles of their offices, upon their knees and cringing, subject now to the whims of those who, up till now, *they*'d always forced to kneel and cringe.

Walter Tyghler steps forward and leans very close towards the three men nearest to him.

'Well now, my lord mayor,' he says, his tone mocking, 'and well now, master bailiffs.'

The stout lord mayor, despite wobbling on his knees, lifts his head and, straightening his back, looks Master Tyghler directly in the eye. He protests the roughness of his treatment but one of Tyghler's henchmen lunges forward, his dagger in his hand, and holds the tip of it against the mayor's throat. The mayor shrieks, and howls of laughter burst from the watching crowd.

‘Ha ha!’ crows someone. ‘Just hear the fat pig squeal!’ And the laughter erupts into a clamour of piggy squealing.

Walter Tyghler shakes his head and grins.

‘No, no, my lord mayor, this isn’t the time for *you* to protest and make demands. It’s *we* who are now making the demands!’

A cheer goes up from the crowd and, smiling and nodding, Walter waits for quiet before continuing.

‘And the demand we’re making, my lord, is this – that you’ll join with us in swearing an oath of faith and fealty to King Richard, and to the *true* commons.’

The mayor looks confused for a moment but then seems to understand and shakes his head. The henchman lunges forward with his dagger and again applies its point to the mayor’s jowly neck.

‘But you don’t have a choice,’ says Master Tyghler, grinning. ‘Swear, my lord! And you too, master bailiffs. Swear!’

Then, quaking, all those worthy citizens of Canterbury do swear the oath and, thinking their ordeal over, begin to get up off their knees, expecting no doubt to scuttle home. But Master Tyghler shakes his head and demands they kneel again.

‘No, don’t go yet, my worthy lords and masters. ‘For, you see, we need your help.’

He then calls for the names of Canterbury’s traitors. Of course, none of the men wish to betray their friends and neighbours, but more dagger tips are applied, along with threats of slitting throats, and it’s not long before three names are offered up.

It’s now I realise how afraid I am of what will befall those men.

News soon comes that the men named as traitors have been dragged from their homes and beheaded in the street outside, amidst much jeering from the Canterbury commons. And, for the rest of the day, townsfolk join the Maidstone rebels in harrying and looting all over town, setting bonfires, destroying houses and beating, or worse, their wealthy occupants. By evening, the city is shrouded in black foul-smelling smoke, and the streets are cut across with runnels of blood mingled with flaky ash and the charred fragments of documents and timbers.

I stare at Canterbury’s streets with confusion and alarm. Calling upon the rich to account for their unjust actions, and burning records of their servants’ bondage – these I can understand. But not murder and the wanton destruction of property. Not for the first time, I

wonder why I'm here. The cause I came here to support is surely just, but the winning of it seems nothing more than malevolence and malice.

I'm not sure I want to be part of it. Yet something's persuading me to stay.

XI.

This evening, as I'm sitting around a fire with my comrades, Humphrey Ware runs over, waving a paper much like the one he had before.

'Another letter from John Ball?' I say.

He shrugs. 'I'm not sure, though it sounds very much the same. But this one seems to have come from our Essex comrades. Listen.'

John Shepherd, some time Saint Mary priest of York, and now of Colchester, greets warmly John Nameless, John Miller and John Carter, and bids them beware of dishonesty in the borough.

Stand together in God's name! Bid Piers Ploughman go to his work, but take John Trueman and all his fellows with you. But look sharp and trust one leader only, and no more.

I frown. 'That letter you read before, from John Ball, said *he* was priest of Saint Mary, York. So is this John Shepherd the same man? Is *he* John Ball too?'

Humphrey nods but others purse their lips. 'But who're all these other fellows,' says one, his brow creasing in confusion, 'John Miller, John Carter, Piers Ploughman – what kind of name is that! – and John Trueman?'

Humphrey holds up his hand. 'I don't think they're real men. I agree with Tom, this *is* John Ball again. He's calling on all of us to join the cause – millers, carters, all honest men. But to leave the ploughmen at home, as we need them to work the fields.'

'That seems right to me,' I say, and others nod their heads too, though a few still seem uncertain.

'But listen to the rest,' says Humphrey. 'This is more like verse.'

John Miller has ground small, small, small.

The king of heaven's son shall pay for all.

*But you beware or you'll find woe.
 Be sure you know your friend from foe.
 Take just enough then say 'No more!'
 Do well and then do better, and ever keep away from sin,
 Always seek the way of peace, and keep yourself therein.*

‘Surely it’s a message to us all,’ I say, ‘so we know what to do to help the cause? Be sure of your friends, be modest, honest, and peaceable, and do the best we can. I’m happy with that!’



Master Tyghler’s much fired up by the prospect of talking to the king – he’s certain the king will meet him, and listen to our demands. His zeal convinces many of us to go on with him and, despite yesterday’s chaos and exhaustion, we rise early and set out on the road to Dartford. It’s a hard march: we walk fast and stop little, eager to reach our destination. We reach Dartford early next morning and, in the afternoon, come to a place south of the city of London called Blackheath.

The heath’s teeming with folk. Some, we discover, come from Essex and many others from villages on every side of London, here to share what seems more like revelry than a march for justice. As we men of Kent are setting up our camp, a messenger arrives, come from the king himself and looking for Walter Tyghler. When he’s listened to the king’s words and given the messenger his reply, Walter climbs onto his palfrey to give himself more height and calls for our attention.

‘King Richard wants to know, the reason for what he calls the “dreadful events” in Kent and Essex and elsewhere.’ He grins, and laughter ripples round the crowd. ‘He’s asking what it is we want. So I’ve sent word back we want to save him from his treacherous advisors, the traitors who are laying waste his kingdom!’

A great cheer goes up and many shout out ‘Aye!’ But, although it may be true, his words seem brazen to my ears, and I’m not alone among my comrades in thinking it might bring a sharp retort.

Messengers fly back and forth all afternoon between Walter and the king, but when Walter announces the king’s final answer, we’re both astonished and jubilant.

‘The king will meet us tomorrow morning,’ he says, his face alight, ‘at Greenwich, not far from here.’

Walter and John Ball grin broadly at each other and everyone cheers and slaps each other on the back.

‘If the king’s agreed to meet us,’ says one fellow, ‘surely we must’ve been right to come to London?’

‘The king *knows* what we want,’ says another, ‘for Walter’s already told him we just want to put right the injustice in this land.’

‘To show him how ill his advisers are serving him and his people,’ says a third.

I nod too. ‘If he’s agreeing to meet us, he must be willing to hear what we’ve got to say.’

‘You might say the king’s given us his blessing,’ says Walter, with a grin, as by chance he passes us close by and overhears our conversation. We all nod happily.

Everyone’s so aroused many can’t settle for a quiet evening around our fires, and roar off west to a place called Southwark, where it seems all manner of merrymaking can be found. I daresay they’ll welcome a few cups of ale after their long hard march from Canterbury, and many’ll welcome too the comfort of a woman, with their wives so far away at home. But I’ve never been one for alehouses or stews. And I’m not alone in preferring to wrap my cloak around me and sit by the fire telling stories of what we’ve seen, and what we hope to see tomorrow.

Before I settle down to sleep, I stand up and look about me. We’re on a hill. To the north is the wide river Thames and London itself. It isn’t far to the river and I think I can still see boats plying up and down, their lanterns winking in the falling darkness. Across the heath I can see the lights of thousands of campfires, and the sight of them is wondrous: more people are in this one place than I’ve ever seen before or ever thought it possible to see. That so many have come together for this great cause gives me comfort: so many people surely can’t be wrong.

I’m already asleep when the revellers return, and I’m awoken by some clumsy fellows tripping over my outstretched legs. There’s much cursing and complaining of bellyaches and pounding heads, but it’s mixed with a cheerful retelling of the evening’s adventures. Tired as I am, it’s hard not to get caught up in their tales of mayhem and disorder, their drinking and their whoring. They make it all sound more like a merry shindig than the mischief making I suspect it really was.

A chilly summer wind blows across the heath and, shivering, I pull my cloak tight about me. Many of the cooling campfires gutter in the breeze, and ash is whisked into the air and flutters, moth like, down upon our heads. Though I crave sleep, I lie awake, so fired up by the revellers' high spirits I feel I can almost touch the anticipation of what's to happen in the morning.

XII.

Despite the carousing of the previous night, most are up early and ready for the day. It's an important day: when our hopes of freedom might at last be fulfilled. It's also the feast of Corpus Christi, surely a good omen for our meeting with the king – a day to celebrate our unity with *him* as well as Christ. The buildings and streets of London are bedecked with flags and streamers, and the city's full of folk come here to share the revelry. We're far away from home and our familiar processions and merrymaking, but we're all as eager as children for the day to start.

Though everyone's in a state of high excitement, no one protests when John Ball climbs onto a platform set up on the highest point of Blackheath Hill, to celebrate the Mass. It must be a wondrous sight for him, to gaze over such a sea of people, all reverently kneeling and looking to him for God's guidance on this most hopeful day. It's wondrous to me too, kneeling there midst such a throng, listening to the whispered responses swelling together like a sudden wind rustling the forest's leaves.

When the sacred Mass is over, John Ball takes the chance to inspire his congregation in their march for justice. His sermon begins, as I've heard many times before, with his plea that things won't go well in England until all men and women are equal. This surely was the original state of things, he says, the state God *designed* for the world.

'*This is God's will for us,*' he says, spreading out his arms in an all-embracing gesture. 'The only way God's will can be done is for those traitors responsible for the ruin of the kingdom, and the subjugation of the true commons, to be overthrown: Archbishop Sudbury, the so-called *royal* servants, and all the other servants of the state. All the lawyers, justices and other instruments of government, those who carry out the oppression of the true commons, must be cast out, and the records of our oppression destroyed. The time has come, my friends, for us to cast aside the yoke of servitude and serfdom!'

Great cheering follows John Ball's speech, but, despite it, I know I'm not alone in thinking that what we've come to do is not a cause for merriment but serious and dangerous.

We already know our leaders' plan is not to overthrow the archbishop but to murder him – I heard that Walter Tyghler said so to the monks in Canterbury – and I fear this is the fate in store for all the other men our gentle priest calls traitors.

I'm a poor sort of rebel! My heart's in the cause, but not in the ways of winning it. I think well of Walter Tyghler, but am terrified of what he's pressing us to do. As we gather up our few possessions for our short march to Greenwich, my heart's beating with excitement, and my head's full of John Ball's stirring words. Yet, as we set off to meet the king, my mouth's dry and my hands are clammy.

Perhaps, I think, this is how soldiers feel as they wait for their captain to cry 'Forward!'



We gather on the shore at Greenwich, a rather ragged, yet respectful, army, our Saint George flags and dozens of pennants fluttering in the light summer breeze. We're excited, proud to be lined up like soldiers behind our general, Walter Tyghler. He's sitting straight-backed and dignified on his little black horse, and our priest, John Ball, is astride a brown palfrey, his smiling face shining out from beneath his dun-coloured hood.

We watch as the king's barge approaches, richly decorated in blue and gold and glinting in the sunshine, all holding our breath as the oars dip slowly and rhythmically in and out of the dark Thames waters, bringing our golden young king closer and closer towards us. We welcome King Richard with cheers and hurrahs and some throw their caps and hoods into the air.

Then the barge stops and remains floating in the water yards from the beach, with the king still on it. He makes no attempt to come ashore. Our cheering dies in our throats, replaced by mutterings of incredulity and confusion. Then a man climbs down from the barge into a little boat and is rowed to the riverbank, where he steps out and, striding across the mud towards Walter Tyghler, hands him a message from the king. As Master Tyghler reads the message, his face darkens and he swears out loud, then turns and thrusts the paper at John Ball, who reads it too and, shaking his head, calls down God's wrath upon the king's advisors. Both men dismount and gather together the small group of their most trusted followers and debate what next to do.

The rest of us wait to hear what they decide.

Word flies around that the king's asked for a list of our demands, a petition. A young priest, Nicholas Hibbard – one of the few here who can write and who's become Walter's clerk – is writing a reply. When it's written, Walter Tyghler hands it to the messenger.

We wait again. Walter paces up and down; John Ball falls to his knees and looks to Heaven. But when the messenger returns, the king's reply's evidently not what Walter hoped to read.

The barge turns around and is rowed back towards the Tower. The king must've rejected our demands.

Our disappointment and disbelief flare into fury, and mutterings become howls of rage. Walter Tyghler climbs wearily back onto his little horse and, holding up his hand, demands silence. His face is black, and he's shaking, but seems too to be making an effort to control his anger, presumably to try and control ours.

'The king does not understand. He does not understand the loyalty that we – his true commons – owe him. And he does not understand that our demands are intended to *free* him from those traitors who are robbing the royal purse and perverting justice in his realm.'

The crowd yells 'Aye!' and my heart's beating fast as I join in, my throat soon hoarse from shouting.

Walter's face breaks into a cruel grin as he continues. 'We told the king we wanted nothing less than the heads of those traitors! Archbishop Sudbury—'

A massive jeer of approval bursts forth from the crowd.

'Robert Hales—'

Another jeer for the king's treasurer.

'John of Gaunt—'

That name brings the loudest jeer of all but, as Walter carries on, naming more of the best known and most despised of the king's advisors and officials, our fury grows and so does his. Soon his controlled calm seems to crumble for he's shouting in concert with our jeering.

Then finally he roars out the watchword, 'Who are you with?'

'With King Richard and the true commons!' roar back the rebels, their faces both dark with anger and alight with fervour.

Walter had so wanted to talk to the king, to meet him face-to-face, so the king could see how sincere and earnest were our demands. But it seems as if the time for talking's passed.

He gives us our orders: we're going to cross London Bridge into the city itself, where we'll meet up with our fellow dissenters from Essex, as well as those from London city, and we'll see what happens next. Walter turns his palfrey with a flourish and, with John Ball at his side, rides west, with us, his army, marching furiously in his wake.

XIII.

Everyone knows of John of Gaunt: the king's uncle, the first Duke of Lancaster and England's ruler near enough since Richard – then still a child of ten – was crowned four years ago. Already Gaunt's the most hated and distrusted of the king's advisors, because of the wealth he's amassed and the many castles and lands he's somehow acquired. He's not the king, but the way he lives it seems he thinks he is. Yet he's not earned the commons' good opinion by winning battles to support the king, or by giving his nephew wise advice. Instead, the wars he fights pursue his *own* ends rather than the country's, and are at great cost to the Crown. And it's he who pushed through the loathsome taxes that have paid for his adventures, and are the principal reason why we men of Kent and Essex are rampaging with the men of London through their city's streets.

We cross over London Bridge – someone opened the gate for us – then Walter leads us west. I see sights along the way that take my breath from me: so many grand buildings, so many churches – one at every street corner, it seems. One church I come across is vast, so broad and wide, with a spire so tall it seems to climb right up into the clouds. I'd thought Canterbury's cathedral wondrous but this is such that surely God Himself has built it. While my fellow rebels rush on, eager for mayhem, I have to stop and look. I stand before the church and, tipping my head right back, look up to the spire's very top.

When I lift my head up again, my eyes see black with sparks of light and for a moment I can't stand firm. But I soon recover and rejoin the crowds of people heading west. As we march, some chant the words of a song I'm sure I've heard somewhere before: "*When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?*".

It's the middle of the day and the sun's burning bright and hot. The humour of the crowd is just as fiery. From what they say, their eagerness is not excited so much as furious: fury at the king's refusal to meet the deputation at Greenwich, mixed with a lust for retribution for generations of injustice.

When the rebels – I can't begin to guess how many there now are – come to a grand street they call the Strand, they break into a run, eager to reach the object of their most bitter resentment: Gaunt's London palace, the Savoy. I've never seen a street like this, with its broad stone paving, its towering mansions with gates and gardens, turrets and battlements, and a hundred windows glinting in the sunshine. Here's the London I've imagined, and I can't help but wonder at it. But when we reach the Savoy itself, I stand in amazement once again, for here's a man's *house* – not a castle – yet it's a house *beyond* imagining for a simple Kentish carpenter, still less a Dorset cottar boy.

The palace's destruction is already begun. The gates in the high walls are breached, the buildings inside the walls under attack: not only the stone mansion itself, but the chapel, the courtyard with its monkish cloisters, and the stable block big enough for a whole battalion of horses. Men carrying torches run up and down the staircases, in and out of doorways. Others are bringing things outside to the bonfires in the gardens. Furniture, tapestries, clothes and all manner of precious objects are thrown into the flames as if they're worthless rubbish.

I stand for a moment in the gardens, which I can see were, only a short while ago, a wondrous arrangement of arbours and pergolas, parterres and herbers – much like Burleigh, but even grander. But the garden's beauty is already ruined: everything's being torn down, trampled and put to the torch.

I run forward with the others, though in truth I don't know why, or if, I want to join this mayhem. I find myself inside the great hall, already near to ruination, for a huge fire's blazing in the middle of the floor. My heart contracts as I see a table – very like the one I was labouring over back in my workshop just days ago, though much more richly carved – hefted into the air by two burly fellows who then chuck it carelessly onto the flames.

I want to run forward and save it, but I don't.

After all, none of this is for any individual gain. Walter Tyghler made it clear that looting's not allowed, the task only to destroy those riches unjustly won by traitors. Though it grieves me to see such destruction, I must show I'm part of this great cause, not an unwilling onlooker. But I can't bring myself to destroy furniture, and turn to the great quantities of gold and silver plate stored in barrels in the cellars beneath the hall. I allow myself to smash dozens of shining silver goblets with my heavy adze, beating them out of shape, and I help to roll some of the barrels through the gardens, down to the gates that give onto the banks of the Thames, where others cast them into the river.

When for the third time I return to the hall to fetch more plate to smash, I hear terrible screams rising above the uproar. Looking towards the immense fire in the middle of the hall, already spreading up to the rafters and to the upper floor, I see a man writhing in the flames. I run forward, but some fellows grab me and pull me back.

'He were caught trying to pocket a silver goblet,' says one. 'We all know the rules.'

'So what happened to him?' I say.

'He were thrown into the fire along with his goblet, and the same'll happen to anyone else caught looting.'

Sickened, I pull myself free from the men's grasp, and run out of the hall and back into the gardens. I find the remains of an arbour and tuck myself inside. I crouch down, shaking, and tears spring to my eyes. This terrible disorder is not what I expected of our glorious march for justice. Angrily I wipe the tears away with my sleeve, and tell myself I'm a fool to imagine it'd be different – don't injustice and revenge always drive men to act against their better natures? Haven't I also acted the vilest ruffian?

I might believe in this cause, but I can't stomach this way of winning it.

I think, again, of running away, leaving my fellow rebels – the true rebels! – to their mischief and going back to Maidstone. But, as I'm thinking, there's suddenly a bang so loud my whole body shudders and, leaping to my feet, I run out to see what's happened. It's a shocking sight: the whole of the Savoy's ablaze. As I watch, showers of stone and fragments of timber shoot into the air: something must've exploded in the heat of the fire. As the great building collapses into itself, I pray no one was left inside.

The destruction of the Savoy complete, bands of rebels run off in all directions. But, weary of it all, I don't go with them. All I want is to hear the king agree to our demands. But, with so much of London in flames, surely King Richard'll never agree to meet us now.

The cause seems lost, and I feel a great yearning for my workshop and my home.



As afternoon fades into evening, I head east, thinking to find my way back to London Bridge and from there to Blackheath and the road back down to Kent. But I don't know the streets of London. I find Saint Paul's again, but once I've left the great cathedral behind me, I'm lost. Yet, before long, I realise I'm not far from the river, and make my way down to the bank hoping I can work out where I am.

I then see how close I am to the Tower of London. Looking down river, I can see crowds of people milling around at the bottom of the huge castle walls. I'm suddenly relieved: maybe the men I came with are there, and I retrace my steps up to the narrow street and set off in their direction. When I reach the castle, I find not only Kentishmen camped at the foot of its walls, but Walter Tyghler and John Ball there with them.

I ask some fellows what's afoot.

One cocks his head towards the castle walls. 'He's up there, the king, with his *advisers*.' He grins. 'Master Tyghler's waiting for him to make a move.'

'Does he think the king'll agree to a meeting?'

The fellow shrugs. ‘Daresay he’s hoping.’

Thinking then there might yet be a chance for Walter to meet King Richard – and for me to see the king agree to our demands – I decide after all to wait it out. I find a small space to sit down beneath the castle walls. I lean against the wall and feel the roughness of the stone pressing into my back. I let the sharp stone dig in as I bow my head and cup my hands over it.

‘You seem melancholy,’ says a voice close by, and I look up to see the young priest, Nicholas Hibbard, sitting only feet away. ‘Not what you expected?’

I shake my head. ‘Not such mayhem.’

‘You feel it fits ill with talk of truth and justice?’ This was a question. So did he not agree?

‘You can understand how strongly folk feel about the injustice they suffer daily.’

He purses his lips and nods. ‘And how else can they obtain redress?’

I shrug and look away. I don’t know the answer and feel unable to debate the matter.

I’m glad the priest does not pursue it. Instead he frowns. ‘Perhaps you should not have joined them in their mayhem?’ He indicates my clothes.

I look down and notice for the first time how blackened they are. My good serge jacket is flecked with black specks and scorched in several places. I pull off my cap and find it covered in fine ash. The priest then waves a finger towards my face, grimacing. I wipe my hand across it, and hold up my fingers to show him. He grins.

‘Your face is both black with smoke and reddened from the heat.’

‘But yours is neither. Were you not with us at the Savoy?’

Nicholas Hibbard shakes his head. ‘I understand the yearning for revenge but laying waste is not my way.’

‘So what is?’

He smiles. ‘Negotiation. There can be no other way for civilised men.’



During the evening, a messenger emerges from a small gate in the Tower walls and climbs onto an abandoned cart. Raising his voice, he announces he has a message from the king, then waits for the boisterous crowd to quieten. He holds up the parchment.

‘His Grace, King Richard the Second of England, greets his loyal subjects and sends them this message. The king gives great thanks to his good commons for their loyalty, and he grants them pardon for all their trespasses and felonies—’

A cheer goes up, but the messenger frowns and raises his hand for quiet.

‘But he wills and commands that everyone should now quickly return to his own home and set down his grievances in writing and send it to him. He will then provide a remedy that will be profitable to himself, his commons and the whole kingdom.’

The cheering turns immediately to howls of rage, and shouts of ‘Insult!’ and ‘Shame!’ are hurled at the messenger. But he just shrugs, climbs down from the cart and retreats inside the castle walls.

‘What’s the king think he’s playing at?’ says a fellow near me.

‘He’s not going to meet us after all,’ says another. ‘He’s betrayed us!’

‘How can *we* write down our “grievances”?’ says a third. ‘We’re not clerks and lawyers!’

I look across at Nicholas and my eyes meet his. He shakes his head slowly, then holds out his hands in a gesture of despondency.

But Walter Tyghler then runs forward, his face a mix of fury and frustration, and climbs up onto the cart.

‘Friends!’ he cries. ‘Our young king doesn’t understand. We’ve clearly not made it plain enough to him what it is we want. Let’s ask once more for a meeting and try to put our demands to him again.’

Nicholas purses his lips at this and nods. In the crowd many cries of ‘Aye!’ go up, but mostly angry, resentful shouts are raised. Some men leap to their feet in temper, brandishing their weapons, and say they’re going off to find more lawyers. Walter looks angry too but shrugs and climbs down from the cart.

XIV.

Walter Tyghler and his closest companions sit together in the house of Thomas Farringdon, a rich man yet an enthusiastic supporter of the cause. Over mazers of Master Farringdon’s good ale, they talk long and hard.

They agree they have the upper hand, for the king does not seem to know what to do for the best.

Walter smiles at his companions. 'We're in a good position to press for what we want. To change forever the way things are between villeins and their lords. Men's lives are ruled by the ties that bind them to their manor. We know this isn't right. It's not according to God's *natural* laws, as John has so often told us. Our new demands will put right these injustices. Surely, the king'll see how fair and reasonable they are?'

At length, the young priest, Nicholas Hibbard, takes out a parchment and his pens and ink and begins to write, as Walter paces up and down the room, saying aloud the words they have all agreed. 'Men must no longer be *bound* to their lords, but be free to work wherever they wish.'

He pauses to let Nicholas write the words, then continues. 'All villeins must be allowed to sell their produce in any fair or market, wherever they choose, instead of handing over the surplus from their labours to their lord.'

A pause. 'All land throughout the kingdom must be rented at the fixed rate of four pence an acre.' He grins. 'To stop those greedy lords fleecing their tenants by charging whatever they like.'

Nicholas looks up in quizzical alarm and Walter laughs out loud. 'You don't need to write that down, Nicholas!'

Revitalised as they are by their hopes and expectations, a few of the group become impatient, waiting for the young clerk to finish his slow and careful penning of their demands. They are relieved when he writes the final word and, lifting the parchment to his lips, blows on the ink to dry it. Then, with a smile, he hands the parchment to Walter Tyghler who holds it aloft and give a brief, if bitter, laugh. 'Surely, my friends, the king'll acknowledge these as his people's just demands?'

They all roar in agreement and raise their mazers, well pleased with their evening's work.

XV.

When Walter and his council return to the Tower, they find the king's made a move. For a short while ago, the king's messenger came again to tell everyone to meet the king tomorrow morning at a place outside the city called Mile End.

So our chance for a meeting with the king's come after all.



Very early next morning, we're all getting ready to walk to Mile End, when one of Walter's spies, a stringy wall-eyed fellow, who's been keeping watch on the comings and goings at the Tower, comes running.

Having listened to the man's news, Walter climbs up onto the cart and calls for silence.

'The king's preparing to trick us. He's gone to the meeting place but left the traitors Sudbury and Hales behind here in the Tower, so they can make their escape while we're all chatting up at Mile End.'

His face begins dark with irritation, but then it lightens.

'But we'll not let them get away!' he cries, grinning. 'So, my friends, a change of plan: I'll not go with you to Mile End but will stay here with a strong party of our comrades. We'll guard the Tower and make certain those traitors don't slip away.'

Naturally, everyone cheers.



As we take the road north from the Tower and pass through the Ald Gate, we're joined by a sea of people, both Londoners and rebels from the counties round about, all thronging towards the great open space at the little village of Mile End where, they say, fairs and tournaments and games are held. Most are chatting and laughing. They seem quite different from yesterday's rabble: not fired up with anger but glad to be going to see their king.

But one fellow pulls out another letter. 'See 'ere!' he says, waving the crumpled paper about his head. 'Can anyone 'ere read?'

Nicholas Hibbard's walking with me and calls out to the fellow. 'I can. What is it?'

The fellow shrugs. 'Dunno. There're lots of 'em about...'

He hands the paper to Nicholas. ‘It’s another of those letters,’ says Nicholas. ‘But not from John Ball this time, it seems.’

Jack Carter begs all of you to make a good end of what you have begun, do well and even better. For if the end is good, then all will be well. My brother Piers the ploughman will stay at home and harvest the wheat for us, but I’m coming with you to bring you food and drink, so as to keep you going.

Be sure you punish Hob the Robber for his betrayal of you, and keep God with you in everything you do.

Now is the time...

‘There’s that “Piers the ploughman” fellow again,’ I say, shaking my head in puzzlement. ‘And who is “Hob the Robber”, do you think?’

Nicholas shrugs. ‘As before, I reckon neither is a real man. I think “Hob” is just a nickname for all those rogues, both high and low, who dare to rob the king and commons.’

But the other fellow coughs and taps Nicholas on the shoulder. ‘But I’ve ’eard, young priest, that “Ob” stands for “Robert”, and we all know who ’e is, don’t we? Robert ’Ales!’



When we arrive at Mile End, the king’s party’s lined up on one side of the great field. The nobles and knights are a splendid sight, in their fine, parti-coloured clothes, their armour glinting in the sunlight. I look about me at the vast band of rebels who’ve gathered here, and see how wretched most must look to the young king’s eyes. For days, we’ve been marching, looting and burning, night after night sleeping on the ground in makeshift camps, and many have spent their evenings in the stews of Southwark or drinking themselves into a stupor. Surely this band of subjects come here hoping to win the sympathy of their golden boy king, however loyal they may be, will more likely earn his loathing and disgust?

The crowd kneels to welcome Richard. Then Nicholas Hibbard – Walter’s spokesman here – speaks, raising his gentle voice so all can hear. ‘Welcome, our lord, King Richard. If it please you, we wish to have no other king but you.’

Sitting astride a great black charger, his velvet cloak flowing over the horse’s flanks, King Richard’s straight-backed and his head, a small crown encircling his yellow curls, is held high. Yet, for all his princely presence, his face looks pale. Our king’s still a boy – only a year or two older than Adam – and it must be frightening to face such a vast and ill-

favoured crowd, even with his great retinue of nobles and knights behind him. But when he speaks, his voice is calm and clear.

‘Sirs, I am your king, and I have come here to listen to you. Tell me what it is you want.’

He listens intently as Nicholas then reads out the demands written on the parchment. The king nods and smiles, and, when he’s heard it all, steadies himself in the saddle, lets go the reins and holds out his hands towards us.

‘I have listened carefully to your demands, and I agree to them all...’ A buzz of excitement runs round the waiting crowd, but the king, smiling, raises a hand for silence.

‘But I do ask you now,’ he goes on, ‘to go home. Go back to your homes and your families.’

‘God’s Eyes, not again!’ grumbles one fellow near me, but he’s promptly hushed up by others as the king has more to say.

‘However, every village should leave one man here, and tomorrow I will have charters drawn up containing all your demands and sealed with the royal seal. Each man will return to his village bearing the charter that promises all of you the freedom you desire.’

The buzz swells into a great cheer, and I hear many around me saying our young king’s wise after all, and noble, for at last he’s giving us our freedom. Then some people start to shuffle away and leave the Mile End field, declaring, in loud and cheerful voices, they’ve got what they came for and can now go home.

But the king’s not yet finished speaking.

‘Moreover, I command you to find those men who are traitors to our kingdom, and bring them before me, so they can be tried according to the law.’

He looks satisfied enough as he says this, though I wonder if he really means it. For, as soon as he’s said it, two or three of my comrades say to each other the king’s surely just given leave for the traitors in the Tower to be brought to justice. They leap to their feet and push their way out through the crowd. I can see they’re heading south to Tower Hill.

The confidence I had moments ago, that the king’s declaration of our freedom meant this unhappy uprising was over, is already draining away. I jump up too and try to follow the others back towards the Ald Gate. But it’s hard to get away from Mile End. I find myself struggling against crowds of people: those from Essex, I suppose, streaming in the opposite direction, east, away from London altogether. Others, London folk, perhaps, once through the Gate, then head north and west.

But I go south and cover the short distance from there to Tower Hill at a run.



Whether Walter waited for the tip off that the king had sanctioned the capturing of traitors, or whether he'd already entered the castle, I can't tell. But it's clear some of Walter's supporters found their way inside the castle walls and hunted down Archbishop Sudbury, as well as treasurer Robert Hales and three other men I don't recognise. For they've all been brought out and are being herded to the top of Tower Hill, all the while protesting their innocence and pleading for their lives. But the crowds of my comrades who line the slopes are not in a forgiving humour, and neither, it seems, is Walter Tyghler, nor even Christ's gentle servant, John Ball, both waiting on the hill.

The crowd jeers and yells for the heads of those five wretched men, now being put in a line and forced to kneel side by side. Walter gives a signal and two of his henchmen approach the archbishop, whose eyes are closed and hands pressed tightly together as his lips move, presumably in prayer. Roughly, each man grabs one of his hands, forcing them apart, and wrenches each arm behind his back, holding him fast. At the same time they push down on the back of the old man's head and pull back his cowl to expose his neck. Then a third man steps forward, a giant of a man, with a hood covering his whole head apart from two holes for his eyes, and carrying a great axe. The archbishop's quaking, and his fellow traitors moan and wail at the horror of what undoubtedly awaits them too.

As the huge man raises his axe, the crowd's cries rise to sickening screams. I turn my head away, unable to face the grisly sight, but I can't close my ears to the ghastly sound of the axe head chopping through the bones of that old man's neck, not once but eight times, before the poor man's head tumbles to the ground. I want to flee this horror, but can't show my disgust: I must force myself to cheer and yell alongside my comrades, as the other so-called traitors are likewise compelled to expose their necks.



After the terrible events on Tower Hill, a great host of Kentish rebels, seemingly fired up by those ghastly murders into a lust for yet more blood, roar off back into the streets of London, yelling for the heads of anyone who might be a traitor. Some take with them the bleeding heads of the five murdered men, held aloft on the tips of lances, as a gruesome banner of their triumph and a warning to other traitors of what's to befall them.

I don't go with them.

Neither does Nicholas Hibbard, nor Walter Tyghler nor John Ball, nor any of Walter's closest group of supporters: they remain on the Hill, talking endlessly, and heatedly, about what next to do. I don't understand what more can be done: the chief traitors are dead, the king's agreed to our demands and promised charters of freedom for every village. Can we not now all just go home?

But the king's also sanctioned the capture, if not the killing, of *all* traitors, and the Kentish men have taken him at his word. If Walter Tyghler approves of what they're doing in his name, he does not precisely say so, but neither does he declare it wrong.

I slip away to be alone. I must decide whether to stay and see the rising through to whatever conclusion Walter wants there to be, or whether I should go home now.

I make my way down to the riverbank and sit down on a jetty. Looking across the water to the other bank and turning my head to the east, I know I can see Blackheath Hill where, only four days ago, the mood among my fellow rebels was one of excitement and expectation. It was only yesterday that many indeed did go home, leaving Mile End content in the knowledge that the king had granted them their freedom, and they'd soon have their charters to prove it. I wish I was one of those happy fellows! But none of *them* came from Kent. It's the *Kentish* men who aren't yet satisfied, who've been bent on murdering their hated archbishop and those other poor wights, and who now are rampaging through London's streets dragging yet other, possibly innocent, souls from their homes and hacking off their heads.

I had felt so proud to be part of this great uprising, proud to be among the men of Kent leading the march for justice, but now I'm ashamed to call myself a Kentishman. When I leave here, I'll return to Maidstone, but I wonder if the time's come for me to go back to my true home, to Dorset.

As I sit by the river, the sun rises high in the sky and then begins its slow progress towards the west. My head churns and I argue with myself back and forth, but come to no decision. The afternoon declines into evening and I trudge back up to Tower Hill and resume my makeshift encampment at the foot of the castle walls.

'Has Master Tyghler yet decided what to do?' I ask Nicholas, still sitting nearby with his back to the wall, reading a small book.

Nicholas nods. 'He said he wants another meeting with the king. But three times the king's sent messengers offering terms and three times he's refused to accept them.'

'Why?' I ask, confused.

‘Because he says we’re in control of London now and must hold on to our advantage by keeping the king and his counsellors dangling at the end of our rope.’

Nicholas’s face is gloomy. I know he joined the rising in a passionate desire for justice, and he’s been a fervent follower of John Ball.

‘But all this murder...’ he says, shaking his head, and I can see tears in his eyes.

‘Is not what we came for?’

He nods.

As the evening advances, many of our rampaging comrades return to the Hill. They’re a shocking sight: more filthy now than ever, their clothes spattered and, in some cases, drenched in blood, their faces black and red, and shiny with sweat: they look more like devils emerging from the fires of Hell than men.

XVI.

Rumours are abroad that Walter’s planning to light fires all over London and burn the city to the ground, and that he’s going to abolish the Church. I haven’t heard Walter make such claims but I’m fearful they’re indeed what’s in his mind.

However, towards the end of the morning, word comes from the king that he wants to meet the rebels again, at a place called Smithfield, some distance from the Tower, right over to the north-west and well outside the city walls. This time, Walter Tyghler agrees to the king’s offer and everyone makes ready to go with him.

It’s late afternoon by the time we arrive at Smithfield, accompanied yet again by crowds of Londoners responding to the king’s command, streaming out of the city, causing a crush as we all try to push through its northern gates. Smithfield, it turns out, is an even greater open space than Mile End: a place where fairs, markets and festivals have been held since ancient times, where horse racing and trading go on, and where both animals and enemies of the Crown are slaughtered: a place of amusement but also of death. I fancy I can see and smell the evidence of it as I tramp across the field.

We’re already massed together to one side of the field when the king and his party – another splendid-looking body of knights and soldiers – ride in and line themselves up far away on the other side, so far we can’t make out their faces.

Shortly, a man – who someone says is the Mayor of London, William Walworth – rides out to the middle of the field and shouts out for Walter Tyghler to approach the king. I'm standing close enough to Walter to see the pride return to his face as he's asked for by name. Mounting his little horse, he turns to us with a huge grin and punches his fist into the air. We cheer mightily, and my heart lifts once more with hope and anticipation. Then he trots off and follows Walworth as he rides back towards the king.

They're so far away we can hear nothing of what Walter and the king are saying. Indeed we can hardly even *see* what's happening. We have to be content with waiting for Walter to return with the good news that the king's accepted his demands. Though I'm no longer certain I know what they are, beyond what the king already agreed to at Mile End.

Nicholas is standing nearby and I ask him if he knows.

He shrugs. 'I'm not sure. But I think he'll insist on taking the Church's lands and wealth away and dividing it up among the poor.' He smiles at this, then frowns and lowers his voice to a whisper. 'But he'll probably also say the Church hierarchy must be done away with and John appointed as the only bishop. And I'm not sure that's right...'

I nod. 'It's much more than just asking for freedom from bondage.'

'Indeed,' says Nicholas, then, barely audibly, adds, 'and it's not what I came here for.' Then he pulls his cowl up around his face and turns to look across the field.

I look too, straining my eyes to see.

Walter dismounts and makes a strange sort of curtsy before the king and then appears to grasp his hand and shake it. Then clearly he starts speaking, but the king does not reply: the two men seem to be staring at each other. Then, strangely, a jug of something's brought for Walter to drink and then a second, and he drinks them both, then climbs back onto his palfrey. What happens next is very hard to make out from such a distance: Walter appears to be waving his arm in the air, and one of the king's men rides up to him and waves *his* arms about, then another man rides forward too. There appears to be some sort of scuffle between the three men, then Walter's horse suddenly veers away from the group and charges across the field towards us.

Halfway across the field, the horse slows down and Walter slips sideways and falls to the ground. We can't believe what we are seeing, but some, immediately assuming the worst, get out their bows. Then many of the brave knights of the king's party break ranks and ride away out of the field and back towards London, as if in flight, and all is confusion. But the king's not joined their flight and instead races towards us on his charger. As he gets close, he shouts to us.

‘My friends! I am your captain now! Leave this place and follow me to Clerkenwell.’

I hardly know what to make of this, but one fellow shouts out. ‘See, the king’s abandoned his cowardly army and is coming to our aid!’

‘He’s our true king,’ shouts another, ‘and we’re his true commons!’

Everyone cheers, and most of my comrades hasten to follow the king.

But Nicholas and I and a few others of Walter’s supporters do not follow. We hurry over to where Walter’s lying. It’s a sight to make us weep, for he’s a deep gash in his neck, from which his dear blood’s pouring, onto the killing ground of Smithfield.

‘Perhaps he can yet be saved?’ cries Nicholas. ‘Quick! To the hospital.’ The rest of us look around. ‘Just over there,’ he says, pointing to a great building on the field’s eastern side.

Six of us pick up Walter’s limp and bleeding body and run with it as fast as we can. Poor Walter’s awake and cries out pitifully at every jolt. In the hospital, the monks run to our aid, placing Walter’s body on a pallet and binding his wounds as best they can. Nicholas kneels by Walter’s side and prays but, maybe unable to bring himself to admit our leader’s going to die, hesitates from offering him absolution.

I run outside again to see what’s happening, and find the field’s already empty: neither the king nor his army, nor any of our great band of rebels are there.

Moments later, a knight rides at speed into the field, accompanied by a few companions. The knight appears as astonished as me, for he wheels his horse around and around. But then he turns the horse towards the hospital and he and his small army ride fast in my direction. As he gets closer, I see it’s William Walworth, and hatred’s written on his face.

I turn to run back into the hospital, but my escape’s cut off by one of Walworth’s henchmen, who grabs me by the arm and hauls me over to his master.

‘Where’s Tyghler?’ says Walworth, scowling, his voice thick with hostility.

I want to cry. I can’t bear to be the one who betrays Walter. After all that’s happened, is it going to be *me* who hands him over to our enemies? If I was a stronger, better man, I might deny knowing anything of Walter’s whereabouts.

‘What’s your trade, man?’ asks Walworth and, without wondering why he’s asking such a question, I answer, ‘Carpenter.’

At that, Walworth nods, and two of his henchmen dismount. One grabs me by my right hand and holds my arm out straight, and the other raises his sword ready to strike off my

hand. I scream in terror, and, to my great shame, immediately cry out that Walter Tyghler's in the hospital.

'But he's near to death!'

Walworth roars and, signalling to his men to follow him, gallops to the hospital gate, leaps from his horse and disappears inside the building. His henchman lets go of my arm and, pushing me roughly to the ground, kicks me hard in the back before remounting and following his master.

I lie there, weeping, cradling my right hand with the left, horrified at what I might have lost. Though that loss would be nothing to what others have lost these past few days.

Moments later, Walworth and his bullyboys emerge from the hospital at a sprint, dragging Walter's poor body behind them. Nicholas and our other comrades are running after them, shouting at the mayor to leave Walter to die in peace, but Walworth just hurls curses back at them and doesn't stop until they've hauled the bleeding body to the middle of the field.

Struggling to my feet, I limp towards Nicholas and the others. Unable to prevent whatever's going to happen, we watch, our faces awash with tears, as the soldiers manhandle Walter into a kneeling position, holding his arms out on either side, pushing his head down. We thought him our saviour but no one can save him now. Walter's blood is dripping and pooling in the dust, as a soldier rips his hood away to bare his martyr's neck. Then another man leaps forward, brandishing a sword and, with one stroke, slices off his head. As Walter's headless body collapses sideways, William Walworth lets out a great huzzah, and he and his henchmen take turns to kick the body before one picks up the head and sticks it on a lance. Then, remounting their horses, they ride away, presumably to Clerkenwell and the king, bearing their grisly trophy aloft.

My five comrades and I fall to our knees and weep. In between sobs, Nicholas prays for Walter's soul, and all our souls. But there'll be no place in Heaven for my soul, or Walter's, or for any of the thousands of rebels who've wreaked such mayhem and spilled so much blood in so very few days.

It's truly over now, the march for justice, and I want nothing more than to go home.

1382

XVII.

The months following Walter Tyghler's death were almost as grisly as the days of the rising itself. The king took revenge for what had been done to his archbishop and treasurer, and to his beloved city of London: he revoked the charters of freedom and sent commissions to all the rebellious counties and towns to hear indictments against the rebels. Hundreds – some of them innocent of any crime – ended their lives upon the block or at the end of a rope. Some, like John Ball and other leaders of the rising, were more brutally punished: half-hanged, then gutted and cut into pieces, a quarter sent to the four corners of the kingdom.

It was a time of terror. Yet men of words still wrote, put their protests onto paper and circulated copies among those willing still to listen.

*Men beware and do not mock:
Think upon the axe and block.
The block was hard, the axe was sharp,
In the fourth year of King Richard.*



When I first reached home after fleeing London, my spirits were very low: dismayed that what had seemed such a righteous cause had been so readily, so disastrously overtaken by violence and a lust for blood. Yet I also lived in terror of accusation. Given how close I'd come to Walter on the last day of the rising – and Mayor Walworth, for one, had seen my face and knew me for a vile betrayer – I was certain I'd be hunted down and brought to justice for my crimes. For days and weeks I cowered in my workshop, not showing myself in Maidstone's streets, yet not believing I'd escape King Richard's retribution.

At length the travelling commission arrived in Maidstone. Hundreds of Kentish men were tried and many were beheaded. But I was not among them. The justices left Maidstone without sending the constable to knock upon my door. At last I emerged from my hiding place and returned once more to some sort of normal life.

Yet there were times when I regretted my escape. For death would've freed me from the shame I felt at my part in the inglorious march for justice. But my shame lay not in my part in the Savoy's destruction, nor in my collusion – if not involvement – in the murder of so many. It was in my weakness at betraying Walter, my failure to defend our saviour at the end. And it was in my guilt at being left unpunished when others died for what I also did, and indeed died for crimes they did not commit.



Weeks later, in the tavern, I fall into conversation with an Essex man. He tells me of a large band of rebels who hid in the Essex forests, hoping to escape the commission's verdict.

'They were bold enough, to send envoys direct to the king himself, asking him to grant them their freedom.'

'Surely that was foolhardy,' I say. 'These days the king's in no mood to listen.'

He nods. 'Indeed. The king made it quite clear, whatever promises he may have made in June, the commons would *never* now be free.'

'What did he say?'

'He told them they'd always be villeins, and on harsher terms than they'd had before. "While I am king," he said, "I will keep you in servitude, so much so that your burden will always be an example to those that come after you".'

'So the king never meant what he said at Mile End!'

My companion nods. 'So it seems.'

Yet I still *do* believe in the rightness of the cause, and I consider what I can do to make some sort of amends for my part in its failure. I think again of Lady Joanna, how she encouraged me to better myself, and how clearly she understood there's no immovable barrier between the gentry and the common folk. Many times I wonder what's happened to her: did Sir Ralph kill her in a fit of jealous rage, or is she still alive?

Before the rising, when I was still proud of my achievements, I longed to show her what I'd become, and thought often of returning to Dorset or Southampton. Now there are aspects of my life I'm not so proud of, I think maybe she'd not be so pleased to see me. Yet I still want to see her, and the idea of it grows and grows until I almost decide to close down my Maidstone workshop and take myself – and Adam – back to Dorset and start afresh, away from what I think of as the taint of Kent.

“In Kent this misery began...” So goes it in a verse some fellow read out last evening in the tavern, to entertain his friends and fellow drinkers.

Tax has brought ruin to us all – as the death of so many good men shows.

The king got little of the haul – for the greedy stole and held it close.

Ill fortune followed in its wake – and at length caused so much grief and pain,

Reverence was full forsaken – because of those greedy robbers' sin.

In Kent this misery began – and soon they outraged those in sway.

In a mob brave rebels ran – bearing their weapons on full display.

Fools have no fear of any man – not the king nor yet the common folk.

Scoundrels were our rulers then – keeping us all beneath their yoke.

Of course the verse-maker was not quite right – it was in Essex, not in Kent, that the great cause had its roots. But Kentishmen played their part. And they played the cruellest and, in the end, most grievous and most dreadful part.



But, if I felt I no longer belonged in Kent, ever the ditherer, I took no action. And now much time has passed, and we're already five months into a new year. I'm still in my Maidstone workshop and I'm doing well, as reports of my furniture are spread abroad by contented clients.

I'm working on an oak cabinet for a new and wealthy client, a merchant. I'm more than usually pleased with the piece, the best I've done so far, with open tracery worked into its front panels to let the air flow through. It's delicate work, for the tracery – in small imitation of church windows – must be carved out and shaped with a gouge and chisel, and needs my close attention to be sure I don't break the fine ribs of the design.

It's the middle of the afternoon. I'm bending over the cabinet, making some final refinements to the carving, while Adam's sweeping up the pile of oaky shavings on the floor. Suddenly, I hear what sounds like a low rumbling underground and Adam cries out in alarm, throwing down his broom and rushing to my side.

The house begins to shake. Candlesticks and pots are falling from their shelves to clang or smash onto the floor. Some of the carpentry tools lying on the workbench – my carving knife and gouges, my three best chisels – start to creep across the surface until they too tumble with a clatter to the floor. Adam's terrified, and in truth so am I, though I put my arm around him and try to keep him calm.

We struggle to our feet and go outside into the street to find people running hither and thither, screaming and crying out that it's the end of the world. Masonry is toppling from buildings. Church bells are ringing wildly. All is alarm and chaos and indeed it does seem it might be the end of days.

But it lasts only moments. As suddenly as it started, the ground stops shaking. People stop running and stand still, and alarm and chaos are replaced by an eerie calm and silence.

It was a most strange occurrence and I've no idea what it was: the earth shook and then it stopped. In the town there's a little damage to some buildings, but most harm has come to people's fears. Many declare the shaking was a sign from God, to warn us of his anger at what happened almost a year ago. I, though, am not convinced.

But, whatever the shaking was, and whatever its cause, for a reason I cannot explain, I take it as a sign that the time has come at last for me to return home to Dorset.



7: Despair

Susanna Rolfe

1382

I.

The dark's so thick it feels like I can touch it. And it's so cold I can't keep my teeth from knocking. *And* it's beginning to rain again. As if I'm not wet enough already.

If her ladyship went from Salisbury to Southampton on a freezing wet November day, she'd go in a closed carriage, not the open cart she sent me off in. The stuff in the back was covered well enough, but me and the carter were perched on the bench, with the rain coming down in sheets and the wind blowing so hard I had to hold tight. My thick wool cloak – the only thing the old dragon gave me when she threw me out – got so wet and heavy it almost dragged me off the seat.

The carter dropped me off down by the docks. It was where he was going anyway and I said it'd be a good place for me too. But when I got down from the cart, I just stood there, looking round.

'You sure this is all right?' he said, frowning. I couldn't tell if he was worried about me or just wanted to get on his way, as it was already getting dark.

Anyway, I nodded. 'Yeah, I can find my way from here.'

But I can't.

I'd thought it'd be easy to find my parents' house, for Southampton isn't that big, is it? But I don't have the smallest idea where I am. I don't even know the name of where we live, so I can't ask anyone how to get there. Not that I really want to ask.

So I tramp up and down the streets and alleyways a while, dragging my heavy cloak around me, hoping I'll find somewhere I know. But I don't. Lots of houses look a bit like I remember ours, but I don't know any of the churches or taverns, so I suppose this can't be it. I'm sorry now I was so cocky with the carter.

And now it's dark there's not much point keep looking.

I find myself near a big church and slip into the porch. I don't like it much, with all those dead people just a few steps away. But at least it's dry. I sit down on the cold stone floor and open up my bundle, the bread and cheese I got from the manor kitchen. The bundle's as sodden as my cloak, and the dark bread, hard and dry enough when I started out, is pappy inside and the crust's damp and leathery, and the cheese crumbles when I touch it. But my belly's crying out for food, so I scabble on the ground, dabbing up the crumbs of cheese on the end of my finger, and I gnaw at the disgusting bread even though it's making me feel sick.

The rain's mostly stopped, and there's a bit of moon, so maybe I'll look for somewhere more comfortable to sleep. I stand up from the cold stone floor, stiff and aching. My little purse of money – just a few pennies I saved – drops with a soft chink to the ground. It must've slipped out from my bundle. Bending down to pick it up, I hear a rustle among the graveyard trees. I grab the purse and press my body back into the darkness of the porch.

But, moments later, I'm on the ground again and the purse falls from my hand. They're only kids, smaller than me, but strong. They pounce on me from the bushes, yelping like a pack of dogs, and, dragging me from the porch, push me over onto the church path. A boy sits on my legs, and another leans on my shoulders, pressing me down into the mud. The third, a girl, I think, is scrabbling around the porch floor. I struggle and arch my back, trying to throw off the boys. But I'm too weak, and so I just cry and beg them to leave me alone.

'Please, don't...' I say, struggling to catch my breath.

'Why not, missy?' a boy says, sniggering.

'Cos I'm poor like you!'

'You're not like us!' says the girl, cackling. 'You've got money.'

'But it's all I've got...' I whimper.

'cept now you 'aven't!' says the girl and crows with laughter, as she waves my purse above her head.

'No!' I scream and try to get to my feet, struggling as my stupid cloak gets in the way. But the girl spots the cloak and snatches hold of the hem.

'Blimey! Feel this,' she says to the others. 'It's good stuff.'

They feel it too. 'That'll fetch something,' says one. 'Let's 'ave it off her.'

They grab at the cloak and wrench it off me, nearly choking me as the clasp presses on my throat till it finally gives way. Then they push me down again, and a boy kicks me, in my chest and in my belly, before they all run off, cheering their good fortune.

I lie on the muddy path, crying like a baby. A stream of water's running underneath me, and my kirtle's soaking up the wet and clinging like an icy shroud. It's not long before I'm shaking like I've got the ague. Someone's hammering inside my head and every bit of me is hurting. My belly hurts so much I can't help crying out when I try to move, but I know I can't stay here.

After a while I make myself get up and totter back towards the street. The moon keeps going in and out, and sometimes a feeble light peeps through some shutters, but none of it's enough to light my way. There's nobody around to ask for help – why would there be, on a cold, wet night like this?

My body hurts all over and doesn't seem to want to move at all. I feel funny too, my head all giddy, and I lean against a house wall. It's damp from the rainwater dripping off the thatch, but I can feel warmth in it too. I long to be inside, lying on a pallet near the fire. I think of knocking on the door and asking them for help but, as I think it, the light goes out inside. Anyway, they'd scarce take kindly to a stranger knocking on their door so late.

I think of the bed I had at the manor and wish now I'd not had to leave. I'm so tired I want to sleep right here, leaning up against the wall. I close my eyes and, as I do, my legs go weak and wobbly, and I slump slowly down onto the cold, rain-puddled ground.



I can't have slept for long, but all the candles have gone out, and there's not a soul about. Though I wish I hadn't gone to sleep at all, hunched up on the ground, for now my body's stiff and my legs feel numb. My belly's hurting worse than it did before. It comes over me in waves and, each time, the pain's so bad I'm gasping for breath and trying not to squeal.

I try to shift my useless legs, and, as they rub together, I can feel they're all wet and sticky. I lift my kirtle and touch the wetness with a finger, then touch it with the tip of my tongue. When I taste it, I'm so scared I want to scream.

But I don't.

I make myself get up. My legs are weak as a newborn kitten's, but I force myself to walk. But, on my feet, with each wave of pain, I know the blood's leaking out and running down my legs. Clinging to the walls, I feel my way along the dark, narrow street, hoping soon, please God, soon, I'll find an empty house, or maybe a little woodshed.

It seems like I've crawled miles. All I want is to lie down and sleep. But the moon comes out from behind the clouds and lights up the street ahead. I'm almost too feeble to look up, but I've got the strangest feeling, like an angel's come to help me. And, when I lift my head, I see a little shack, stuck on the side of a house, only steps away. Scarce daring to believe, I cover those few steps in a moment. I push open the shed door to find it's full of sweet-smelling straw, and throw myself down onto the scratchy heap and weep.

II.

I can hear a church bell, ringing matins I suppose, and light's beginning to peek through the gaps in the rickety wooden walls. All night I thought I was going to die and, in between the waves of pain, I prayed hard to Our Lady to forgive me all my sins and not let the Devil drag me down to Hell for being the wicked ungrateful girl the old dragon said I was. But now I'm not dead after all, and I suppose I know what's happened.

I'm not sure whether to be thankful or upset.

I don't want to look but, now it's almost light enough to see, I lift my kirtle and peer down at my legs and the straw where I've been lying. My legs and kirtle are all red and sticky, and on the straw there's something more than blood – it looks a bit like a baby bird that's fallen from its nest. I retch from the sight and smell of it.

The church bell rings again, so loud and close it hurts my ears. The day's begun and folk'll be scurrying about, sweeping out their houses and going to the market to buy their bread. I sit up. I fancy I can smell bread and the thought of it makes me hungry, but I don't have even a farthing to spend at the baker's stall.

At any rate, the state I'm in's disgusting. My kirtle's a vile stinking mess – sticky and filthy and smelling like a rusty cooking pot – and I can't think how I'm ever going to get it clean. How can I go out to try and find my Ma, or even get food, when I look like this? I throw myself back down onto the straw and cry. I cry just like a baby, loudly, taking great wet gulps of air and gagging as the snot runs down my throat. I'm making so much noise, it takes a while to realise I'm not alone, and I let out a shriek. And someone shrieks back.

'Sweet Mary and Joseph! Who's that in my shed?' she cries, and I can see her looking up to where I am, crouched on top of the mound of straw. She thrusts her hand up at me as if she's going to grab my leg, and her wrinkly face is so dark and glowering, her grey uncovered hair so wild looking, I take fright and scurry out of reach.

‘You come down from there!’ she shouts. She tries to clamber up the pile, but she’s so old and feeble I don’t think she can reach me. She scrabbles at the heap a while but gives up when she can’t get a foothold. But she must be standing on her toes, for moments later she’s peering over the top. She doesn’t look angry any more: her scowl’s changed to a smile, and she’s holding out her hand.

‘Come forward, child,’ she says, her voice gentle now, ‘so I can see you better.’

I shake my head, not sure if I can trust her.

She smiles again, and she looks a bit like my Nan did years ago before she got all crooked and crabby. ‘I won’t hurt you, child,’ she says. ‘I didn’t mean to be so cross, but you gave me such a turn!’

I sit there a bit longer, saying nothing.

‘Come on, sweetheart,’ she says, in the sort of voice Ma used when she was trying to get me to do something I didn’t want to.

I wonder if I can trust her after all.

‘What’s your name, dearie?’ she says.

‘Susanna,’ I say in a whisper, leaning forward a little bit.

‘That’s a pretty name.’ She gives me a big smile that changes her face completely.

‘Mine’s Margery. I expect you’d like a bite to eat, wouldn’t you, Susanna?’

‘Yes,’ I say, still quiet and fearful, but desperate for something to fill my empty belly.

‘Come down, then, dearie.’ She holds out her hand to me again, and this time I shuffle forward to the edge of the mound. ‘That’s a good girl.’

She leans further forward and reaches out. But then she suddenly lets out a cry.

‘Oh, sweet Jesus, whatever’s happened to you?’ she says, her face not smiling any more. ‘Come down quickly, and let’s have a proper look at you.’

As she helps me down, I can see her looking at the mess on the straw. ‘Oh, sweet Mary,’ she mutters, ‘you poor little thing.’



Dame Margery’s house is warm and cosy, and she’s got two proper chairs with soft pillows and woven pictures on the walls. It’s a bit like the hall in the house at Salisbury, only nowhere near so big or high. I stare at everything she’s got and wonder how she can afford

to buy so many pillows and pots and pans and plates. I've never seen anything like it in ordinary folks' houses.

It's turning out she's more like my Ma than my Nan, though she's much older. She's as kind as Ma ever was, even more than Ma might be now, seeing what's happened to me. For Dame Margery isn't scolding me for making such a mess of my kirtle, or leaving the horrible mess on the sweet rushes she was keeping for her floors. She just makes me take off my filthy clothes so she can wash them – though she does mutter about how hard it'll be to get my kirtle clean – and she brings a pail of warm water and a cloth so I can wash. It's good not to be sticky or smelly any more, though I still feel weak and wobbly when I stand up.

She helps me over to her great table and gives me soft bread and a little bowl of pottage. She watches me as I eat, just like Ma used to when I was little, smiling and nodding as I wipe the last scrap from my bowl. When I've finished, she helps me up the narrow staircase to the floor above, where there are two separate little rooms, each with a big bed with hangings and a mattress. I can scarce believe it. There were comfy beds like this in the old dragon's house, though not for us servants, but at home we all slept together on straw pallets in the loft.

'You lie down here, dearie,' says Dame Margery, pointing to a bed, covered in a smooth woven blanket, that looks like it's not been slept in. 'I must go out, so you have a good sleep. You've lost a lot of blood.' She lifts up the blanket and, pressing gently on my shoulders, pushes me down onto the bed. Then, covering me over, she strokes my hair and my face.

'Sleep,' she says and shuffles out the room and shuts the door.



Margery Goody's as good to me as if she was my own mother. I've got a proper bed to sleep in and plenty of food in my belly. She's made me two new kirtles – the old one never did get clean and in the end she declared it only fit for burning. I help her in the house, keeping it clean and tidy while she goes out. Every day she comes home with money, or some new trinket she's bought from one of the foreign merchants in the market.

I haven't thought much about Ma and Pa a while. I miss Ma, though to be honest I don't care if I never see Pa again. I hate him for what he did: hearing about that kitchen skivvy job up Salisbury way from some bloke he met in the tavern, and then taking me to the manor. Right out in the countryside, it was, a long day's walk from Southampton, and when the old dragon – her ladyship – agreed to take me on, he left me, right then and there, in that strange place, with people I didn't know. I cried and begged him not to leave me. But he pushed me

away and walked off, without even looking back. Ma hadn't wanted me to go, but Pa ignored her, as he always did, and I'll never forgive him that.

I tell Dame Margery about wanting to find Ma.

'Course you do, dearie,' she says, patting me on the arm, 'and you will. But you don't need to worry about that now. Just get well. Put those apples back into your cheeks!'

To be honest, I'm already thinking maybe I *don't* want to go home after all. Ma and Pa are poor, and their house is small and draughty, and the roof leaks. It's nowhere as comfy as here. So why would I want to leave?

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III.

It's Easter Sunday evening. We went up to the church this morning – only the second time I've set foot in the place since I've been here – then in the afternoon we went to watch the procession down English Street, and the mummers performing the Resurrection in the square around Saint Michael's church. It's been a lovely day.

Dame Margery and me are sitting by the fire, she in her best oak chair with the comfy cushions, me perched on a little stool. She's asleep, snuffling and snorting like a pig, which she does most evenings. I'm not doing anything much – just sitting, looking through the open shutters, watching for the sun to go down. It's my job to light the candles once it gets dark though, with the old woman asleep, I might not bother. But I do get up to close the shutters, when it drops chilly. She wakes up with a start.

'Good heavens, child,' she says in a scolding voice, 'why haven't you lit the candles? It's pitch black in here!'

It isn't, for the fire gives out a merry light.

'I'm just doing it,' I say, trying not to sound peevish, and go to fetch the taper from the green painted cupboard stood by the inner wall.

I light two of the fat beeswax candles sitting atop the cupboard and the others on the shelf. These sweet-smelling candles are another sign the old woman's got plenty of money. She doesn't have to burn those horrible smoky, smelly tallow ones all Ma could afford.

‘Oh, my,’ says Dame Margery, groaning a bit as she squirms in her chair, ‘my neck’s gone all stiff. Come and rub it for me, dearie, there’s a good girl.’

I’m glad the room’s gloomy so she can’t see my face. I hate rubbing her wrinkly neck, and her flabby arms, and her puffy ankles. I don’t want to touch her horrible old body at all. But I have to, to ease the stiffness that creeps into her bones when she’s been out all day and come home tired, or when she’s fallen asleep in the chair and woken up too stiff to move, like now. Of course I keep my grumbles to myself, and go to stand behind her chair. Gritting my teeth, I take off the band holding her veil in place and put it and the veil on the table. Then I unpin the linen barbet, and unwrap it from under her chin, letting her thin greying hair fall to her shoulders. I always feel queasy at the sight of the balding patches and scraggy throat the veil and barbet make such a good job of hiding. I gather up her wispy hair and catch it under a close-fitting coif, so her neck’s completely uncovered and ready for my soothing hands.

‘You’re a good girl, Susie dear,’ she says when I’m done, and rolls her head in contented circles. Then she pats the stool standing by her chair. ‘Come and sit down, dearie.’

I sit facing her and she reaches out and takes my hands in her bony ones. I try hard not to shudder.

‘Tell me, dearie,’ she says, ‘how old are you now?’

I shrug. ‘I dunno. Fourteen? Fifteen? Something like that.’

She nods. ‘That’s what I thought.’ She grins. ‘Almost a woman.’

‘You want me to find a job?’ I say, disappointed.

But she cackles and pats my knee. ‘No, no, dearie, nothing like that. But I do have a little plan for you, child. Just be patient, and you’ll see.’

IV.

An elderly gentleman, arrayed in the latest fashion, wields his stick and hails the woman hovering on the threshold of the best inn in town.

His voice quavers with age. ‘Margery Goody! A word, ma dame.’

Dame Margery, alarmed to be so accosted whilst about her business, turns nonetheless to see who is hailing her, and at once applies a broad smile to her face.

'Why, Alderman Farthingale, how delightful!'

He grins. He has always had a soft spot for Margery Goody, despite her reputation.

She simpers. 'Whatever's this about, Henry?'

He shakes his head. 'A bad business. You know that many in authority hereabouts find your... ahem... activities contrary to public... ahem... scruples.'

The old man's wrinkled face goes slightly red and he moves a little closer. He whispers. 'Though of course I don't necessarily share their opinions.' Then he chuckles.

Dame Margery smiles and rests her hand upon the alderman's arm. 'Shall we speak of this in private, Henry dear? Let me buy you dinner – after all, it's well past sext.'

Henry Farthingale hesitates. He is always eager for a dish of good food but should he be seen *lingering* in the company of a woman such as Margery Goody, fond as he is of her? He dithers a few moments longer, then decides. 'A grand idea!'

Looking quickly to right and left, he scuttles through the door into the inn. He waves his stick. 'Over there.' And he totters forward, squeezing between the crowded tables, heading for a quiet nook. He signals to the innkeeper to attend them.

Margery Goody does not much concern herself with the authorities. She has often found herself before the magistrates, but has always got away with a warning and a modest fine. They never put her out of business, unlike some other bawds in town.

She orders a dinner of beef for them both, to be washed down with a cup or two of good Gascon wine, then settles herself close to Alderman Farthingale. Not all the town's elders are easy to win over. But Henry can usually be persuaded to support her case.

V.

A few days later, as she's leaving the house in the morning, to go wherever she goes – she never says – Dame Margery turns to me and says I should put on my new green kirtle, for today's the day of my surprise.

She's beaming. 'Be sure the house is clean, and make yourself especially pretty.'

I smile to myself, thinking she's given me a hard job – I'll never be *pretty*. My green kirtle fits me closely, so my new roundness stands out a bit, and Dame Margery says I look well in it. But I don't know what else to do to make myself look different, so I don't bother.

When the old woman comes home again, she's not alone. I think at once she must've decided to find me a husband, and am sorry after all I haven't bothered. For Dame Margery's brought home a man – a man with brown crinkly skin, dark curly hair and a little beard flecked with grey, and finely dressed in a heavy velvet red and blue gown. He looks rich.

'This is Susanna, M'sier Martin,' she says, beckoning me to curtsy. I keep my eyes lowered, as she's told me I'm supposed to do when I first meet a man, but when I stand up again he takes my hand in his and, raising it to his lips, kisses it lightly. I can't help looking up then, and see Dame Margery standing behind him, grinning and nodding at me.

'Enchantay, dem'selle,' says the man, lifting his eyes and fixing them on mine. His eyes are brown and seem to smile. I feel hot but, not knowing what he's said to me, can't think what to answer, so I just stand there gawping, while he hangs onto my hand.

Dame Margery steps forward, and gives a little laugh. 'Susanna's very young, M'sier. She's shy, modest.'

'Modesty is charmon, Madame,' says the man, in a funny voice like I've not heard before. Then, eyes smiling, he lets go my hand.

'Why don't you take a seat, M'sier,' says Dame Margery, 'and Susanna will bring you some refreshment.'

He sits in Dame Margery's grandest chair with the softest cushions and she ushers me into the pantry.

'Bring the best ale,' she says, whispering, 'in the best jug. And be quick.' Then she winks. 'What d'you think? Handsome, eh?'

I nod. He's got a nice face.

I bring the ale and fill Dame Margery's best pewter cup and, as I hand it to M'sier Martin, he smiles at me again – a warm smile – and his brown eyes are bright and crinkle in the corners. He seems kind.

But he's a foreigner. And I can see now he's very old.

When M'sier Martin's finished his ale, Dame Margery offers more, but he shakes his head.

'Mercy, mais non, Madame,' he says, rubbing his eyes. 'My voyages have fatigued me and I must rest.' He looks up at her and she nods.

I suppose his visit must be over. So I'm stunned when Dame Margery tells me to show him to what she calls the guest room – is that my room?

I try to catch her eye, to see if I've understood her right, but she isn't looking at my face. Instead, she flaps and points towards the stairs. I don't understand but do as she bids.

'Please, M'sier, follow Susanna,' says Dame Margery, and he gets wearily to his feet and climbs the narrow staircase behind me.

When M'sier and me get to the top, I stand at the door of my room and point to the bed. He goes inside but, as I turn to go, I find the old woman at my elbow.

'You too,' she says, taking hold of my arm.

'What d'you mean?'

'You too, in the room.' She almost hisses out the words. Then she pushes me inside and closes the door behind me. I spin round at once and take hold of the latch, but at the same moment I hear the clunk of the key turning in the lock, and realise the old witch planned for this to happen.

Tears spring to my eyes. I'd thought her kind but she must've been planning this all along. For a while I just stare at the closed door, scared to turn round and face the man she's brought here for me. But, after a few moments, I feel a hand upon my shoulder and another on my waist and M'sier Martin gently turns me round to face him.

'Do not cry, ma petite.' He takes my hand and raises it to his lips. 'You have nothing to fear.' Then he leads me to the bed – my bed – and, sitting down, draws me down beside him. I say nothing, my thoughts a jumble, but I can't stop the tears.

He reaches up and gently wipes my cheek with his fingertips. 'Why the tears, dem'selle Susanna?' I shrug. I know what I want to say. But I can't. So I just shake my head and let the tears flow a bit more.



Later, as I lie next to Auguste Martin, naked and still tearful, I think about the time with Gilbert, back at the manor. When he took me by the hand and led me to a hidden part of the garden, a little grassy meadow with a pool in the middle, and a high fence all around covered with prickly plants with sweet-smelling yellow flowers. The fence and flowers made it shady and secret, and Gilbert told me no one went there but him, so it could be our special place. I thought it was lovely there.

Gilbert wasn't a bit good looking. He had spots all over his face and his black hair hung like a damp curtain round his ears. Everyone said he was simple, which was why he hadn't gone to be a squire like his two brothers. I didn't know what they meant by "simple", though it seemed odd that, despite being sixteen or thereabouts, he was always acting the fool, playing tricks on folk and getting into fights with children in the village. But, sometimes, like when I was working outside, beating blankets or suchlike, he'd come and talk to me. I was scared at first, not sure it was allowed, but he always smiled and said things that made me laugh.

Anyway, the first time in the secret garden, we sat down on the grassy meadow and Gilbert stroked my hair, saying how pretty it was – and how pretty I was! I thought then he must be simple, because I know I'm not pretty with my turned up nose, and my hair's just ordinary dull brown, like a mouse. Still, Gilbert said he liked it. And he liked me. And he'd like us to be friends. I couldn't see how we could be, with him being the old dragon's son, but he said it'd be our secret. No one else'd know. I thought as long as no one knew it'd probably be all right. So I said yes.

Then he drew my kirtle up a little bit so the bottoms of my legs were bare and he stroked them with his fingers. I felt all funny when he did that and said I didn't think he should be doing it, but he said we were friends. And, after a bit, he pulled the bottom of my kirtle right up to my waist, and he was tickling me between my legs and I was giggling, because it felt nice. But then he was pulling his braies down and clambering on top of me and I'm not sure what happened next but he pushed something inside me and started panting – and it hurt me such a lot, I stopped laughing and cried out, but he kept on pushing until all of a sudden he shuddered and groaned and rolled off me onto the grass.

After a while he stopped groaning and started laughing again, and I didn't know if I should too, though I didn't feel much like it. I really just wanted to cry though I wasn't sure why. I went to pull my kirtle down again and saw there was blood on the tops of my legs.

'You hurt me,' I cried out, and Gilbert leaned across and looked.

‘Nah,’ he said, ‘that’s normal,’ and he wiped the blood away with the edge of my kirtle.

Then he stroked my hair again and grinned. ‘Did you like that?’

‘I liked it at first,’ I said, ‘but not when you hurt me.’

He shrugged. ‘It won’t hurt next time. You’ll enjoy it.’

I snorted. ‘What makes you think there’ll be a next time?’

But he just grinned at me again. ‘We’re friends, aren’t we?’ Then he got up onto his knees and, leaning over, put his hand on the back of my head and pulled my face gently towards his. He kissed me on my forehead, and then flicked his tongue against my lips before kissing me on my mouth. I felt funny all over again, and thought maybe I’d not mind after all if there were lots of next times.

But I don’t want any next time with Auguste Martin.

He was gentle enough, and really didn’t hurt me at all. He kept stroking me, and kissing me, and, when he touched me between my legs, I felt funny, just like I did with Gilbert. But when he took off all his clothes, he was flabby and his belly stuck out, and the hair on his chest was grey and wiry, and, though I couldn’t stop the funny feelings, I didn’t want this old man touching me like that, and couldn’t stop myself from crying.

‘Please, don’t,’ I said to him, but he shook his head, and wiped my tears away with his thumb.

‘But, ma petite, this is why we are here.’ Then he smiled and heaved himself on top of me.

Afterwards, he held me in his arms and stroked my hair, and made me giggle despite myself by kissing me on the nose.



Auguste Martin shares my bed often – and pays Dame Margery for his pleasure. And so do lots of other men. They’re all rich and all old – some even more ancient than Auguste, who I now realise isn’t really all that old. Some are kind enough, but I hate what they do to me, not that they take any notice of what I think. They’re paying to do whatever they want, and it’s of no matter to them whether I want them to or not.

It doesn’t seem to matter to Dame Margery either.

‘Poor Señor Garcia. He’s so lonely here, Susanna, far from his wife and his family. He needs all the comfort we can give him, dearie.’

That makes me laugh – though not to her face – for it’s *me*, not *we*, who’s giving him the comfort. All she does is pocket the large amounts of money “poor” Señor Garcia gives her in return. I know now how Dame Margery’s got such a comfortable house and so many fashionable gowns. Though of course she doesn’t get all her money just from the men who use me – she’s got a big bawdy house as well, down by the docks at West Quay, full of girls like me.

‘But they’re a different class of person altogether,’ she says. ‘Mariners, the rough end of the trade.’ She pulls a face, then winks at me. ‘Whereas you, Susie dear, give comfort to men of culture and rank, *gentlemen*.’

So should I be grateful most of the men who use me don’t take their pleasure in violence? Be grateful to Dame Margery for protecting me from the hard life of her “girls” down at West Quay?

But I’m not grateful.

It’s true many of my customers come every week or once a month, so I’ve got to know them, which I suppose is better than being poked by a different stranger every night. But I’m not earning any money, for Dame Margery takes it all. One day I ask if I can have some of it. She sighs and purses her lips.

‘I give you a roof over your head, Susie dear,’ she says, a catch in her voice. ‘And food in your belly, never mind the pretty kirtles.’ She slumps down in her chair and her eyes are sad. ‘You should be grateful you’re not walking the streets.’

But I’m not grateful about that either. Well, maybe a bit – how can I not at least be thankful she took me in?

But I hate how the old bawd tricked me. And I hate how she acts like she owns me. I begin to feel bitter about it, thinking the food and kirtles aren’t enough to make up for what I’ve become. Maybe I was only a kitchen maid before, but I was at least still decent. Dame Margery and all those men have shamed me. I worry my soul’s doomed to wander in Purgatory for ever, maybe even to go down to Hell.

Unless I run away.

I’ve decided to try and find Ma after all, but can’t begin to work out where she lives. I don’t even know where in Southampton Dame Margery’s is. She hardly ever lets me out of the house, and never on my own, and the few places I’ve been to I don’t seem to know at all. And of course the old bawd’s not going to help me. I make her a lot of money, and she isn’t going to give that up in a hurry! She’s more likely to come after me and drag me back if I try

running off. She might even beat me to teach me a lesson. So, too scared to try, I just carry on, day in, day out, being used and hating it.

VI.

On Trinity Sunday Dame Margery insists we go to a great fair held at some village outside the town walls. It turns out it's not that far away. From our house, we walk up the wide main road – English Street, where the best shops and workshops are – then turn into another busy street leading down to the East Gate.

'There's been a Trinity Fair out here as long as I can remember,' says Dame Margery.

It seems the whole of Southampton's going. When we reach the gate, so many folk are trying to go through the narrow archway, we find ourselves carried along in the crush. On the other side of the gate, the lane goes past the town fields on one side – full of tall grass waving in the breeze, waiting to be cut – and orchards and gardens on the other. We soon reach the fair, in a big village all on its own, with lots of little houses, many with crumbling walls and holey thatch. Most are strung out along the road, but a few are huddled together round a great church that stands in the middle of a wide grassy area.

Dame Margery doesn't go much to church, except on special days. Ma never missed a Sunday, and made sure all of us went too, me and my big sister, Alice, and my brothers. Pa didn't go – he went to the tavern, and Ma scolded him for it, saying he'd spend eternity in Hell with all the other drunks. But he didn't care a fig for what she said and sometimes he slapped her round the face for speaking her mind. When I went to Salisbury, it was her ladyship's rules that all the servants went at least once on a Sunday. But, since I've been living here, I've only been twice inside a church, and I'm sure I'm going to end up in Hell, along with Pa, and I don't like that idea at all.

But the moment I see that great church, I know it's Ma's church, Saint Mary's! And when I look again at the little houses clustered round it, I know them too. And the folk I see standing around outside them, I know their faces, though I couldn't say their names. Then I remember of course I've been through that East Gate before, and walked along that busy road back to English Street, and then turned up to the main city gate that leads out and away from Southampton. I've only done it once and I cried like a baby, for that was the day Pa took me to Salisbury. I pleaded with him to let me stay. But he just gripped my arm and made me walk.

Until that day, I'd never been out of the village. I'd never even been into the city. I spent my whole life just here, among these little houses, and the great church, and the fields and woods that stretch for miles around. That day, when Pa made me leave everything I knew, I was so scared I thought I was going to be sick. But he didn't care – he just wanted me out. My sister Alice'd come home again – she'd had a servant job on a grand manor near somewhere called Lyndhurst but, after working there for years, the master sent her packing. She found work as a nursemaid to the old father of the weaver Ma worked for. But, I was just a mouth to feed, and Pa was having none of it.



But now I'm back. I'm so excited I almost cry out to Dame Margery. But something stops me and she marches off ahead, while I stand staring at where I now know my Ma's house is.

When I catch up with Dame Margery, she notices the grin upon my face. 'What's up with you? You look like a cat that's got the cream.'

I laugh. 'Oh, I'm just excited about the fair.' As I say it, I remember how excited I always was. For I've been here lots of times, since I was little, and I can't wait to see the jugglers and musicians again, the dancing bears and the fighting cocks, the pie stalls and the roasting pig.



Dame Margery has invited the ancient alderman to dinner once again. She thought last time had done the trick but it seems a little more persuasion is required.

She trots out her usual argument. 'You know the benefits my business brings to Southampton. Giving comfort to all the mariners who come here encourages them to spend money in the shops and taverns as well as on my girls.'

Henry nods. 'Can't be denied.'

Then she smiles and paws at his sleeve. 'Henry, d'you remember my *special* damsel?'

Henry's eyes grow glassy. 'Ah, the lovely Katherine. Such a sweet little thing, so willing, so accomplished.' He shakes his head. 'But she left you—'

Margery sighs. 'One of my best clients was so smitten, he stole her away from me!'

The serving girl puts a steaming platter of beef before them. Margery at once takes out her knife and, spearing a piece of meat, offers it to Henry, then takes one for herself and chews a while before continuing with her discourse.

'But I've another special little damsel, Henry, as lovely as Katherine, if not more so. The comeliest of faces, pretty nut-brown hair. A slender little body, yet plump just where it matters...'

Chuckling, she cups her ample bosom in her hands, and Henry almost chokes upon his meat.

When he recovers, Dame Margery sees the familiar glint in the old man's eye. 'Susanna offers a high-class, *personal*, service, only to the most *select* of clients, like those foreign merchants who bring such bounty to our town.'

The alderman nods but his eyes are glazed. He licks his lips.

'Are you thinking of my little damsel, Henry?'

He coughs and goes quite red. But Dame Margery smiles: it is clear he will quite soon succumb. And will this time safeguard that she is not summoned before the court.



After Trinity Fair day, there've been lots of times when I think today's the day I'm going to run away, or maybe tomorrow, or maybe next week. But I haven't gone. As much as I want to see my Ma, I keep thinking about what Pa'll do when I turn up. He'll certainly curse me, and might beat me, or even kill me! So I just go on keeping house for Dame Margery and trying not to cry when, night after night, I have to let some rich old man into my bed.

But, in the end, I have to be brave.

I'm nervous as a cat the morning I decide to leave. The old bawd goes out, as usual, and, just before she goes, she winks at me.

'Make yourself especially pretty today, Susie dear,' she says, stroking my hair, 'for I might have an especially lovely surprise for you later.'

I know well enough what that means – she’s got a new one, maybe an especially rich one, perhaps a particularly ancient one, and I can’t bear the thought of him taking off my clothes, stroking me with his cold, bony fingers and heaving his sagging, wrinkly body on top of mine. I smile at her, as I always do, pretending to look pleased. But I won’t be here when she comes back.

I try to imagine Dame Margery’s face when she finds me gone. It makes me smile to think how angry she’ll be, having to explain why her special little “damsel” seems to have done a runner. I imagine her storming from the house, charging up and down the streets squawking like a mad old goose, and I can’t help laughing at the thought of it, even if I’m scared.

I’m a bit afraid Southampton isn’t big enough for me to hide from her. But it’s been months since we went to the fair at Saint Mary’s and I don’t think she’d likely look for me there. I pack my clothes in a bundle and leave the house.

I walk quickly, looking around me all the time, worried she might be on the street. English Street’s very busy, with folk shopping, buying food and cloth and pots and pans. At times I have to push my way through the crowd of people jostling to buy at the most popular stalls, and I’m nervous Dame Margery might be among them. But I don’t see her and as I turn into the lane leading down to East Gate, I breathe easy again and slow my step. I can’t believe she’d ever come this way except to go to the fair. For there’d be no rich pickings for her in Saint Mary’s; no wealthy foreign merchants looking for comfort. Saint Mary’s is full of poor folk, of no interest to the likes of Margery Goody.

As I walk into the village again, for the first time since Trinity Sunday, I’m certain I’ve come home. In a little while I’ll see my Ma, and maybe Alice too, unless she’s married. If Pa’s there, well, I’ll just cope with whatever he says or does. It won’t matter. I’ll be home and I’ll be free.

VII.

My heart’s thumping and my hands are damp and sticky as I knock on the door I last walked through three years ago. Three years seem a lifetime, and suddenly I’m scared Ma might not know me, or won’t want to now.

When the door opens, I almost turn and run. The woman standing there isn’t Ma: she’s a lot younger than Ma. She stares at me, her eyes wide, and I stare back.

Then she speaks. 'Susie, is that really you?'

She looks so different from when I saw her last. Her hair isn't covered but braided and looped up over the top and, instead of being dark and shiny, it's mostly grey. And the face doesn't really look like hers: it's too thin and her nose looks pointy.

'Ali?' I say in a whisper. 'You're still here?'

Her mouth stretches into a thin, hard smile. 'I haven't gone anywhere. But what are *you* doing here?'

I haven't thought what I was going to say, so I dither, feeling my face going red.

'Her ladyship said she didn't need me any more, so she sent me home.'

'Sent you home?' Ali raises her eyebrows.

I nod. 'And she gave me this.' I hold out the edge of my cloak, though of course it's not the one her ladyship gave me. 'Look, it's good thick wool.'

She reaches out and feels it. 'So I see,' she says, and frowns a little.

I step forward, peering past her and through the door, eager to go inside. 'Can I see Ma?'

Her eyes open wide again and her hand flies to her mouth. 'Didn't no one tell you?' she says, her voice suddenly creaky.

'Tell me what?' Though of course I know at once.

Ali steps back so I can go inside. It's chilly in the room, and feels damp. The fire in the middle of the floor is almost out. All the shutters are wide open and, as it's a sunny day, light's flooding in. I see at once why Ali wants the light, for a spindle fat with spun wool sits on a stool by the window.

'Is that Ma's?' I say, and she nods.

'After Ma died, I started using it. I'm spinning for the same weaver she did.'

I nod.

'Sit down,' she says, and points to one of the two stools standing by the table. She sits on the other.

We're quiet for a while, just looking at each other, but I can't stop tears running down my face and don't even bother to wipe them away.

'How did Ma die?' I say at last, scarce able to get the words out.

Ali shrugs. 'I don't know really. It was like the bloody flux, but she was so ill.' She shakes her head. 'She just never got well again.'

'Where's Pa?' I look round, hoping he's not about to come through the door.

She snorts. 'Oh, he's dead too. You'll not believe it, but he found he couldn't live without her. He spent all he had on ale, and one night drank so much he fell face first into a ditch full of water.'

I know it's wicked but I feel glad. 'Do you miss him?'

'Hardly! He was a pig as well as a drunk. After you left, he got worse. Always hitting Ma, though I tried to stop him. I think that's why she died.'

'Poor Ma. I hope she's now in Heaven.'

Ali smiles, and leans across to pat my hand. 'She deserves it after all she went through.'

I nod, and smile back. 'Poor Ma,' I say again. Then, 'I hated Pa for sending me away.'

She purses her lips. 'I suppose it was hard for Ma to keep you. I didn't bring in much and Pa didn't earn a farthing. Perhaps it seemed for the best.'

'But Ma didn't want me to go,' I say, knowing I sound whiney. The tears come faster and make my nose run.

Ali nods but doesn't say anything, so I don't know if she thinks I'm right, and we're quiet again. I look round the bare little room.

'You living here on your own, then?'

'Yes. Why?'

'I thought you might've married.'

She laughs, but not happily. 'Married? Me? What've I got to offer a man? I'm old and I'm poor.'

'You're not old, Ali!' I say, but she shakes her head.

'I'm more than thirty, Susie.' She gets stiffly to her feet. 'Anyway, I must get this fire going again, else there'll be no dinner today.' She bustles about, getting more wood from the little storeroom and rekindling the flame in the hearth. When the fire's burning again, she hangs Ma's old iron pot on the rack and starts stirring.

'I haven't got much. Just a bit of pottage.'

I glance into the pot – there’s almost nothing in it. And looking round the room again I realise with a shock how much less there is than I remember. Ma never had much, but where was the green jug she liked so much, and the pewter mug her grandma handed down to her, the only thing of any value she’d ever owned?

I feel suddenly ashamed. I’d been expecting to find Ma here, imagined her throwing her arms round me, welcoming her little girl back home. Instead I’ve found my big sister, older but somehow smaller than she was before, and it’s obvious she’s struggling to look after herself, let alone anyone else. I now feel bad I’ve come. For, despite me hating living with Dame Margery, at least I had enough to eat. Yet I can’t bear the thought of going back, so I just go on sitting, watching Ali trying to make a dinner not big enough for one stretch to feed us both. When she ladles the pottage out of the iron pot into two bowls, the thin broth barely comes up half way.

She smiles thinly. ‘Sorry it’s so little.’

I shrug. ‘Thanks for sharing it.’

She reaches out her hand and places it over mine. ‘You’re my little sister. How can I not?’

We eat our small meal in silence, grinding our teeth on the hard dark bread, and sipping at the pottage to make it last. I’m still hungry when I’ve finished but can hardly say so.

‘What’s it like, working for the weaver?’ I say at length.

Ali shrugs. ‘It was all right. But the past few weeks he’s put less work my way, so I’m not making much.’

She gets up and takes the bowls off the table. She pours two cups of weak ale and comes to sit back down.

‘I don’t know how Ma kept the family going. Pa never worked.’

‘Lazy pig!’ I say, and she grins. ‘Anyway, can’t you spin for another weaver?’

Ali shakes her head. ‘I’m scared to try. The old bugger expects me to work just for him. He might cut me off altogether if I go to someone else.’

She picks up the spindle and her distaff thickly wrapped with fleecy wool. Sitting down again, she tucks the distaff under her arm, then, drawing out the wool from the fat wad, she continues twirling and dropping the spindle that winds and spins the yarn. She looks like she’s been doing it for years.

As she spins she looks up at me. ‘You going to tell me what you’ve really been doing since you left the manor?’

I squirm inside and go all hot. I’d thought Ma’d be so pleased to see me she wouldn’t ask me why her ladyship sent me home or what I’d been doing since.

‘That’s pretty,’ says Ali, nodding towards my kirtle. ‘Did her ladyship give you that too?’

I flush. Ali’s no fool, and I know I won’t be able to lie to her for long.

So I don’t.



That night, as I slip under the blanket beside my sister, I know I love her even more than I loved Ma. She puts her arm round me and hugs me close.

‘My poor little Susie. You’re safe now.’ She kisses my forehead. ‘Sleep now.’

I don’t need persuading. I’m worn out from all the talking, and from the shame of telling my sister the awful things I’ve done.

But when I wake up sometime later, to the once-familiar sound of Saint Mary’s bells ringing prime – or maybe it’s only matins – I lie quiet, still in Ali’s arms, and think how glad I am to be back home with her. And how grateful she wasn’t angry or shocked at what I told her.

It isn’t long before Ali wakes up too. ‘Ooh, my arm! It’s gone all stiff with your great head lying on it.’

I sit up. ‘Here, let me.’ I put my hands on her arm and begin to rub.

‘That’s good. How d’you learn to do it?’

I tell her about Dame Margery’s aches and pains and she laughs when I say how horrible it was rubbing her wrinkly neck.

‘She was just a wicked old witch. Even in league with the Devil himself.’

‘She did buy me pretty clothes,’ I say, sticking up for her, despite myself.

‘Pah! Never mind the kirtles, Susie.’ Ali shakes her head. ‘What she did to you was evil. Just an old bawd taking advantage of a young girl who knew no better.’

VIII.

Young Hubert Marchant is ambitious. Heir to the Godfrey wine business, through his father Andrew, he feels obliged to uphold the social aspirations of his grandmother Christina who was, his grandfather Hugh once said, a great believer in the power of rank and station. Hubert believes it too, and, to prove the point, has made a successful marriage, above even the Godfrey family's already elevated station.

It seems a pity, then, he thinks, as he sits down to dinner with his handsome and refined new wife, only a few weeks since their wedding, that he really does not like her.

And what is he to make of the tale she is now telling, of an encounter with a young woman of his very recent acquaintance?

'Can you imagine, Hubert,' says his wife, 'that today one of those "Goody Girls" came knocking on our door, looking for a job.'

Hubert cannot help but blush. He turns aside, then pretends to drop his napkin and leans down to pick it up.

'What sort of job?' he says, upright again, his composure regained somewhat.

'A maid or servant of some sort. Of course we badly need another maid, but how could I take in a girl like that?'

'How do you know she was a Goody Girl?'

'I knew her name – Susanna Rolfe.' She turns to pat her husband's arm and smiles. But Hubert is already choking, and attempting to cover his discomfiture with a feigned coughing fit.

'Are you quite all right?' she says.

He nods, although his face is livid, and he finds it hard to reclaim his voice. 'You know of her?' he squeezes out.

She nods. 'It's not hard in a town like this, you know, to learn who's decent and who's not. And Susanna Rolfe is just a common whore...'

IX.

I've been looking for a job, as a kitchen maid or servant. Kind as she is, it's obvious Ali can't look after me. But finding work turns out harder than I thought. There's nothing going in Saint Mary's, so I've gone back into the city, even though I'm scared of the old bawd.

Merchants' wives want lots of servants, them who've done well for themselves and are looking to climb the social ladder. So I've been knocking on their doors, down French Street and other places rich people live. But it seems I'm wrong about the merchants' wives, for every one I ask says no, they don't want any sort of servant, and shut the door. I walk the streets day after day trying to find someone to take me on, even as the lowliest scullery maid. But no one seems to want me.

When I go home each evening, I can't stop myself from crying. I say I'll go back to Dame Margery, but Ali refuses to allow it, and I'm glad because really I can't bear the thought of begging her to take me in again.

But days and weeks pass by and not only haven't I found a job but Ali's spinning work's dried up. We've so little money she's terrified we'll be thrown out of our house.

'I don't own this place, Susie,' she says, in a whisper. 'If I can't pay the rent, we'll be out on the streets.'

She's even thinner and I can see she's struggling. But I've still got my looks, such as they are, as well as the three good kirtles I brought with me.

Ali cries and hugs me when I tell her. 'There must be something else, Susie,' she says, her voice cracking.

'But there isn't, is there?' I hug her back. I cradle her head against my shoulder, realising I'm the taller of us two. She sobs, and I hold her tight, stroking her dry, grey hair, feeling like the big sister instead of the little one. 'I can do it, Ali.'

But next day Ali and me *both* go down to West Quay. In the hours before dawn, as we both lay cold and sleepless in our bed, holding each other close and trying not to cry too much, my proud big sister whispered she'd already done it too.

'So I'll come with you, Susie. Though the way I look, I'll probably have to make do with the other whores' grim leavings!'



Ali's smartened herself up as best she can but, in truth, the only men she usually can pick up

are old, or poor, or desperate. When she comes home, her face is often dirty, with streaks running down her cheeks that I suppose are tears. Her yellow gown is mostly grubby too, and sometimes has a rip, or worse, so she has to spend the next morning cleaning and stitching it back together.

She climbs into bed beside me and we hug each other tight, and I stroke her hair, the big sister once again.

‘I kept my eyes closed and my nose pinched with that one,’ she says, grimacing, and I feel so bad she’s only doing it because of me.

As for me, I’m learning a whole new way of selling my body: no longer having the customers brought to my bed, I must go onto the streets and find them for myself. I’m no prettier than many of the other whores – less so – but I’m younger and my clothes are finer and it’s easier than I thought to persuade some of the better-looking punters to come with me instead of them. Though I feel sick every time one gives me the nod and demands to know where we’ll do it.



Months later, we’re still making only just enough to pay the rent and have one meal a day. We hardly speak of what we’re doing: we just hug each other and go to sleep, and next morning go about our chores, trying to forget what we’ll be doing again after we’ve had our dinner.

But we know what each other’s thinking.

Ma was poor, from a family of landless labourers, and she married another one, who was not only landless but turned out to be a lazy, useless waster. But she worked hard to give her family a place to sleep and keep us fed. And she was proud she had. If Ma knew what her two girls were doing now, she’d say we were going straight to Hell. We fear it too at times.

In our few merry moments, we make each other laugh by remembering stories we heard when we were children, about unhappy maidens rescued by knights on horseback, and we cheer ourselves up with pretending one day a handsome knight’ll come and rescue us.

Though of course it’s only girlish fancy.

X.

How I hate December, when it's dark from late afternoon and night goes on forever. Last night was bitter cold, and a thin fog swirled along the streets and down the alleyways, dulling the noise even of the taverns. Because of the fog, I'd not walked as far as West Quay but staked a pitch in East Street, quite close to the turning into English Street.

Through the gloom I thought I could see a man staring across at me from the porch of the church close by where I usually stand, waiting for customers to give me the nod. Certain he'd beckoned to me, I walked towards him, but almost at once he turned and hurried back inside the church, so I shrugged and went back to my pitch.

This evening he's there again, looking and definitely beckoning, and this time he doesn't hurry away as I go to him. When I reach him, I'm shocked and scared to find he's a priest.

'Do you know what I am?' I whisper, but he laughs harshly.

'In here,' he says and, grabbing at my sleeve, drags me inside the porch.

'Here?' I whisper, horrified, but he shakes his head.

'Of course not, you foul blasphemous little whore!' His voice is low, hissing like a snake. 'The house.'

I shake my head, knowing at once I don't want to go with him.

But he grasps my elbow tight. 'Walk,' he says, pushing me forward.

I'm already scared of priests, what with their talk of Hell's fiery furnaces and how most of us will end up there because of our wickedness. But this priest makes me think I'm there already. He keeps me in his house for hours and, all that time, never lets me see his face: he doesn't light a candle and everything he does to me he does from behind, shamefully, like we're dogs. And all the time he's doing it, he prays, his voice low and rasping.

"Be merciful unto me, O God, wash away my sin and cleanse me of all evil. It is right that thou condemn me, but I pray, O Lord God, thou close thy eyes to my iniquities and do not take thy holy spirit from me."

And, as he prays, he grabs my long hair and forces my head backwards, bending my body into an agonising arch. I can't help but cry out with the pain.

'Please, stop, I beg you!' I cry and shake my head to try to free it from his grip. But he's got the Devil's strength, and the wickedness, and he pulls yet harder on my hair.

He takes me time and time again, until at length I can no longer bear it. In those few moments when, recovering from his exertions, he's powerless, I summon all my strength and throw myself off the bed, turning to face him. Dawn is sending slivers of light through the shutters, enough for me to see his horrible face, shiny with sweat and twisted in ecstasy and, I think, also with disgust. But then I wish I hadn't seen it after all, for I know his face – his church is the one I used to go to with Dame Margery. I don't know why I didn't realise it before. My cries of horror arouse him from his stupor and he grabs at the jewelled crucifix he'd used earlier against me, lying discarded on the bed, and lunges towards me, striking my cheek with such a force it tears into my flesh and rips the soft part open.



Ali must've been in bed for hours when I finally stagger home, holding a pad of cloth torn from my kirtle hard against my bleeding cheek, in agony from the pains in my back and belly. She must've awoken as I open the cottage door, for she's already climbing down the ladder. As she gently lifts the pad away from my cheek, uncovering the jagged flap of flesh, she cries out.

'Who did this to you? Who was it?'

I shake my head. 'Some priest,' I say, feebly, and she almost laughs with the shock of it.

'It's bad, Susie,' she says, looking at my cheek. I can feel it's still bleeding badly, and the blood's already soaked into the bodice of my kirtle. I'm beginning to feel faint, and there's a dizzy disorder in my head. I drop onto the nearest stool, and Ali holds onto me to stop me falling.

'I'll get Simon Hogge,' she says. She replaces the pad of cloth and bids me hold it tight in place again. Then she simply throws her cloak over her chemise, thrusts her feet into her boots and runs out into the street. Master Hogge's the butcher but he served in the king's armies, and is practised at stitching wounds and removing limbs that can't be mended. It seems no time at all before Ali's back, and Master Hogge is with her. He tells Ali to put a pot of water on to heat, while he looks at my face.

'The Devil take that whoreson priest,' he says, muttering and shaking his head. 'Men who ill-treat women should burn in Hell.'

Through a sort of mist, I see him take from his bag a small leather wine flask, clean cloths, a needle and some thread, but moments later I must've slipped into a faint.

When I wake up I'm lying on the bed, dressed in a clean chemise, with my head wrapped around with a great cloth bandage. Ali's sitting at the end of the bed.

She smiles. 'Hello, little sister. You've come back to me?'

I put my hand up to my face: it's throbbing with a terrible pain, but I can't touch it for the thickness of the cloth. 'How is it?' I whisper.

Ali comes to sit next to me. She takes my hand in hers. 'Don't try to touch it, sweetheart. Master Hogge said it'll take some time to heal.'

'You said it was bad,' I say, and she nods, her mouth crumpled.

'What did that pig do to you, Susie?'

I shake my head. I don't want to remember.

'Rest, then,' she says, and bends over to kiss my forehead.

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XI.

It's late morning and Ali and me are still in bed, sleeping off our night's work. The bang on the door's so loud we both wake up with a start, and Ali sits bolt upright.

'God's Eyes, who can that be?' she says, though she never normally curses.

She looks awful: her eyes are red around the edges, her hair's a dry tangle and she's got a dark patch on her cheek. Heaving herself out of bed, she throws an old cloak over her chemise.

'Stay there, Susie,' she says, 'just in case.'

'In case of what? Why'd anyone come to our house? Has one of our customers come after us? Or the bailiff come to throw us out?'

Ali shrugs. 'We pay our rent, don't we? The authorities've got no reason to interfere.'

She sounds brave but in truth I know she's ever fearful the city officials'll get wind of us two women living alone, and give us trouble.

The banging sounds again. 'I'd better go,' she says, scowling, and climbs down the rickety ladder. I get out of bed too and, crawling to the edge of the platform, peer down into the room below.

When Ali opens the door, she stands completely still for a few moments, then her hand flies to her mouth. ‘Tom Godewryght!’ she cries. ‘Is that really you?’

I can’t see the man standing outside the door, but the voice that answers is deep yet soft.

‘Of course it’s me, Alice Rolfe. I’ve come back to see you.’

Ali cries out again, and she sounds really happy to see this Tom. I’ve no idea who he is, and want to go and see. My cloak’s downstairs, so I grab the grubby blanket and wrap it round, and climb halfway down the ladder so I can see outside the open door.

The man’s quite tall, with longish fair hair and a small beard. His face isn’t especially good-looking but I think it does look kind. He’s well dressed – respectable-looking, not like a merchant, but maybe a craftsman of some sort. He doesn’t look anything like a knight: he isn’t handsome, doesn’t have a sword or helmet, and isn’t riding a white horse. But the moment I see him, I feel our lives are about to change, for a reason I can’t begin to fathom.

‘How d’you find me?’ Ali’s asking.

‘I always planned to look for you,’ he says, ‘and I remembered your parents lived somewhere here. It seemed a long shot after all these years, but I thought the city surely wasn’t so big I wouldn’t be able to find you.’

I smile to myself, remembering once I’d thought that too.

‘I’ve been in Southampton near two years already, re-establishing my business here.’

‘What sort of business?’ says Ali, an interest in her voice I’ve not heard in a long while.

‘Carpenter, of course. That’s what I’ve been doing all these years, in Kent. My workshop’s now in English Street.’ He grins and I can see how proud he is.

‘I always knew you’d do well for yourself,’ says Ali, sounding just as pleased. ‘Anyway, don’t stand outside.’

He hesitates. ‘Are your parents here?’

Ali runs her fingers through her matted hair. ‘I live here alone, Tom,’ she says, shaking her head. Hearing that, I cough loudly, and she spins round and sees me on the ladder. She raises her eyebrows a little and grins. ‘Or rather, I live here with my little sister, Susie.’ She holds out her hand towards me.

I climb down the last two rungs and, struggling to keep the blanket wrapped round, shuffle over to her side. ‘Master Godewryght,’ I say, bobbing a slight, awkward, curtsey. I keep my eyes down, just like Dame Margery always taught me, but throw a little smile in his direction, and I can see him nod and smile at me before he turns back to Ali.

‘Perhaps I shouldn’t. Two women alone... It’s not fitting.’

Ali laughs – her harsh, bitter laugh. ‘Oh, Tom, we’ve no reputation to lose.’

My face goes hot with the shame I still feel, and the tight skin of my scar is stinging.

Master Godewryght frowns. ‘What d’you mean?’

She shakes her head and holds out her hand. ‘Come in, Tom, and I’ll tell you how far we two have fallen while you’ve been climbing fortune’s ladder.’

I can’t believe she’s going to tell this decent man what it is we do! But I don’t know how to stop her, so say nothing. He comes in and she offers him a stool. Then she bustles around, fetching the last of the ale from the storeroom. She pours it into a cup and hands it to him.

‘What about you?’ he says, holding out the cup.

She shakes her head. ‘Not thirsty,’ she says, pressing her lips together.

He nods, takes a draught and sets the cup down upon the table. Then he smiles broadly.

‘Tell me, Alice, d’you always wear a cloak,’ and, turning towards me, ‘or indeed a blanket, inside on such a fine warm summer’s day?’

I go hot again, but Ali hoots with laughter. ‘Ha! I’d forgotten I wasn’t properly dressed. How shameful!’

‘Is it?’ he says.

She sighs. ‘Well, it should be, but for us it’s normal not to be dressed at this time of day.’

And so it all comes out.

Ali tells Master Godewryght how she was dismissed from her job at Burleigh and how, soon after she returned home, our parents died, and she took over Ma’s work as a spinster.

‘I suppose spinning doesn’t bring in much?’ says Tom.

She laughs her harsh laugh. ‘Not much at the best of times. Still less when the weaver gives your work to someone else.’

‘So you don’t spin now?’

She shakes her head. ‘Not now.’

Suddenly Tom turns to me, apologising for ignoring me. I blush under his gaze, and quickly turn my face away, to try and hide my scar. ‘And what of you, Mistress Susie?’

I dither and Ali comes over and puts her arm round my shoulders.

‘Oh Tom, you haven’t asked why it is we’re still not dressed.’

He flushes to his hairline and takes a few sips of ale. ‘I didn’t like to,’ he says at length, in almost a whisper.

‘I’m not proud of what I am, and neither’s Susie. But we have to eat.’

Master Godewryght nods. ‘It’s not for me to judge you.’

We’re all quiet for a while, then Tom speaks again. ‘Maybe it’s why I had this sense I had to find you?’

‘Why did you come back here at all?’ says Ali. ‘When you were doing so well in Kent, why leave?’

He shrugs. ‘I’ll tell you more of that another time. Something happened. I got involved... It made me think a lot about Lady Joanna...’

Ali looks surprised. ‘It’s more than a dozen years since you left Burleigh. Have you tried to see her?’

He shakes his head. ‘I’ve thought of it, but always found a reason not to go.’ He looks up at Ali, and his eyes seem to be wet. ‘I don’t even know if she’s still alive.’

‘I don’t know either, Tom. She was alive when Sir Ralph sent me away but that was only a year after you left.’ She seems to hesitate before going on. ‘But I’ve heard since – from a woman I know who lives down Lyndhurst way – her ladyship’s gone mad.’

Tom’s eyes fly open. ‘Mad? How could someone like her go mad?’

Ali sighs. ‘Sir Ralph was brutal to her. After you left, he treated her badly, imprisoned her and beat her cruelly. He was never called to account, of course, and no one, not the servants nor his children, would quarrel with him. He locked her ladyship away, pretending to the world she was ill and needed rest and quiet.’

‘No one tried to help her?’ says Tom, his eyes staring.

Ali shrugs. ‘I did. I argued with him: I knew her ladyship wasn’t ill, but that bastard abused her every night in the prison he kept her in. He let me stay the first few months, her only companion. Time and again I told the other servants he was mistreating her, but they were too afraid of Master Wragge. I even tried to get her ladyship’s atte Hyl daughters, Eleanor and Eloise, to understand, but they were so subject to their stepfather’s rule they too feared to try and help their mother. Anyway, at length, Sir Ralph got so angry with me interfering he threw me out with nothing but the clothes I was wearing.’

‘So her ladyship was left without a friend?’ says Tom.

Ali nods. 'And assuming Sir Ralph's cruelty continued, it'd be enough to make anyone lose their wits.'

'I can see that,' he says, but his shoulders are shaking and he brushes his hand across his eyes. 'I must know what happened to her, Alice. I shouldn't have left it so long.'

'But it'll be difficult, Tom, and dangerous too. Sir Ralph'll not likely be glad to see you.'

Tom looks up and grins. 'You're right. But if this friend of yours knows she's still alive...'

Ali shrugs. 'It was a while ago I saw her.'

'Can we go and see her?' he says. 'Find out what she knows?'

'I suppose so. She's landlady of one of the inns in Lyndhurst.'

'Will you come with me?' says Tom.

XII.

Ali's not that keen on the idea of a trip to Dorset. I think she's scared of coming face-to-face with that Sir Ralph, who sounds a nasty piece of work. And she keeps saying it's improper for her to travel alone with Tom, which sounds stupid given what she does. Though, in truth, I'm a bit upset at the thought of them going off together and leaving me behind. But it seems Tom thinks I should go too.

'It seems unfair to leave you here,' he says, smiling.

'I'd like to come,' I say, and turn to Ali.

She shrugs. 'If Tom doesn't mind.'

'Perhaps it'll stop you worrying about propriety,' he says, and Ali grins.

Next morning, as the church bells are ringing prime, Tom turns up with his horse and cart. I'm as excited as a child. I've put on my best green kirtle, which I never wear for work. Even though it holds some memories I'd rather forget, I know it suits me very well. Ali notices I've made an effort.

She raises her eyebrows. 'Would you be trying to catch someone's eye?'

I can feel the flush rise up my neck. But I shake my head. 'I want to look nice for our trip.'

‘Me too,’ she says, grinning. She spreads her hands and drops a teasing curtsy. ‘So how do I look?’

Ali’s a lot prettier than me, especially now I’ve got this hideous scar slicing through my cheek from eye to chin. But these days she looks old, with her pinched cheeks and greying hair. She doesn’t have a “best” kirtle, so what she’s wearing is nowhere near as fine as my green. But lately she’s been making a loose surcoat, from some blue cloth, which looks well over the dull yellow kirtle that hangs on her too loosely. She’s copied it from what she’s seen on merchants’ wives, and it does make her look more well-to-do.

She’s wearing a headdress that covers most of her hair. I still wear my mousy brown hair loose, falling in unruly waves to just below my shoulders, though today I’ve fixed a few yellow flowers to a pin and clipped it just above my ear. When she works, Ali sometimes wears her hair loose too, or more often braided but still uncovered – it’s what’s expected. But today she’s tucked it into a sort of coif, with a little hat perched on top. It makes her look like a married woman.

When Tom sees us both, he grins. ‘Don’t you both clean up nicely.’

Ali seems offended, but in truth he’s only seen us looking a mess straight out of bed. I fancy maybe he looks at me a little longer than at her, and when he gives me an extra smile, I feel all fluttery inside.

As we set off, Tom says, ‘Well, don’t we look just like a respectable little family off to visit their relatives.’

I glance at Ali. She might’ve been upset that he thinks she looks old enough to be my Ma, but she smiles and nods, and I see she’s dressed on purpose to make it seem that way. We climb into the back of the cart, and sit on a pile of hay bales covered with a blanket. It’s a lovely day for an outing: the sun’s already warm and there are few clouds. It feels like a holiday, like we’re going to the fair.



The inn landlady – her name’s Bess Poole – greets Ali like a long-lost sister. It was here Ali first came when Sir Ralph threw her out. Bess gave her friendship as well as a room. Months later, she and her husband went to the Trinity Fair and by chance met Ali there.

Bess bustles about bringing us ale, and pies too, though it’s nowhere near dinnertime.

‘It’s so good to see you again, Alice dear,’ she says, her face beaming.

I can see Tom's being patient, smiling at the women's happy chatter. But, at length, he touches Ali's sleeve and clears his throat. Ali grins and nods, and he turns then to her friend.

'Mistress Poole,' he says, 'what can you tell us about Burleigh?'

Bess purses her lips and shakes her head. 'I dunno, really. Last I heard, her ladyship'd lost her wits and his lordship was even more wild than he'd been before. As I heard it, the manor's gone to rack and ruin.' She collects the cups and pours more ale. 'But that was a while back.'

Tom offers to pay for the ale and food but Bess shakes her head. 'My pleasure. For the sake of our friendship,' she smiles at Ali, 'and in the hope you can do something for that poor lady.'

'Let's go, then, shall we?' says Tom.

Bess agrees to look after Tom's horse and cart until we return, for Tom thinks it'll be safer if we approach more quietly on foot. As we get closer to the manor, Ali's getting agitated.

'I'm not sure this is a good idea, Tom,' she says, clutching at the edge of her surcoat and twisting the cloth round her fingers.

Tom shakes his head. 'We've come this far, Alice. You two can stay here if you want, but I'm going to see if I can find someone I know.'

But I don't want to stay behind. 'Oh, come on, Ali, let's go too. I want to see the manor.'

No one stops us as we approach, first along a track through untidy woodland with dead and fallen trees, then through fields, where a few men and women are bending over, pulling weeds, Tom says.

'It looks a hopeless task,' he says, shaking his head. 'The fields look to have a deal more weeds than crops.'

Some workers look up as we pass, but none call out or ask why we're there.

I gasp when the house looms up ahead of us: it's got a great tower to one side and a wide moat runs all around the bottom of the walls.

'That's where you two worked?' I say. 'Salisbury was a big house, but this is a great castle!'

Tom nods. 'Sir Ralph was very rich, and Burleigh was an important manor in these parts. If he'd taken more interest in the affairs of the county instead of picking fights with his neighbours, he might've become a great man instead of mad.'

As we get closer, Ali lets out a cry.

‘Oh, look, Tom. The Italian garden!’

The part of the garden she’s pointing to looks beautiful, with little hedges around a complicated pattern of flowers and herbs, and winding paths leading through long, tall archways covered in yellow and pink flowers.

Tom’s eyes are shining. ‘That must mean her ladyship’s still alive.’

‘Why?’ I say.

‘The gardens were Lady Joanna’s. Sir Ralph cared little for roses and herbs, and walks and bowers. We did it all for her ladyship’s pleasure. Maybe the gardeners are still.’

Though I can’t see why that nasty Sir Ralph would let them, even if the lady is alive.

Ali spots a few men working in the orchard, way off on the other side of the great house. She points. ‘Maybe they know, Tom?’

Tom doesn’t stay to answer. Ali and I follow more slowly, and when we reach the orchard, we find he’s talking to a man about his age dressed just in a shirt and braies, with long dark hair stuck wetly to his head, his face red and shiny with sweat.

‘That’s John Reede,’ says Ali. ‘He was a gardener too, when Tom and me worked here.’

It turns out John’s in charge of the outside workers, and he seems very pleased to see Tom again. Tom’s saying how good the Italian garden still looks, despite the rest of the grounds being rather run down.

John nods. ‘It’s not perfect, but we do what we can, for her ladyship. Sir Ralph don’t seem to notice what we do or don’t do, and neither does old Wragge.’

‘So she does still walk in the garden?’ asks Tom, his face bright, but John shakes his head.

‘Not these past many years. But she looks at it from her window. Which is why we try and keep it up, even though we can’t do much.’ He hangs his head. ‘Master keeps her locked up, y’see, wi’ one of his henchmen to guard her door.’

‘But she’s still alive?’ says Tom.

John shrugs. ‘I think so, Tom.’

‘So I could see her.’

John sucks on his teeth. ‘I wouldn’t try, Tom. His lordship’s even more dangerous than he was. And the guard won’t let you past the door.’

Ali frowns and bites her lip, but Tom just shrugs.

‘But what about her children, John?’ says Ali. ‘Do they see their mother?’

The gardener shakes his head. ‘Mistress Eleanor and Mistress Eloise married and moved away. I reckon they hated their stepfather so bad, they were glad to get away.’

‘What of Sir Ralph’s own children?’ says Tom.

‘The two younger lads went long ago, but Mistress Margaret and Master Edmund still live here,’ says John. ‘But as far as I know they never see their mother.’

‘So who looks after Lady Joanna?’ says Ali, frowning again.

John shrugs. ‘D’you remember old Agatha Chapman, used to be the laundress? It’s her takes her ladyship her meals, and sits with her sometimes. She says her ladyship’s thin and pale. Spends her time reading and praying, and pacing up and down her rooms. She only has fresh air when she opens the windows. But she says her ladyship loves to look at the garden, even if she can’t walk in it no more.’

‘Does Sir Ralph visit her?’ asks Tom.

John shrugs again. ‘Dunno really. He’s always off somewhere, causing mayhem. He’s mad, Tom, mad!’

‘And what of Lady Joanna,’ says Tom, ‘is she mad too?’

John purses his lips. ‘Rumour says she is, but if you ask old Agatha she’ll say she’s sad not mad.’

‘It wouldn’t be surprising if she was,’ says Ali, and John nods.

I’m spellbound by the story of this poor lady locked up by her horrible husband, though I haven’t said a word. But then a thought pops into my head. ‘Maybe she’s waiting for you to come back, Tom?’

Tom laughs. ‘I’m sure she’s not, Susie. I abandoned her. As far as she knows, I’m lost or dead.’

I blush but won’t give up what I think’s a lovely idea. ‘But maybe you’re *wrong*.’

Ali purses her lips. ‘Susie could be right, Tom. And you *have* come all this way.’

Tom stops laughing and goes quiet.

I wish then I hadn’t said that about Lady Joanna waiting for Tom. I turn away because I can feel I’m blushing again. I glance sideways at Tom, letting my hair fall in front of my face. But he’s not looking at me: his eyes are shining, staring up at the castle walls.

‘Where’s Sir Ralph?’ he says to John.

‘Away, on one of his skirmishes against some o’ the other poor sods who’ve the ill fortune to be his tenants.’ He shakes his head. ‘Mad,’ he says again, almost to himself.

‘So I could try and see her ladyship?’

‘I suppose so,’ says John. ‘But you’ll have to get past the guard. And we never know when his lordship’s coming back.’

‘It’s a risk worth taking,’ says Tom, looking at Ali. She nods her head.

‘You’ve come all this way.’

I wish I’d kept my mouth shut.



Tom persuades John to help him get inside the castle, though it’s obvious he isn’t keen. Nonetheless, he tells us to wait out of sight, pointing to a secret little garden surrounded by a high hedge, while he goes to find old Agatha. When he comes back, she’s with him, her back bent and crooked, her face wrinkled like an old walnut.

‘You come back to save her ladyship?’ she says, her voice so croaky it’s hard to make out her words.

‘Not really,’ says Ali, ‘but we want to know she’s all right.’

Agatha shakes her head and clicks her tongue. ‘All right? She’s hardly that, dearie. What with the old swine beating her, and not letting anyone see her but me.’ She shakes her head again and mutters something to herself.

‘And how d’you think you’re going to see her?’ she goes on. ‘The old swine’ll kill you if he catches you here!’ She goes quiet again for a while, her mouth working like she’s chewing a hunk of old dry bread. ‘Anyway, her ladyship’s ill – mebbe she won’t want to see you at all.’

Tom runs his fingers through his hair. ‘But, Mistress Agatha, if she’s ill, it’s even more important I get to see her! Help me get past the guard – please?’

She grunts. ‘Impossible. They’re all in the old swine’s pay.’ And she snorts.

Ali bites her lip. ‘So it’s hopeless?’

The old woman nods, but Tom shakes his head. ‘We can do it. Where are her ladyship’s rooms? How far from the ground are the windows?’

John laughs. ‘Now *you’re* mad, Tom! They’re really high up – his lordship chose those rooms so she couldn’t get away.’

‘I could climb up,’ says Tom. ‘Are any of the windows out of sight?’

John shrugs. He takes us to where Lady Joanna’s rooms overlook the garden. Following the castle walls round in the direction of the orchard, we see a small window facing away from the main garden and the approach road to the castle, but overlooking the orchard. The window’s very high up, but there are apple trees just as high within a few yards of the walls.

Tom points to where a branch reaches almost to the window.

‘I’m surprised no one’s tried to reach her ladyship before.’

John shrugs. ‘No one would’ve thought of going against his lordship.’

‘But surely even Sir Ralph could see there was a chance of it?’

John shakes his head. ‘It’d never occur to him. He probably hasn’t noticed the old tree’s grown so high.’

‘Well,’ says Tom, ‘I’m used to climbing apple trees – or I was.’ He grins. ‘I reckon I can climb that tree and crawl along the branch to the window.’

It sounds dangerous to me, and Ali tells him he shouldn’t do it, but Tom Godewryght isn’t going to be talked out of it. It’s like a test, something he must do to prove his gallantry, like the knights in the stories.

‘But you can’t take her ladyship by surprise,’ says Ali. ‘Agatha should ask her first. Then if she wants to see you, she’ll open the window.’

‘Like a signal,’ I say, thinking of the lady in the story waving a kerchief from her window.

Agatha agrees, though she warns Tom not to get his hopes up. ‘Like as not her ladyship won’t even remember you, or’ll be too afraid to let you in. An’ I already said she’s ill.’

‘What’s wrong with her,’ asks Ali, but the old woman just shrugs.

‘Has she seen a physician?’

Agatha spits on the ground. ‘The old swine won’t let no one near her.’

‘I *must* see her, Alice,’ says Tom. ‘I must take the risk. And I must do it now, before he comes back. If I do it after sundown there’ll be less chance of being seen.’

‘It’s still dangerous,’ I say, scared, despite feeling excited too. But Tom just grins.



It's dusk. My heart's in my mouth as Tom, Ali, John and me stand, not speaking, under the apple tree, waiting for the signal. In truth, none of us think it likely old Agatha'll play her part right. So we're startled when the window opens and, through the gloom, we see her waving at us.

Tom becomes eager as a puppy, and almost leaps into the tree. He clammers up it as easily as a squirrel. But when he crawls along the branch towards the window, Ali hides her eyes behind her hands, as John tells us what happened, years ago, to a young boy, who fell out of an apple tree straight onto his head. But Tom takes it steady, and when he reaches the window, Ali says what a good thing he's still lean, else he couldn't squeeze through the narrow opening. Still, I'm sick with fear he might miss his footing, and hold my breath until he's safe inside.

XIII.

Lady Joanna Burleigh is lying on her bed, pale in the candlelight. She is much thinner than Tom remembers, and her hair, unbraided and uncovered, is grey now, and wispy. But when he climbs down into her chamber from the window, she holds out her hands to him and smiles.

'You have come back to me, Tom Godewryght. I always knew you would. I just hoped I could hold onto life long enough to see you again.'

He gasps. 'Surely you're not dying?'

She nods. 'I am ill and my lord refuses me a physician, so I cannot get well again. But I feel better, Tom, already for seeing you.' She smiles faintly. 'Why have you come?'

He tells her he wanted her to know what he has done with his life since she sent him away. 'And, now I'm here, I want to help you escape your prison.'

But she shakes her head. 'No, Tom, I cannot do that. I am too ill. Anyway, the guard would try to kill you and, even if we got away,

Ralph would certainly come after me. But I am pleased you have come, Tom.'

He tells her about his apprenticeship, and his life as a carpenter, and then about the terrible events of the uprising and what he considers his shameful part in it. 'Though I still believe the cause was right.'

Lady Joanna agrees, and urges him to continue the fight for justice for working people. 'The world is changing, Tom. One day, *all* men will be free, I am certain of it.'

She shows him a book by a priest called John Wycliffe.

'Where did you get that?' he says, astonished.

She smiles. 'It is not quite true that I have seen no one. For the first year or two, Ralph allowed me to make my confession to the Burleigh priest, Master Anthony. Ralph has always been so ignorant of matters of faith he never realised that Anthony was what is called a Lollard, a follower of John Wycliffe. If Ralph had known, he would have refused to let me see him and would have thrown him out of his living. Anthony told me of Wycliffe's teachings and, just before he left here for good, he gave me this little book of Wycliffe's writings. Ralph has never known about it. It was our little secret!'

She giggles like a girl, as Tom remembers she used to do, and for a while he sees in her eyes the Lady Joanna of the past. 'Why did Master Anthony leave?'

'Because I knew Ralph was getting suspicious. I think Wragge was up to his old tricks, and I wanted Anthony to go while he still could. I was very sad to lose his company and have seen no one but Agatha, bless her, ever since.'

They talk on until it is quite dark and then Joanna tells Tom that he must go. He resists, knowing he will never see her again.

She smiles and takes his hand. 'I'm proud of you, Tom.'

It is what he wanted – to have her approval. 'I promise not to let you down again.' He gently squeezes the fragile hand in his.

As he turns to go, she catches at his sleeve. 'Tom, take this.' She holds out the Wycliffe book.

'But it's precious to you!'

'And because of that I want you to have it.'

But Tom shakes his head. 'Thank you, but no, my lady, you keep it. After all, I can hardly read.'

'Surely that's not true, Tom? I remember teaching you your letters!'

He grins. 'I still have the book of plants. And I treasure it, because you gave it to me.' Then he purses his lips. 'Yet I still struggle to make sense of it.'

Smiling, she clicks her tongue. 'Oh, Tom, if you cannot read well enough, then *learn!* Find a priest to teach you. Men like you must be able to read, so you can learn about the world and teach others about it too. That way, the world will one day change for the better.'

XIV.

On the journey back to Southampton, Tom lets the horse walk slow and steady, and Ali and me sit close to the front of the cart, hoping he's going to tell us about his meeting with Lady Joanna. So far he's told us nothing.

'You going to tell us about her ladyship, Tom?' says Ali in a teasing voice, 'or are you keeping her to yourself?'

She winks at me, but I press my lips together and shake my head back at her. I don't think she should push him to tell, and in truth I'm not sure I want to hear it. Tom doesn't answer, so I think I must be right. He just flicks the horse's reins and whistles a tune. But Ali isn't giving up.

'Tom Godewryght!' she says, poking him in the back. 'You can't not tell me what her ladyship said – it's not fair!'

At that he stops whistling and turns around. ‘You’re a scold, Alice Rolfe,’ he says, glaring at her, and I think she’s gone too far. His forehead creases into a deep frown, and even Ali looks shocked at his serious face. But then he throws back his head and laughs.

‘Ha!’ he cries. ‘The looks on your faces.’ He grins. ‘You goose, Alice, of course I’m going to tell you. Just give me time.’

He lets the horse trot on another half mile or so, while Ali taps her foot. Then he slows to walking pace again and tells us the story of his final meeting with Lady Joanna Burleigh. When he reaches the end of his story, he stops the horse, and turns round to face us.

‘Her ladyship embraced me as we parted. Her arms were weak, but I felt the warmth of her heart against mine.’ His voice cracks a little and his eyes are shining. At first I think they’re full of tears, but then I realise what I’ve feared is true – he loves Lady Joanna Burleigh, and always has.

XV.

Back in Southampton, Tom returns to his work with, he says, a clearer conscience and a lighter heart.

‘My customers need me,’ he says, winking, as he proudly takes us to see his workshop. His apprentice, Adam, a thin spotty boy about my age, seems pleased to have his master home but hangs back as we crowd in. Tom, grinning, goes over and pats the boy on the back.

‘All well here, Adam?’ he says, and the boy nods.

‘Glad you’re back, though,’ he says, pulling a face. ‘Folk keep asking for you – customers.’

Tom chuckles. ‘Good! So we’ll soon have lots more work.’ Then he turns to Ali. ‘Which reminds me of an idea I’ve had.’

Ali tilts her head. ‘What?’

‘I suppose I should’ve asked you first.’

‘Asked me what?’

‘Whether you’ll come and work for me, as my housekeeper.’

‘Me?’ says Ali, her eyebrows raised.

‘Why not? I need the help, and I thought it’d help you too – you know, so you don’t have to carry on...’

Ali frowns. ‘What about Susie? What about helping *her* not to have to carry on...’ Her voice is hard.

Tom goes red. ‘I hadn’t thought...’ he says, and trails off.

I want to run out of there and hide. He hasn’t given *me* a moment’s thought! But Ali just looks furious.

‘I’m grateful you want to help, Tom, but what did you think Susie’s going to do while I’m looking after your house? Just keep walking the streets?’

Tom, still blushing, shakes his head. ‘I’m sorry, I hadn’t thought. I knew *you’d* make a good housekeeper.’

Ali shrugs. ‘Susie’ll make a good housekeeper too. Take her instead of me.’

I gasp. ‘But what about you, Ali?’

‘Never mind me,’ she says, putting her arm round my shoulder. ‘Maybe I can try for some spinning.’



A few days later I start work as housekeeper for Tom Godewryght, going in the morning to make dinner for him and Adam, and staying till I’ve prepared their supper. And in between I clean the house and wash their clothes. I’m hurt I wasn’t his first choice but, now I’ve got over that disappointment, I’m working hard so he’ll think I was the right choice after all.

Poor Ali, after so many years of living in Saint Mary’s, has given up our house and found another one in the city. She didn’t want to leave the house Ma worked so hard for, but the new one is closer to where Tom lives, so I don’t have so far to walk, though it’s hardly any more than one room.

I feel bad about my sister, not having the chance to look after Tom, when I’m sure she’d like to. I feel worse when, only a few weeks later, she isn’t there when I come home, and when, in the days that follow, I find she’s never home. Of course it turns out there’s no spinning and she’s back to spending her evenings on the streets around West Quay.

She climbs into bed beside me just as the bells are ringing prime and the sun’s lightening the sky, a faint glow seeping between the gaps in the shutter.

‘Sorry to wake you, sweetheart,’ she says, putting her arm round me and giving me a hug.

And I feel bad all over again because of her smell. I never noticed it before, but now I can smell the men she's been with, a vile, stale stench of ale and sweat, and something else I'd rather not think about. And, because of it, her hug's no longer the lovely comfort it always was before.

'Never mind,' I say, 'it's time to get up anyway.'

I give her a little peck on the cheek and, pulling myself out of her arms, roll off the pallet. I hate thinking she might notice I don't want to be close to her any more. But she falls asleep at once, keeping my sad secret safe.

Most days we hardly see each other, with our different comings and goings. But, on Sundays, when she doesn't go to West Quay, she comes with me to Tom's house on English Street and we all have dinner together. Often we go to church too, the great church of Saint Michael's, close by the fish market. I said it was a much nicer church than the one nearest to Tom's house, and they were happy to agree. I didn't say the one near Tom's was where I went sometimes with Dame Margery, and where I'd never go again.

Ali wears her coif and hat, in the hope, she says, no one'll know her for one of the shameless trollops who haunt Southampton's night-time streets.

'The good folk at church must consider me some poor, but respectable, widow,' she says, pressing her lips together, 'and that's fine with me.' She grins.

But I can't help frowning. I'm sad my kind-hearted sister already thinks she's like a widow, and will never be a wife. Yet if I hadn't come back into her life, she'd not have needed to go whoring and, when Tom turned up, maybe he'd have married her. 'I knew you'd make a good housekeeper, Alice,' he said, and she'd have made him a good wife too. I turn away so she won't see the tears brimming in my eyes. It seems to me I've come between her and happiness – and there's nothing I can do now to make it better.

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XVI.

The first moment I saw Tom Godewryght, I knew I'd love him. Now I know for sure what a good, kind man he is, I can't help the way my heart beats faster when he smiles his thanks for the meal I put in front of him, or praises me for keeping his house so ordered. I lower my

head and, bobbing a quick curtsy, rush from the room, so he won't see the colour rising on my cheeks. I run down the cross passage and out the back door to the little yard, and I stay out there until my galloping heart has slowed.

Months pass, and my feelings for him never change. He's kind to me always, and sometimes on Sundays, when I put on my best green kirtle to go to church, and braid my hair with ribbons and tie it up over my head, I fancy he looks at me a bit different, and find myself all hot. But he never speaks to me like he does to Ali – he treats her as a woman, but I feel he considers me still a child, or maybe just the servant I really am.

It seems my love will always be one-sided – Tom will never, could never, love me, and I know why. My kirtle might be pretty and my hair the latest style, but they can't make my scar less ugly. I've spent years as a whore, fouling my body and putting my soul in peril. And then there's Lady Joanna Burleigh. What can a servant girl like me offer against a lady such as her? Months after he last saw her, he still talks about her – every day it's 'her ladyship said this' and 'her ladyship did that'. I feel sorry for her locked up like she is, but it gets on my nerves, him talking about her all the time.

Though of course I never say.



Tom's business is doing well, and he's taking on apprentices. Adam's seventeen now – like me – and Tom's taken on two younger lads, both sons of people too poor to pay, as parents usually must. Tom's taken them in for nothing, giving them a home and food, and clothes too. I see how much he encourages them to learn.

'When I was your age,' he says to them, 'someone gave me the chance to make something of myself. She taught me anyone can better himself, if he puts his mind to it. So now I'm giving you that chance.' The lads look doubtful, though they nod and say, 'Thank you, sir,' in small uncertain voices.

Now I've got more meals to cook and two grubby little lads to clean up after as well as Adam, it's more than I can manage on my own. I beg Tom to let Ali come and help and at length he agrees. We all moved out of the city a while ago, back to Saint Mary's. Ali and me are back in our old house, and Tom's bought one of the better houses near the church, though he's kept his workshop in English Street. He likes it out here in the village, away from the bustle of the city streets and docks, and he's enough land now to have a garden – where Ali and me grow vegetables and herbs, and a few flowers, and we have a pig as well as chickens.

Neither of us knows much about gardening but Tom's got a book about it. Ali's seen it before.

'It were her ladyship's,' she says. 'She gave it to Tom when he left the manor all those years ago.'

'So you can read it?' I say to Tom, impressed.

He shrugs. 'A bit. I must try harder.'

And he does, well enough to read out to us the instructions for growing onions and cabbages and flowers.

'Does it say anything about herbs?' I say.

He nods and leafs through the pages. 'Here.' He reads the words slowly and carefully.

*Let there be great diversity of medicinal and aromatic herbs,
which are not only useful but both please by the odour of their
scents and refresh the sight with the variety of their flowers.*

I nod. 'I want to learn how to grow herbs and use them. If only I could read the book...'

'I'll help you,' says Tom, grinning. 'Well, as best I can.'

Whilst Ali and me work in the garden, Tom's making a start on an orchard.

'Seems to me you're trying to create your own little manor out here in Saint Mary's,' Ali says one day, as we help him plant his first few apple and pear trees. Her eyes are smiling as much as her mouth.

He grins again. 'You know I've always loved trees.' He turns the soil back into the hole he's dug for the last of the apples and treads it down. He stands up and gazes along the row we've planted.

'Looks good, doesn't it?' he says, and Ali and me both agree. Then he points to the far edge of the field, to a small patch of woodland that came with the land he bought. 'I'm going to plant a lot more trees down there too. More oak and ash and walnut, good for making furniture.'

'Your own little forest,' I say.

He nods happily. 'Of course, I'll not see the trees I plant full grown, especially the oaks.' He turns the corners of his mouth down a little.

'But your children will,' says Ali, her eyes smiling again.

He turns to her, his eyes wide. 'Children?'

She shrugs. 'You never know, Tom. One day, maybe?'

I'm already turning away, my cheeks flaming and my scar stinging. I busy myself gathering up the spades and other tools we brought with us. But, as I look back at them, I can see Tom's smiling and nodding his head, and Ali's laughing. I wonder what he's really thinking. This talk of children makes my heart ache, but he's already got the boys to care for, and maybe that's enough for him.

One afternoon, when we're out in the garden weeding cabbages, Ali stands up and stretches, and as I look up I see her staring at me.

'What's wrong, sweetheart?' she says, and I stare back.

'Why d'you think there is?'

She smiles. 'Because I know you're sad, little sister. Tell me?'

I shake my head. 'I'm fine, really!'

Ali comes over and crouches down beside me. 'I'm not a fool, Susie. You've been sad for months. And I know it's to do with Tom.'

I shake my head again. 'No.'

'Yes,' she says, firmly. 'I saw your face when I made that silly comment about children – you blushed and ran off. You were thinking you'd like to have Tom's children, weren't you?'

I look away.

'*Weren't* you, Susie?'

She puts her arm round my shoulder, as we both crouch among the cabbages. I stare down at them, not wanting to face her, and notice the leaves are full of holes. Turning them over, I find a mass of furry caterpillars clinging underneath. I tear at the eaten leaves, ripping them roughly from the plants. And I can't stop a few tears running down my cheeks.

'Tell me,' she says, squeezing my shoulder.

I nod. 'Let's go and sit in the orchard.'

We sit under the one big tree in the field – a towering oak Tom says has been there for two hundred years, though I can hardly believe it could've been so long. We sit with our backs to its enormous trunk and, through my kirtle, I feel the sharpness of the bark pricking at my shoulders.

Everything I've been thinking, about the way I look and what I've been, and about Tom loving her ladyship, comes tumbling out, together with the tears I've been holding back so long.

'Oh, Susie, sweetheart,' says Ali, hugging me to her. 'If you think Tom loves her ladyship as he would a wife, you're wrong. He loves her more, I don't know, as a mother,' she frowns, 'or a guiding angel.'

I shrug, not at all sure she's right.

'I do think you have a chance with Tom,' she says.

'How could I? I'm not a bit pretty, specially with this.' I touch the scar on my face.

Ali snorts. 'I don't think Tom cares much about prettiness. You've a sweet nature and I'm sure that'll make you prettier in his eyes than a beautiful face.'

'But I was a whore. Surely he'll hold that against me?'

Ali shakes her head. 'I don't think so. Tom understands why you – why I – had to do it.'

I nod. It's true Tom's never shown any sign he's offended by the times we walked Southampton's streets.

'But he's a lot older than me.'

'So many objections!' says Ali. 'It's normal for husbands to be older than their wives.'

'You're closer to him in age. Don't you want him for yourself?'

Ali shakes her head again. 'I'm too old to give him children, Susie, but you can give him a whole family of carpenters.'

I feel sure she's being brave.

'So work hard for him,' she says, 'and always be sweet and kind, and he'll surely come to love you.'

She means well, but I've been doing that for years. I can't see he's ever going to change.

1386

XVII.

Months later, in the dreary gloom of early February, Tom has a visitor. It's late Sunday morning and we're all huddled round the fire trying to get warm again, having run the few yards back from Saint Mary's church, slipping and sliding on the icy path. We're looking forward to the thick stew of ham and beans simmering in the pot. Despite the cold and gloom, we're just like a happy family, laughing and talking together, with the two youngest apprentices, Arthur and Roger, keeping us merry with their funny ideas and silly stories.

We're so startled by the sharp knock on the door Roger lets out a shriek. Tom pulls a face and, hauling himself to his feet, shuffles over to the door, making the lads laugh by pretending to be old and crabby.

'Who d'you think it can be?' he says, in a strange scratchy voice. 'Mebbe it's the Devil come to carry you away.' Roger shrieks again before dissolving into giggles.

Tom opens the door just a little way, so as not to let in the cold or let out our lovely warmth. He peers through the narrow gap and then, with a yell that makes us all jump, throws the door wide open and almost drags his visitor inside.

'John Reede!' he cries. 'Come in, my old friend. Come and warm yourself by the fire.' He makes a sign to Roger and Arthur to move round a bit so John can sit down too. John looks round at us all, his eyes wide. I suppose he hardly expected to find me and Ali here with Tom, never mind the three boys.

'How did you find me?' says Tom, but John just shrugs.

'Easy. I didn't have to ask many folk before I found one who knew you. You're well known around these parts, *Master* Godewryght!' He grins.

'But why are you here, John?' says Ali.

He grimaces. 'I was let go from the manor, and came to the city to find work.'

Tom's face stops smiling at the news. 'Why let go, John?'

John hangs his head and runs the brim of his hat through his hands. 'I hardly know how to tell you, Tom.'

'Her ladyship?' says Ali, and Tom looks across at her, his face stricken.

John nods. 'She died a couple of weeks back.'

'How?' says Tom, his voice small.

John shrugs. 'She were very ill. I think it were – I dunno. Sir Ralph let a physician come at last, but he declared her ladyship incurable. Anyway, no sooner were she in her grave Sir Ralph got rid of all us gardeners. I were surprised he kept us on as long as he did.'

But Tom isn't listening. Tears are brimming in his eyes and he's shaking his head as if he's trying to cast from his ears the dreadful news.

Ali's face is pale. 'Her ladyship lived much longer than we might've thought, seeing how weak she was when Tom last saw her. After all, that's nearly two years past.'

John nods. 'Agatha said she were better for a long while after Tom came. Every day she came to look at the garden.'

Ali rests a hand on John's arm. 'So you know your work still gave her ladyship some joy.'

He shrugs. 'I hope so, though I didn't see her for weeks before she died.'

Tom looks up. 'Did she die alone?'

'No, Agatha were with her, right to the end.'

'Did she say anything,' says Tom, 'about me?'

John shakes his head. 'I don't think so, Tom. Agatha never said.'

Tom nods and turns his face away.

XVIII.

Tom and Alice are sitting in Bess Poole's inn in Lyndhurst, waiting for Bess's servant to bring their dinner.

Tom was so restless after John's visit and the unhappy news he brought that Alice suggested they went down to Burleigh.

'To pay our respects', she said. 'Susie'll stay here and mind the shop.'

Tom nodded, glad that she had given voice to what he was thinking.

Bess comes to talk to them while they eat their dinner. 'Sir Ralph's dead too, killed in one of his endless skirmishes.' She pours Tom another cup of ale. 'Everyone round here's pleased he's gone.'

Alice crosses herself. 'I know it's wrong to wish ill of the dead, but I'm glad too.'

Tom nods gloomily but then his face brightens a little. 'Now Sir Ralph's not here to object, I'm going to pay the new Burleigh priest to set up a small chantry for extra masses to be said for Lady Joanna's soul. If anyone does, surely she deserves to speed her way through Purgatory and stand before Saint Peter...'

He smiles. 'Saint Peter!'

XIX.

Tom's changed since he and Ali went down to Burleigh. Ali told me about the chantry, and I wonder if that's what's made the difference. For sometimes I catch Tom looking at me, and when he sees me looking back, he smiles, his eyes sort-of crinkling, and it makes me feel all shivery.

Then one day he comes up behind me when I'm mixing the pastry for his favourite pie, and puts his hands lightly on my shoulders. I'm so surprised I jump and the mixing spoon falls out of the bowl and clatters to the floor, and bits of rush and herbs and goodness knows what else get stuck to it. Tom bends down to pick it up and, when he stands up, he grins at me. He puts the spoon down on the table and puts his hands back on my shoulders, though now he's facing me. His hands squeeze gently and I can't help going off balance. I want to look him in the face but I keep my eyes lowered. But then he takes my chin in his hand and lifts my face until it's close to his. I go hot, thinking he's going to kiss me, but he doesn't.

Instead he says, 'How pretty you are, Susanna,' and, stroking my scarred cheek with his thumb, smiles his broadest smile.

1387**XX.**

Once Tom and I were married, Ali gave up our little house for the last time and came to live with us. Our family of six has a busy life. Tom's well known for miles around for his skill in making furniture and now he receives commissions from churches too, for screens and pulpits, chests and aumbries. He doesn't say so, but I think he believes this means God's forgiven him his former sins.

So, everything is going well.

Except that, as I lie each night next to my beloved husband, worry stops me sleeping: we've been married months and still there's no baby in my belly. And now I wonder why, since that first time with Gilbert, I've never got with child, despite all the men I've been with.

Dame Margery always said her "girls" hardly ever did have babies.

'Everyone knows,' she used to say, 'unless a woman enjoys it as much as the man, she'll not get a child. So you just make sure it's *them* getting the comfort, Susie dear, and not yourself, and you'll be safe enough.'

I believed her, because I always hated what those men did to me and certainly got no pleasure from it. But, now, I love what Tom and me do together.

So why isn't there a child growing in my belly?

Each month Tom gives me comfort as our hopes of a child are washed away in a flood of red. I'm distraught, and spend every week of my courses weeping, while he continues with his work and tries to keep cheerful for my sake. We try simply to enjoy each other, even though the Church says it's a sin to come together knowing no child can come of it.

'I don't believe that's God's view,' says Tom, stroking my breast as we lie together, 'else why'd he have made it so much fun?'

I can't help myself but laugh.

'Anyway,' he says, 'we don't know for sure we can't have a child. Maybe one day God'll change His mind?'

I turn and nestle myself into the curving of his arm. 'I do hope so,' I say, and lay my hand on his belly, running my fingers through the fair hair that spreads downwards from his navel.

But the red floods keep on coming and I'm afraid I simply *can't* have babies any more. Perhaps what Dame Margery said isn't true at all, or I'm barren because of what those men did to me? Is God punishing me for doing what he ordained for getting children, but for doing it unwillingly and without pleasure, and so denying the possibility of children?

Night after night I lie awake. Tom knows nothing of my nighttime grief, always sleeping soundly until dawn, and I can't bring myself to tell him.

But at length I suppose the sleepless hours and the sadness begin to show in my face.

'Are you not happy with me?' he says.

I burst into tears and throw my arms about his neck. 'Oh, Tom, how can you think that?'

'Because I see grief in your eyes,' he says and, taking my arms from his neck, holds me apart from him and looks into my face. 'Tell me what's wrong.'

I shake my head. 'I can't,' I say in a whisper, too terrified to tell him what I've now persuaded myself to be the truth.

'Yes, you can,' he says, stroking my hair. 'You must.'

So I take courage and spill it out, between bursts of weeping and leaning my head against his chest to gain strength from his embrace. When I'm done, he wraps his arms about me and kisses the top of my head.

'How could I be disappointed in you, Susanna?' He lifts my face gently away from his chest and smiles at me. 'If we can't have a child of our own, so be it – it's God's will. We'll just have to make do with my apprentices.'

I smile back at him, grateful for his kindness. Though of course it wouldn't be the same.

1389

XXI.

God hasn't changed His mind.

Adam served his time and left us to practise his craft with another master, though sometimes he comes back to work for Tom when there's a big job needing many hands. Each time one lad leaves, Tom says, we'll take on another, so we'll always have a little family of three for me to feed and care for.

Tom's helped me learn to raise and use the herbs and flowers in our garden, and now I'm quite the expert when it comes to ministering to our boys. We study the book of plants together, though it's still only Tom who can make any sense of the words – I don't think I could ever learn to read.

A syrup of violets is a good remedy against the pleurisy and cough, and also fevers or agues, especially in young children.

Apply the petals of Saint Mary's Gold to painful stings to soothe them...

Wormwood is a bitter herb...that cures the stomach ache and a constipation of the bowel... It also repels fleas...

I often wonder how it can be that leaves and petals can stop our bodies' pains, and heal our wounds and pustules, but Tom says such remedies have been used since men first ever gathered flowers and herbs and then grew them in their gardens, and we must simply trust in the book's counsel. And so I do.



It's just past midsummer, and as commissions come in weekly to Tom's workshop, he's always busy, and frets that he's no time to spare for his orchard and beloved little forest.

'It's not that I don't want the work but, at this lovely time of year, I want to be outdoors, not cooped up in here!'

In truth he loves his work, loves to design and build new furniture, or carve new pieces for a church, and he loves to teach his apprentices his craft. But when the Master of the Guild comes to our workshop, clutching a small boy by the hand, Tom looks as if he might burst.

'Have you got room for a little one, Master Godewryght?' says Master Turner, his eyes twinkling. 'He's only ten, but willing.'

Tom frowns. ‘I don’t need a new apprentice, Master Turner, till Roger moves on,’ he says, rather more peevish than I think he should be with the master. ‘And I’ve no time for a fourth.’

The Master nods and strokes his beard. ‘This one’s an orphan, Tom. No family at all, though his Pa were one of my best journeymen, till he and his wife met wi’ a nasty accident a year or two ago. Been brought up by his grandma since, but now—’ He grimaces and draws a finger across his throat.

A muffled sob comes from the little boy: his shoulders shake and he wipes his face against the sleeve of his grubby little shirt. I rush forward to wrap him in my arms.

‘What’s his name, Master?’ says Tom.

‘Peter, as it ‘appens. Because o’course it’s Saint Peter’s holy day today. A sign, mebbe?’ He winks at me.

I can see at once Tom’s no interest in the saint’s day, however blessed Saint Peter is. But a small gasp escapes his lips, and he looks across at me, fixing me with his eyes. Master Turner surely doesn’t know the import of the child’s name. But I understand. Tom’s lips stay slightly parted as if he wants to speak but can’t find the words. I smile at him and nod. It’s a sign but not the way the Master thinks.

‘Of course we’ll give young Peter here a home,’ says Tom at last and, coming across to us, kneels down and gives the lad a hug.

1399

XXII.

For most of my life, I’ve known little of the world beyond Southampton, even beyond the hamlet of Saint Mary’s. But, in September, we hear King Richard’s overthrown, after twenty-two years on the throne, and a new king, Henry Bolingbroke, wears the crown. There’s a great commotion all around, with some people excited and others alarmed by what the future holds. I don’t know which side to believe but Tom says he’s glad that Richard’s gone.

Tom's never talked much to me about his part in what he calls the great uprising. I remember he told Lady Joanna about it that last time he saw her. He was relieved to find she approved him standing up for working people, and even urged him to continue to fight, saying she thought all men would one day be free.

But, with Richard's downfall, Tom at last seems willing, even anxious, to unburden his heart to me about that awful time for, though he still thinks the cause was just, he looks back on those days with horror and remorse.

'Richard was still a lad when he took the crown,' he says. 'And he was truly brave to face the rebels as he did, when he was just a boy.' He sighs and shakes his head. 'But then he proved a traitor to his people, when he went back on all the promises he'd made.'

'But why did the people rebel against their king?'

'It wasn't the king they were unhappy with. It was his advisors and the government they hated, for taxing them too hard, and the lords who kept their tenants poor. And the Church, too.'

I gasp. 'They rebelled against the Church?'

'Against the power and wealth of the Church, and its bishops.'

Then Tom tells me again what Lady Joanna said about the preacher called John Wycliffe, who believed priests and bishops should be poor and humble and made a Bible all in English, so ordinary folk could read it – well, a few ordinary folk, anyway – and about his followers, the Lollards.

'She said there'll be a better world one day, when the Church belongs to the people and all men are brothers.' He smiles. 'I wonder if that'll ever be?'



Everyone says Tom's one of the best furniture-makers in the city, even in the whole of Hampshire. He's considered a good master too, so he's never short of young journeymen seeking work. Nor am I ever without small boys to mother. Though none of them are as dear to us as Peter, now a fine, strong young man and showing every sign of being as skilled in his craft as his adopted father, and as keen to better himself as was his namesake.

Often, in the evening, when our daily tasks are done, Tom and me go out together, past Saint Mary's church and across the fields down to Tom's woodland, sometimes to work, sometimes just to walk, or sit and enjoy the peace and the shushing of the leaves. Over the

years, Tom's planted lots more trees, just as he said he would, ash and walnut, but mostly his beloved oak.

One warm October evening, we're sitting on our favourite hummock in a mossy clearing that shines like a bright pool amid the dark towers of the older oaks.

'It seems so sad you'll never see these trees full grown,' I say.

But Tom shakes his head. 'They're for the future,' he says, putting his arm around me. 'For Peter. He was brought to us for a reason, and he's our future.'

I nod and rest my head against Tom's shoulder, smiling, glad he signed the papers to make Peter our proper son.

'It's time I taught him all about the trees. The ones we're growing here for timber, and those in the orchard.'

'You should show him *The Nature of Growing Things*,' I say, thinking how often Tom has looked at it, teaching himself all over again what he used to know about gardens and orchards. 'After all, it belonged to his namesake Peter.'

He smiles. 'Yes, it did.'

We sit quiet for a long while, just looking at the trees. Then Tom sighs. 'I love this woodland. And I love you being here with me.'



It's December, dark and drear, and our days are once more measured by the foulness of the weather and the scarcity of light. Tom often frets on days like these, when time's too short to permit him to go down to his beloved woodland, the confinement made much worse when the air's so chill and the wind so biting not even Tom would choose to stay outdoors for more than moments. But he worries nonetheless, as if the trees are his precious livestock, and not tending to them for a day or two is akin to cruel neglect.

When the light fails in the middle of the afternoon and Tom can no longer see to carve a cabinet's decoration with gouge and chisel, nor even to saw a simple plank of timber, he, Peter and the boys run home from the workshop, hurrying along the darkening streets to escape the icy needles of driving rain, the gusts of wind so fierce they must hold tight onto their fleecy hoods.

It's not far to run but, when they arrive home this afternoon, their fingers and noses are blue, and the little boys are crying with the cold. But I always have a good fire going, and I strip the boys of hoods and cloaks and wrap them in the blankets I've warmed specially by

the fire. And I give them all some ale I've mulled with a little spice and honey, and we all sit around the hearth together and talk about our day, while they turn pink once more and recover their good spirits.

Despite the cold and dark outside, I love these times we spend together, me and my beloved husband, our little apprentice boys and our precious Peter. And I know Tom loves it too, for he likes to tell us things he's just discovered, something to arouse our curiosity.

'This year's drawing to a close,' he says. 'When these long months of dark and cold have passed, it'll be spring again. The sun will shine, trees burst into leaf, plants push new shoots up from the earth, lambs frisk and caper in the meadows. And it'll be another new year and, this time, a *special* year.'

The year that's coming to an end I think of as the twenty-third of King Richard the Second – that's what the sheriff's envoys said when they brought news to the village green, and it's what the constable's always said at the hallmote. Though now of course it's the first of King Henry the Fourth – I really must remember that!

But Tom says the year's got another name. 'It's called "thirteen hundred and ninety nine", and it's the last year of the thirteen hundreds.'

I can see the boys already look bewildered, their mouths turned down, their eyes gazing round the room. But Peter's eyes are wide and round, and there's a smile upon his lips. And I stop my supper preparations so I can listen too.

'The new year,' says Tom, 'will be called "fourteen hundred", and it's been a hundred years since those thirteen hundreds began.'

I can't imagine how long that is, and say so.

Tom nods. 'It is hard to grasp. Folk only live, what, thirty, forty years, sometimes more, God willing. But some *things* last much longer.'

He gets up to come over for a refill of mulled ale, then, sipping at the steaming drink, goes back to his chair.

'Think of that great oak, the one on the edge of the clearing in our woodland. It's stood in just that place for more than a hundred years and, if no one cuts it down to make cabinets or chairs, it'll still be standing there in yet another hundred.'

I can't think how Tom knows this but I don't question him. I just love to believe it's true. And Peter's face is shining with delight.

Tom gets up again and, opening the doors of the carved oak cabinet he made to hold our treasures, he takes out our most precious possession. When he sits down again, holding it on his lap, his eyes are shining.

‘But that tree’s a grand, solid sort of thing, whereas this book is fragile. Yet it too has survived as long.’

He opens the book and carefully turns the pages. Even the boys are curious now and shuffle over on their knees to peer at the lovely paintings, though in the candlelight it’s hard to see their beauty.

Peter too stands up and leans over Tom’s shoulder to get a better look.

‘A hundred years?’ he says. ‘Can such a book have truly been around so long?’

Tom nods and smiles. ‘It must’ve been. Because, you see, Lady Joanna’s husband, Peter – your namesake – wasn’t the first to own it. Before him, it was his mother’s. Her name was Agnes and she loved to read, despite being just a villein’s wife. She learned reading from her uncle, a priest called Master William Beneyt. It was *him* gave her the book, and he got it from his own father. And it must’ve been written many years before that. So the book must be much *more* than a hundred years old!’

I smile with happiness, thrilled to think of our precious book being handed down from person to person for so many years.

The boys laugh and clap their hands, and Peter grins and asks if he can turn the pages. Tom stands up and places the book carefully on the table. ‘Of course. I want you to. And you must learn to read it too.’

‘I’m so proud the book belongs to you,’ I say to Tom, ‘and to know you’ll hand it on again, to Peter.’ I come and touch Peter gently on the arm, and he responds with yet another grin and a light kiss on my cheek.

‘And, who knows,’ I say, ‘perhaps it’ll be passed down from hand to hand for yet *another* hundred years.’

Tom laughs and puts his arms around me. ‘It’s a strange thought, isn’t it, how life just carries on? It’s like a wheel. Right now, on a dark December day like this, much of the world outside is dead or dying, but we know, come March, the wheel will turn and the world spring into life again.’

I nod but say nothing for a while, as a thought’s forming in my head yet I can’t quite find the words. I sense Tom’s waiting, and the boys, and I suddenly feel shy. But then I find I do know what it is I want to say.

I look up at Tom. ‘We know that, even when *we* die, there’ll always be someone to come after us, and then someone to come after that. And our book being handed on from one person to the next is the same, something that carries on from year to year, for a hundred years and then another hundred years... It’s just the nature of things, isn’t it?’



APPENDICES

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APPENDIX 1 SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL

The novel opens with a prologue, first explaining the origin of the gardening book that will appear throughout the novel, and then hinting at the horror that is to come as the century unfolds.

Then comes the first of seven stories, *Poverty*. William, a newly ordained priest responsible for a small rural parish in Hampshire, is from a lower gentry family, better educated than he needed to be, and something of a disappointment to his father. His church is part of a large manor estate presided over by an insensitive and unpleasant knight, who cares little for his servants and tenants. Although at first he felt strongly that he had a calling, once in the job, the disaffection of the peasantry against their lord make William question his abilities as a priest. William's story runs from 1300 up to 1314, the year before the great famine that ravaged England. In the years leading up to the famine he observes a great deal of misery and death – it is the lot of the common man, but even he finds it difficult to understand God's purpose in it all.

His story opens with a fire in an alehouse, the horror of which makes him think deeply about the hard lives of his flock. The villagers resent the harsh attitude of their lord and there is a lot of unrest, and worse, which William finds himself drawn into as a mediator and advisor.

William acts against his better judgement when he falls in love with Alys and takes her as his mistress, despite the requirement for priests to remain celibate. He struggles to uphold the church's teaching on celibacy, and finds his faith in his vocation severely shaken. When Alys dies, he forms a close relationship with his young niece, Agnes.

In *Famine*, we first meet Agnes as a girl. She is William's niece, the daughter of a relatively wealthy peasant living on a well-run manor in Sussex. Her story runs from 1314 to 1328. The rains that will devastate harvests for years to come have started, and at first her story is only about the famine. We glimpse her hunger for "more" in life, symbolised by her desire to read, but it is soon forgotten in the struggle to survive. But once the rains subside for good (four years later), the usual desires of a young girl for love dominate her story, and eventually lead her into calamity and misery.

Her husband, Richard, whose story, *War*, runs from 1328 to 1346, is a young man trapped by the convention of the manor and his father's determination pass on his valuable holding to his eldest son. He agrees to marry (against his wishes) and loves the children that ensue, but he longs always for adventure, and when the opportunity to become an archer for the king arises he takes it, and he discovers his vocation, fighting in what we now call the Hundred Years War, but death will come for him not on the battlefield but back home as a result of the plague.

We first meet Peter, the youngest son of Agnes and Richard, as a boy who, like his father, longs for something beyond the peasant life, though he does not want to be a soldier. His story, *Plague*, runs from 1346 to 1359. His young life is turned upside down by the plague (the "Black Death"), which robs him of most of his family and threatens to trap him on the manor (also like his father). But Peter runs away to Southampton and, by great good fortune, meets a wealthy merchant who helps him find the new life he was looking for. He discovers adventure and great wealth of his own, but it is the peril of adventure that will end his life.

Part of Peter's new life includes Joanna, his patron's daughter. Her story, *Death*, runs from 1359 to 1371. We meet her first when she and Peter have been married for three years. She is blissfully happy as his wife, and the mother of his children. But death robs her of some of her babies, and then her beloved husband. She remarries, into the gentry, for the sake of regularising her position in society and ensuring her children have security. But it proves a loveless marriage, and she finds an outlet for her affections in one of her gardeners, a destitute child whom she takes in and nurtures into manhood. But, as a result, she loses everything including her freedom.

Tom, the gardener who is the object of Joanna's affections, was a bold child, despite his lowly background, and also talented with his hands. His story, *Disorder*, begins in 1371 when, grown up, he is obliged to flee the manor. He fetches up in Kent and eventually becomes the carpenter he's always dreamed of being. But he is caught up in what we call the Peasants' Revolt, and both the injustice he perceives and the horrors of men's brutality to their fellows have a profound effect on him. By the end of his story, in 1382, he has returned to Hampshire.

Susanna is the final character, her story, *Despair*, running from 1382 to the end of the century. We meet her as a child, banished by her employer and alone in Southampton, trying to find her parents. She is forced into prostitution by a seemingly kind old woman, who proves to be a bawd, but eventually escapes and finds her way back to her family home. There she finds her sister, Alice, alone and nearly destitute. Alice, who once was Joanna's maid and a friend of Tom's, takes Susanna in but poverty forces them both back into prostitution. But, when Tom shows up at Alice's door, returned from Kent, both women's lives take a turn for the better.

APPENDIX 2 CAST OF CHARACTERS

Narrators are in **CAPITALS**. Other principal characters are in **bold**. Names in *italics* are characters who are referred to but do not speak.

1. POVERTY 1300-1314

MASTER WILLIAM BENEYT, a parish priest, new to his living on a manor, Swivelton, in Hampshire

Marjory Tyler, his sister, a villein farmer on a Sussex manor, Broadham

Geoffrey Tyler, her husband

Agnes, their daughter, their last child

Alys Dyer, William's mistress

Walter, her dead husband

Dan Miller, old man

Robert Payne, a disaffected youth, and his friends, *Ralph Strong* and *Martin Rolfe*

Sir Philip le Strange, lord of the Swivelton manor

Sir Giles de Syngletoun, lord of the Broadham manor

Nicholas Foreman, the bailiff

Beatrice, his wife and Matilda, their daughter

Jakys Coupere, the landlord of Swivelton's most popular alehouse

Matthew Spencer, a hostler

Anne and Amice, his dead wife and daughter

Emma and *Francis Hammelee*, orphaned children

Hawise and Nathaniel, their dead parents

Jack Webb, the constable

Agatha Strong, wife of the blacksmith, mother of Ralph

Sybil Kemp, wise woman

Hubert Dyer, Alys's brother-in-law

Mistress Payne, Robert's mother

Master Benedict, a curate

2. FAMINE 1314-1328

AGNES TYLER, later atte Hyl, villein farmer

Marjory and **Geoffrey**, Agnes' mother and father, villein farmers in Broadham, Sussex

Alan and **John**, two of Agnes' brothers

Master William Beneyt, Margery's brother, Agnes' uncle

Ralph Bordeman, reeve

Emma and Francis Beneyt (born Hammelee), adopted children of William Beneyt

Maud and Arthur Fletchere, their family, poor cottars in need of help

Sir Giles and Lady Margaret de Syngletoun, lord and lady of the Broadham manor

Alan Cook, Nick Fuller, William Webb, Adam the blacksmith, amateur musicians

Mariota Grene, Agnes' friend

Harry Fuller, Mariota's beau

Tom Wodeman, carpenter, Agnes' lover

Richard atte Hyl, Agnes' suitor, later her husband

Master atte Hyl, his father

Master Anselm, parish priest in Broadham

Adam atte Hyl, Richard's younger brother

Edwin and George, Agnes' older brothers

Edith Bellyng, midwife

William (Will), Elizabeth (Lizzie), Geoffrey, Edwin, children of Agnes and Richard

Beatrix, daughter of Agnes and Tom

3. WAR 1328-1346

RICHARD ATTE HYL, a villein farmer and archer

Agnes, his wife, formerly Tyler

William (Will) atte Hyl, eldest son of Richard and Agnes

Elisabeth (Lizzie), *Geoffrey, Edwin*, other children of Richard and Agnes

Peter, last-born son of Richard and Agnes

Master Anselm, parish priest in Broadham

Adam and James atte Hyl, Richard's younger brothers

Henry Etheridge, Sussex coroner

Sir Henry de Syngletoun, son of Sir Giles, lord of the Broadham manor
Robert of Hurst, a freeman
Alan of Hurst, his son
Simon Bigge, Richard's comrade, an archer
 King Edward III, king of England
Sir Walter Mauny, a knight in the service of King Edward
 Gilbert Mannerling, a man-at-arms in service to Robert of Hurst
 A French bailiff, *his wife, son and daughter*, at the mercy of the English army
 Father Hubert, a physician-friar in service to Sir Henry
 Maggie and her friend, camp followers of the English army
King Philip, king of France
Beatrix (Bea), daughter of Agnes and Tom Woodman
 Elinora Hurst, mother of Alan
Edward, the Black Prince
 Earl of Warwick

4. PLAGUE 1346-1359

PETER ATTE HYL, born a villein, later a merchant and traveller
William (Will), his older brother
 Sir Henry de Syngletoun, the lord of the Broadham manor
Richard, Peter's father
Master Nicholas, the parish priest
 Isabel, Will's wife
Geoffrey, Agnes and Bella, children of Will and Isabel
Elisabeth (Lizzie) Proudfoot, born atte Hyl, Peter's sister
Philip, Lizzie's husband
Tom Elyot, one of Richard's friends
Robert Bordeman, son of Ralph, reeve
Beatrix (Bea), Peter's half-sister
 Dame Ellen Broustere, landlady of *The Red Lion*
Master Hugh Godfrey, Southampton wine merchant
 Jack, a sailor in Hugh's employ
Dame Christina, Hugh's wife
Joanna, Hugh's eldest daughter, later Peter's wife
 Isabella and Elisabeth, Joanna's younger sisters
 Simon de Witt and Roger le Barbier, journeymen to Hugh
 Madame Ferrand, an innkeeper's wife in Gascony
Jean de Martigny, Hugh's friend and fellow merchant
Signore Giovanni Alberti, a Genoese merchant and good friend to Peter
 Will Travers, a veteran traveller
Alexander, Hugh, Robert, children of Peter and Joanna

5. DEATH 1359-1371

JOANNA GODFREY, later atte Hyl, later Burleigh
Peter atte Hyl, her first husband
 Alexander, *Hugh, Robert*, Eleanor, Eloise, their children
Hugh Godfrey, Joanna's father
Christina, her mother
 Isabella and Elisabeth, her younger sisters
 Hawisa, the children's nurse
Jean de Martigny, Hugh's friend and fellow merchant
Katherine and Marguerite, Jean's children
Alice Rolfe, Joanna's maid
 Cook, in service to the Godfreys
Signore Giovanni Alberti, a Genoese merchant and good friend to Peter
Sir Ralph Burleigh, Joanna's second husband, a baronet, lord of a Dorset manor and many other estates
Editha, Ralph's dead wife
 Andrew Marchant, Isabella's husband
 Jane, Christina's sour-faced maid
 Marion, once a lady's maid, in service to Lord Burleigh
 Gilbert Wragge, Sir Ralph's seneschal
 Nicholas, the cook at the Burleigh manor
 Emma Godewryght, a manor servant
Thomas Godewryght (Tom), her son, a servant and gardener

Margaret, Edmund, Giles and Anthony, children of Joanna and Ralph
 Robert Spycer, courting Alice Rolfe
Old Ned, the head gardener at the Burleigh manor
 John Reede, a gardener and friend of Tom

6. DISORDER 1371-1382

TOM GODEWRYGHT, servant to Lady Joanna Burleigh, a gardener, later a carpenter
 Alice Rolfe, maid to Lady Joanna Burleigh
Edmund Goldynge, goldsmith and pilgrim
 Dame Cecily, Edmund's wife
 The innkeeper of a Winchester tavern
 A constable in Dorking
 Sir Ralph, Lady Joanna's husband
Jack Simkins, master carpenter in Maidstone
 Dame Ellen, Jack's wife
 Stephen Bellows, Maidstone blacksmith
 Amice, Stephen's daughter
John Ball, a mad priest and rebel
 Sir John Hoo, tax collector in the service of King Richard
 Elias Parker, a Maidstone artisan, *his wife and children*
 Geoffrey Webbe, a Maidstone weaver, his wife, Anne, and their children
Simon Sudbury, Archbishop of Canterbury and chancellor of England
Richard Griggs, a Maidstone merchant
 Adam, Tom's young assistant
 A Rochester man, a rebel
Sir John Newton, keeper of Rochester Castle
Walter Tyghler, a tiler and rebel
 King Richard II, a boy and king of England
John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, uncle of King Richard, the most hated man in England
 Humphrey Ware, a yeoman
 A monk, worshipping in Canterbury Cathedral
Nicholas Hibbard, a priest and rebel
Thomas Farringdon, a rich man and supporter of the rebels
 William Walworth, Mayor of London
 An Essex man, in conversation with Tom

7. DESPAIR 1382-1399

SUSANNA (SUSIE) ROLFE, a maid, later a prostitute
A lady, Susanna's former employer in Salisbury
 A carter
 Three Southampton street urchins
Dame Margery Goody, a bawd
 Henry Farthingale, Southampton alderman and client of Dame Margery
Monsieur Auguste Martin, a merchant from France and client of Dame Margery
 Gilbert, son of Susanna's former employer
Susanna's father and mother
Alice (Ali) Rolfe, Susanna's sister, a spinster and prostitute, formerly maid to Lady Joanna Burleigh
 Hubert Marchant, son of Andrew, heir to the Godfrey wine business, and his wife
 A priest, a wicked man
 Simon Hogge, a butcher-barber-surgeon
Tom Godewryght, a carpenter, formerly a servant at Burleigh manor
 Bess Poole, landlady of a Lyndhurst inn
 John Reede, head gardener at Burleigh manor
 Agatha Chapman, maid to Lady Joanna Burleigh
Lady Joanna Burleigh, chatelaine of Burleigh manor, imprisoned by her husband
 Adam, Tom's assistant, now apprentice
Tom's other apprentices, Arthur and Roger
 Master Turner, Master of the Guild of Carpenters in Southampton
 Peter, Tom's latest apprentice, later his adopted son
King Henry IV, king of England

APPENDIX 3 REVIEW OF HISTORICAL NOVELS

I looked at thirty novels and made notes about “mindset”, “mediaevalness”, alterity and modernity or otherwise of their language. I chose the thirty from a spectrum of different types of historical fiction, selecting first from those with which I was already familiar, and then later from others that seemed to offer a different style of writing or literary perspective.

List of novels read, by historical fiction category

Traditional (historical people and events)

Bennett, Vanora, *The People's Queen*
 Champion, Emma, *The King's Mistress*
 Chadwick, Elizabeth, *The Scarlet Lion*
 Penman, Sharon, *The Reckoning*
 Plaidy, Jean, *Passage to Pontefract*
 Seton, Anya, *Katherine*
 Zelitch, Simone, *Confession of Jack Straw*

Social history

Baer, Ann, *Down the Common*
 Chevalier, Tracy, *The Lady and the Unicorn*
 Follett, Ken, *World Without End*
 Lord, Elizabeth, *Company of Rebels*
 Sankaran, Vanitha, *Watermark*
 Vantrease, Brenda Rickman, *The Illuminator*

Military

Cameron, Christian, *The Ill-Made Knight*
 Cornwell, Bernard, *Harlequin*

Mysteries

Doherty, Paul, *The Cup of Ghosts*
 Eco, Umberto, *The Name of the Rose*
 Franklin, Ariana, *Mistress of the Art of Death*
 Gregory, Susanna, *A Vein of Deceit*
 Knight, Bernard, *A Plague of Heretics*
 Peters, Ellis, *A Morbid Taste For Bones*
 Robb, Candace, *The Riddle of St. Leonard's*
 Starr, Mel, *The Tainted Coin*

Literary

Ackroyd, Peter, *The Clerkenwell Tales*
 Blackburn, Julia, *The Leper's Companions*
 Golding, William, *The Spire*
 Thorpe, Adam, *Hodd*
 Unsworth, Barry, *Morality Play*

“Myth and magic”

Maitland, Karen, *Company of Liars*
 Riley, Judith Merkle, *The Water Devil*

Summary of review of novels read

The tables below summarise my notes following reading the selected books. Some notes are more expansive than others, but all are intended merely to encapsulate my perceptions of the books in terms of the four categories, mediaeval mindset, alterity, “mediaevalness” and language. The notes are not the result of a detailed *analysis* of the books, for I only wanted to gain an impression of them. Similarly the “scores” (see the table on page 11) are not precise, but just a way of roughly measuring my perceptions.

Mediaeval mindset

The characters in nearly all the novels I read had quite authentic-seeming mediaeval thought-worlds, including religious sensibilities of the time, superstitions (and to some extent belief in the supernatural), social attitudes, and generally strange (to us) ideas. A few felt rather modern – in, for example, *World without End*, *Mistress of the Art of Death*, *The Illuminator*, some reviewers have criticised some characters for seeming too 21st century, and I might agree, although I think we should not overlook the likelihood of there being, even then, people with forward-thinking, “modern” outlooks. Some novels, however, have thoroughly “mediaeval” characters – in, for example, *The Clerkenwell Tales*, *A Vein of Deceit*, *Hodd* and *Morality Play*, many of their characters seem very much of their time, and would seem incongruous in the present day.

Alterity

Surprisingly few of the novels had very much in the way of alterity, by which I originally meant something *more than* just the usual religious outlook and superstition. However, at one point during my reading, I realised that I was not quite sure what I really did mean by “alterity” – was it something “fantastical”, or just something sufficiently strange or different as to give the reader a perception of “otherness” about the culture and sensitivities of the time? I felt it should be the latter and I wanted to understand whether such “otherness” was *essential* to bringing a “mediaeval” flavour to the novel, and conversely whether having too much of it might render the novel as fantasy rather than historical fiction.

Novels that scored highly on alterity included *The Clerkenwell Tales*, *Hodd*, *Morality Play* and *The Name of the Rose*, all of which had a sense of mystery and “otherness” that was missing from many of the other novels, yet did not detract from a feeling of normality – none of these novels seemed to be “fantasy”. *Company of Liars* also scored highly, with its strange characters and mysterious beings, but here the “otherness” seemed to bring a somewhat magical or fantastical air to the novel. *The Leper’s Companions* too contained a good deal of alterity, but in this case the nature of it seemed to make the novel much more like fantasy than historical fiction.

A few novels had no strangeness at all, and most had very little beyond superstition, rendering them relatively “naturalistic”, with any strange ideas and happenings seeming merely normal. Yet, I did feel that, in most cases, while alterity can certainly add something to the tenor and quality of a novel, the lack of it did not necessarily detract from its “mediaevalness” – *A Plague of Heretics*, *A Vein of Deceit*, *The Scarlet Lion* and *Harlequin* are all examples where the relative lack of “otherness” in no way detracted from their seeming authenticity as “mediaeval” novels.

“Mediaeval”?

There were generally quite high scores for “mediaevalness”, indicating that most novelists drew convincing pictures of the period, with lots of details of things and environments, which bring it to life. One or two were not so convincing: *The Leper’s Companions* somehow failed to evince the period, and in both Plaidy’s *Passage to Pontefract* and Zelitch’s *Confession of Jack Straw* there seemed to be little to indicate even when the story was set, let alone bring it to life.

A few novels – *The Leper’s Companions*, *The Illuminator* and *Confession of Jack Straw* among them – had more than their fair share of factual anachronisms, which occasionally were so obvious that they threw me out of the illusion of the period, even if I was enjoying the story. However, I was pleasantly surprised to find that most of the novels had few or no such anachronisms.

Language

I found that most of the novels I read were written in straightforward, broadly modern, English, with at least a sprinkling of strange or contemporary words to give a mediaeval air. However, if most novels had few factual anachronisms, some certainly had more than their fair share of anachronistic words and phrases, and/or used language that seemed too modern. Anachronisms of all kinds can throw the reader out of the illusion of the period, and some are more distracting than others, but generally I concluded it was not a significant problem, except in one or two cases. Occasionally, a lack of balance between ancient and modern language can be somewhat jarring – I found this in *Ill-Made Knight*, where archaic-sounding words and phrases sit alongside a lot of modern phrasing.

Several of the novels had some archaic phrasing, but a few had enough archaic language, especially in dialogue, to disrupt my enjoyment, although I realise that some readers find it appealing and authentic-seeming. In others, the language was strange but not distractingly so, giving the novels an air of mediaeval mystery and richness – *The Clerkenwell Tales*, *Hodd* and *Morality Play* are examples.

None of the novels listed went beyond the “somewhat archaic” that I had identified as a possibility in my language scoring. (Two novels I have read subsequently did go “beyond”. Dorothy Dunnett’s *A Game of Kings* has arcane language and a good deal of untranslated French, Spanish and Latin, which, for me, makes for an overly challenging read. Paul Kingsnorth goes even further, writing his novel, *The Wake*, in an invented version of Anglo-Saxon English.)

Categories and scores in review of novels

	Mediaeval mindset	Alterity	“Mediaeval”?	Language
10/10 =	Characters’ thought patterns seem thoroughly mediaeval	Novel is full of relevant strangeness	Picture of mediaeval life is richly detailed and seemingly authentic	Language is totally authentic – <u>is</u> Middle/Old English
				Language seems authentic – but is not actually ME/OE or whatever
				Language reflects speech patterns of the past, has contemporary (mediaeval) words (may or may not have anachronisms)
5/10 =	Characters’ thought patterns are largely mediaeval but some modern views creep in	Novel has some strangeness	Picture of mediaeval life is fair but may have some anachronisms	Language is archaic with contemporary (mediaeval) words (may or may not have anachronisms)
				Language is largely modern but with some archaic phrasing, contemporary words and no anachronisms
				Language is modern with some contemporary (mediaeval) words and no anachronisms
				Language is modern with a few contemporary (mediaeval) words and some anachronisms
1/10 =	Characters’ thought patterns seem very modern	Novel is devoid of relevant strangeness	Picture of mediaeval life is either missing or ridden with anachronisms	Language is totally modern English with few if any contemporary words and lots of anachronisms

List of novels in alphabetical order with notes

	Author, Novel (Year first published)	Period, Type of historical novel	Mediaeval mindset	Alterity	"Mediaeval"?	Language
1	Ackroyd, Peter, <i>The Clerkenwell Tales</i> (2003)	14 th c. Literary	9 – plenty of religion, superstitions, spirits, devils, curses and spells, dreams, strange ideas and happenings. Yet the people seem “normal” for the time. They just have funny ideas! Lollardy and its heretical ideas.	9 – very much so. Lots of strange ideas/happenings: bleeding veins to cure particular ailments, diseases and how to treat them; combing hair restores the memory; effects of food on humour; “snufflers”, people who like noxious smells – is this real?	9 – very much so. Quote on back: “a <i>tour de force</i> , full of rich imaginings and strange happenings...as finely wrought as an illuminated manuscript” – I agree. Interesting descriptions of things, such as techniques of illumination, clothing, apprentice initiation, guild fights, the beliefs of the “predestined ones”, the Lollards (but is this true?); science (“geometry or art-metricke”); properties of rocks. And lots more... Location is strong; sights, sounds and smells of London well drawn. Snatches of history, e.g. peasants’ rebellion, also grounds it. Images of strange things you see on illuminated MSS.	4 – modern English but with a slight strangeness at times, mostly in dialogue: “We are like drops of rain, falling slantwise to the earth.” “There are three things full hard to be known which way they will go.” “Monday’s thunder brings the death of women. Friday’s thunder portends the slaughter of a great man.” Lots of mediaeval or strange words: close-stool, five wits (=senses), queynte, thunder-light, prick-song books (music written down in dots). Names for pubs and people unusual.
2	Baer, Ann, <i>Down the Common</i> (1997)	13 th c.? Social history	6 – author tells what Marion thinks about everything, church, God, guilt, sex... And it seems “mediaeval” enough.	3 – not really. The picture she paints is one of normal life, and there is nothing particularly strange in it, apart from the differences between their attitudes and beliefs and ours, which seem perfectly normal.	9 – very much so, despite lack of alterity. Inside and out of the cottage, environment, the dark, smell, cold, discomfort, all well drawn. The difficulty of being ill, having a child be sick in the night – simple stuff, but telling. Using the midden as a latrine. Goat and chickens sharing the house.	3 – plain English, with a few contemporary words. Contractions in speech. Very few, if any, anachronisms so far. A lot of “tell”, as author tells us everything that everyone is doing and what they think, and background information. Seems like a cross between a textbook and a novel, but it’s interesting enough.

List of novels in alphabetical order with notes (continued)

	Author, Novel (Year first published)	Period, Type of historical novel	Mediaeval mindset	Alterity	"Mediaeval"?	Language
3	Bennett, Vanora, <i>The People's Queen</i> (2010)	14 th c. Traditional	7 – characters, mostly real, seem mediaeval enough. Aunty in the prologue is sceptical about God and the Church. Alice herself is super feisty but I don't feel she couldn't have been like that. Refs to Fortune's wheel...	3 – not much so far. Ideas about how the plague happened somewhat strange but more based on ignorance and superstition. Refs to the witchy Melusine...	7 – quite a good picture of mediaeval life: good on court life, lots about clothes, merchants as financiers, images of London, details of plague. Chaucer, Edward III, John of Gaunt etc. as characters help to ground it.	3 – modern language, with the odd anachronistic word or phrase (mumbo-jumbo, 18 th c; nouveau riche, 19 th c), and a few mediaeval words. Some language has a very modern feel and is very lively, which suits Alice's viewpoint. An Amazon reviewer pointed out how much "tell not show" it is, and there is so much of what Alice is thinking that it actually becomes quite tedious at times.
4	Blackburn, Julia, <i>The Leper's Companions</i> (1999)	15 th c. Literary	8 – characters seem mediaeval largely because of the degree of superstition and fantastical imagery. Religion. Dreams, visions. Saints.	9 – lots: mermaids, devils, angels, baby with the head of a monstrous fish, miracles, talking animals, it pervades the novel to a degree that more or less shuts out the normal. I first thought the story was largely realistic with touches of alterity, but rather alterity is the norm, which makes it seem more like fantasy than historical fiction. Narrator seems to be a ghost moving unseen among the villagers (does she ever become 'seen?'), so the premise is weird to start with.	4 – despite the mindset and alterity scores, it's hard to detect when the novel is set. We are told it is 1410, but there's little evidence of the period. References like kitchen, bedroom, four-poster bed, feather bolster, grate, lace on a shift, potatoes throw you out of the period.	2 – modern English, no contractions I think, slightly formal. Some anachronisms, and no archaic or mediaeval words, nothing that indicates the period.

List of novels in alphabetical order with notes (continued)

	Author, Novel (Year first published)	Period, Type of historical novel	Mediaeval mindset	Alterity	"Mediaeval"?	Language
5	Cameron, Christian, <i>Ill-Made Knight</i> (2013)	14 th c. Military	8 – main narrator and other characters seem to have mediaeval sensibilities, though their language isn't very "mediaeval".	5 – curiously not	8 – despite lack of alterity, everything main narrator talks about is "mediaeval life": chivalry, apprenticeships, brutality, unpleasantness, difficult position of women, plenty of religion and calling on God (even as a boy he's keen on going to Church). The picture seems authentic, despite the language.	2 – language a mix of modern and ancient, some archaic sounding words and phrases, lots of modern phrasing. The effect is fine, really. Voice of main narrator, bluff old soldier, full of himself and coarse language, but also humour, actually quite convincing. Anachronisms annoying but don't detract hugely from the story. In some cases the "anachronisms" enhance the story: "we were swashing and buckling faster and faster" isn't proper English, and "swash" is probably 17 th c, but somehow making up words like this fits the character.
6	Campion, Emma, <i>The King's Mistress</i> (2010)	14 th c. Traditional	8 – definitely seems mediaeval. I think it's Alice's position and frame of mind that determine it.	4 – not really	9 – despite lack of alterity, world is mediaeval: status of women, Alice a pawn in a chess game; religion plays big part in her life – she sees it as her support; also fear of evil.	4 – a few contractions but mostly language seems slightly formal, with occasional archaic phrases I find somewhat disconcerting, such as "I foresee only more censure if I complain". Occasional mediaeval words: moon cycle, monthly flux, vendible, undercroft, fabric names, clothes items, in any wise, aught.
7	Chadwick, Elizabeth, <i>The Scarlet Lion</i> (2006)	13 th c. Traditional	9 – mostly excellent, but with occasional oddity, such as "rich internal life", which sounds very modern.	5 – not really	9 – despite lack of alterity, world seems mediaeval: superstitions; religion; oaths; monsters, "sea a dragon's roar".	4 – some contractions in both narrative and dialogue. A few anachronistic words, like galvanise, tanned? Some old words, e.g. mesnie, lackwit, justiciar; some slightly archaic phrasing: "I tend to yield him credence"; on the morrow; mayhap and so on

List of novels in alphabetical order with notes (continued)

	Author, Novel (Year first published)	Period, Type of historical novel	Mediaeval mindset	Alterity	"Mediaeval"?	Language
8	Chevalier, Tracy, <i>The Lady and the Unicorn</i> (2009)	15 th c. Social history	8 – as far as I can tell, mindsets seem appropriate, but the characters are aristocrats and artists, so perhaps different from superstitious peasants...	3 – none	8 – a bit later than the other novels (1492) and set in an aristocratic environment where everything is fine and clean. The setting seems appropriate for the time.	4 – straightforward English, first person narrator uses contractions, though I think the aristocrats don't. No anachronisms I could spot.
9	Cornwell, Bernard, <i>Harlequin</i> (2001)	14 th c. Military	9 – seems genuine enough.	5 – nothing particularly strange beyond the usual superstitious stuff.	9 – despite lack of alterity, world seems mediaeval: religion, superstition, angels and devils, curses, list of tasks Thomas could do. Good on clothes and equipment.	3 – straightforward English, with some contractions. Similes have religious, angelic, devilish context ("he ran as though the devil was on his heels"). Good imagery: images that reflect what is happening, such as gulls wheeling and crying as a village is pillaged and burned. Interestingly in about 50 pages I found few (any?) strange words. But I did find a few anachronisms, words/phrases of later periods, but nothing to much distract.
10	Doherty, Paul, <i>The Cup of Ghosts</i> (2005)	14 th c. Mystery	8 – yes, with plenty of religion and 14 th century politics.	5 – nothing particularly strange beyond the usual religious/superstitious stuff.	9 – yes. Author very keen on descriptions and lists, e.g. of sights in the streets, which give very good picture of mediaeval world. Lots of small physical things, like horn windows, are good. But seems to know period well, though it does smack a bit of research... Includes a fair bit of history, which grounds it in the period.	4 – basic English, with some archaisms, e.g. "eighty five summers old", "God assoil them!". Uses contractions in the narrative (first person).

List of novels in alphabetical order with notes (continued)

	Author, Novel (Year first published)	Period, Type of historical novel	Mediaeval mindset	Alterity	"Mediaeval"?	Language
11	Eco, Umberto, <i>The Name of the Rose</i> (1980; trans. 1983)	14 th c. Mystery	9 – Adso is a religious and it permeates all he says. Applies also to most of the other characters, perhaps apart from William, who often speaks with a sceptical air. The Evil One as the cause of all criminality; Antichrist. “Monsters exist because they are part of the divine plan.” The central debate about the dangers of laughter seems very mediaeval.	8 – the book as a whole is quite strange and complex, full of mysterious ideas and happenings.	9 – history in first couple of pages grounds it. Lots of physical descriptions give a good picture of mediaeval life in an abbey; and even a basic comment like “nice fresh straw” for a bed helps.	7 – a difficult read, because of complexity of the language, the untranslated Latin and so on. Otherwise, language modern but formal (of course a translation from Italian), with quite a number of strange words that sound simply old fashioned rather than necessarily mediaeval, but may be current and are perhaps peculiar to religious talk. Very occasional contraction but I think mostly not. William’s philosophical outpourings full of high-flown language, although Adso more straightforward.
12	Follett, Ken, <i>World Without End</i> (2007)	14 th c. Social history	6 – the usual things, religion, relics, superstition, fairy folk. Caris and Merthin perhaps somewhat break the mediaeval mould (some think they’re too modern): Caris has ambitions to be a doctor, but maybe a few girls would have done; Merthin’s a nice boy, unlike his brutal brother Ralph, but there must have been nice men!	4 – fairy folk and hobgoblins, references to evil spirits, images on church walls. But this is not much more than superstition.	7 – despite lack of alterity, world seems mediaeval enough. Quite a lot of details of daily life, e.g. straw beds on the hospital floor, punishment for thieving, clothing, archer keeping his bowstring in his hat, and so on.	3 – straightforward English, contractions in dialogue, not in narrative I think. Some anachronistic words but none worth worrying about. Some things like bedroom, kitchen (and its location right next to the hall) give wrong feel but probably don’t matter.
13	Franklin, Ariana, <i>Mistress of the Art of Death</i> (2007)	12 th c. Mystery	7 – yes, with, e.g., attitudes to Jews, disapproval of Salerno medical practices... Adelia is thought by some reviewers to be too modern, but we don’t know how female doctors from Salerno thought...	7 – I’m not sure now what I mean by “alterity”. If it’s merely unusual things that were normal for the time, then there’s plenty – relics, superstition – but as far as I can recall, there’s no witchcraft or magic.	8 – the world is mediaeval enough, with pilgrims, abacuses, billiards, relics, knights, but there is a mix of authenticity and anachronism.	3 – modern English, with a mix of formal and non-formal dialogue, depending on who’s speaking. Brief dialect for a single character. Some anachronistic phrasing and words, “He’s laid out on silver”, gyp, riff-raff, dominoes, but novel written in a slightly jokey way that somehow makes these anachronisms acceptable. The average reader wouldn’t notice them anyway, I suspect.

List of novels in alphabetical order with notes (continued)

	Author, Novel (Year first published)	Period, Type of historical novel	Mediaeval mindset	Alterity	"Mediaeval"?	Language
14	Golding, William. <i>The Spire</i> (1964)	14 th c.? Literary	8 – I think so, with mad Jocelin buoyed up entirely by his belief in miracles. The master builder is more pragmatic but not out of keeping.	7 – yes, more so than in many others. Jocelin's guardian angel: a vision, or just his imagination? Miracles: Jocelin believes the spire will be a miracle and ignores practicalities, such as inadequate foundations. Workmen tease an old man as a talismen against bad luck. A "Holy Nail" from the bishop proves to Jocelin that the spire is meant to be. Maybe this is largely superstition...	6 – yes, it feels mediaeval, though there's not much really to identify the period. Everything takes place in a church, which is much the same now as it was then. But there's a general atmosphere of mediaevalness. Women seem ignored and generally despised, but then Jocelin's a misogynist.	4 – generally modern English, slightly formal, I think, but contractions used in dialogue. Written in 1964, so language rather more old-fashioned than now. No obvious anachronisms, nor much use of archaic words.
15	Gregory, Susanna, <i>A Vein of Deceit</i> (2009)	14 th c. Mystery	9 – all the characters seem of the time, with religion, superstition, the supernatural uppermost in their minds. Matt is a sceptic, but as much about superstition and medical practices that rely on the stars, as about religion.	7 – there's nothing particularly weird, but mediaevalness is on every page, making the slightly weird – superstition etc. – seem normal.	9 – mediaevalness is on every page. Picture of the environment seems suitably cramped and dirty, Matt sharing his university room with his students, lots of refs to mediaeval clothes, food, medical terms, names of illnesses, use of herbal remedies. Names are suitably strange, with the spellings making them seem different.	3 – modern English, with occasional word/phrase I wouldn't have chosen ("fabulous piece of luck", "I am sorry for your loss", though I wonder if the latter was intended as slightly jokey). Few or no contractions, I think, but neither any archaic language, though occasional slightly old-fashioned, possibly mediaeval, word: tincture, apothecary, camp-ball, posset, felon. (Ruffian is 16 th century but does it matter?)
16	Knight, Bernard <i>A Plague of Heretics</i> (2010)	12 th c. Mystery	8 – seems genuine enough.	7 – not overtly, in that there is nothing very strange, it all just seems normal for the time.	9 – the usual things: lots of religion and superstition. But also references to heresy and Wycliffe, fears about spreading illness, the claustrophobia of living in a small city. It's what he writes <u>about</u> that seems mediaeval rather than the way he says it. Stuff about clothes and food good.	3 – standard English with the odd contemporary word. Knight says "any attempt to use 'olde worlde' dialogue... is as inaccurate as it is futile". He uses contractions in normal speech. I found the odd possible anachronism.

List of novels in alphabetical order with notes (continued)

	Author, Novel (Year first published)	Period, Type of historical novel	Mediaeval mindset	Alterity	"Mediaeval"?	Language
17	Lord, Elizabeth, <i>Company of Rebels</i> (2004)	14 th c. Social history	8 – seems genuine enough. Their concerns are of their daily privations - their manorial duties, having enough to eat, families... Marriage is either arranged or forced by misbehaviour. Illicit sex rears its head but in the context of guilt and fear.	4 – not overtly, in that there is nothing very strange; it all just seems normal for the time.	8 – the usual relics, superstitions, the Devil (“More think the Devil to wear a halo”), dreams, and lots of religion and the Church as part of normal life. Village healer “Old Mother Harelip”. Clothing and appearance of buildings and environment seem right.	4 – mostly standard English but a lot of dialect forms in the dialogue. “If he be awkward over a bit of ole wood”, “how’s us going to prevail on him for leniency”. Some of this seems a bit unnecessarily archaic. Mediaeval words: merchet, chevage, avesage etc. Words for surnames are authentic-seeming (Elle, Coupere, Elys, Wodelarke, Randere...) though it’s mostly spellings that make the difference.
18	Maitland, Karen, <i>Company of Liars</i> (2008)	14 th c. Myth and magic	9 – lots of relics, superstitions, religion, God and the Devil; the causes of and fears for Black Death. The wonder of people not understanding what they see – the merchild – presumably a deformed baby?	8 – yes! Opening bit about burying a witch; Narigorm, an albino; the merchild; the strange roles of some characters – camelot , magician, diviner, storyteller with a swan’s wing where an arm should be. Strange names, such as Zophiel, Narigorm.	8 – the general oddness lends a mediaeval air. Picture of fairs and markets seems good, and all the stuff in “mindset” gives a strong sense of the period.	3 - language straightforward modern English, with contractions, not many obvious archaic or peculiar words or phrases, not much anachronism either.
19	Penman, Sharon Kay, <i>The Reckoning</i> (1991)	13 th c. Traditional	7 – religion, belief in supernatural, sin...	5 – nothing particularly strange beyond the usual religious/superstitious stuff.	8 – set at first in a monastery, so religious lives and sensitivities to the fore. Seems good – history helps to ground it. No anachronisms of fact I could spot.	4 – modern English, contractions in narrative and dialogue: he’d, who’d, I’ll. Some archaisms: ere, this eve, loose-gaited, caring naught, mayhap, for certès – I particularly don’t like the last two, for they seem to intrude in otherwise fairly standard English. Sprinkle of mediaeval words, e.g.: carol (the dance), hippocras, esneque??, cupshotten. A few anachronisms: tufa?, mesmerized!, ricochet..., but not very many. Valkyrie is not anachronistic but I wondered at its currency in mediaeval England...

List of novels in alphabetical order with notes (continued)

	Author, Novel (Year first published)	Period, Type of historical novel	Mediaeval mindset	Alterity	"Mediaeval"?	Language
20	Peters, Ellis, <i>A Morbid Taste for Bones</i> (1977)	12 th c. Mystery	8 – the usual religious sensitivities, plus saints, relics and bones. A “miraculous” dream indicating divine guidance, and a miraculous cure by a saint are told matter-of-factly, and several characters believe it, though the main protagonist more likely considers the miracle a fake.	6 – the “miracles” might suggest alterity, but as the main protagonist seems a bit of a sceptic, maybe we too should regard them as just a form of superstition?	8 – another novel set at first in a monastery, so religious lives and sensitivities to the fore. No anachronisms of fact, I think.	5 – slightly formal and archaic modern English – I think it’s the choice of words and phrasing that make it sound somewhat “mediaeval”, e.g. “before the day was aired”, “they were wont to point him out to one another with awed whisperings”, “blanched and beautiful of visage”. Also quite a number of contemporary or unusual words, e.g. conventual, paynim, gilvers and gromwell (herb names).
21	Plaidy, Jean, <i>Passage to Pontefract</i> (1981)	14 th Traditional	8 – the characters (all real people) do seem to have thoughts of their time. Women are suitably modest in their behaviour (though I haven’t yet met Joan or Katherine, who were probably a bit different). John of Gaunt is portrayed as jealous, self-seeking and potentially dangerous - not nice at all - and maybe he was like that.	2 – none. Can this really be true? I didn’t spot any.	2 – how very odd! Apart from the history and the characters being real people, you wouldn’t really know when the story was set, because there is so little detail of environment, or dress, or food, or anything to paint a picture. The first 40 pages or so are really just history, and repetitive.	4 – language is modern, with occasional archaic phrasing. I noticed neither anachronisms, nor contemporary words. (Lots of people love Plaidy but, if this is a good example, I can’t think why, as it’s mostly tell and little show.)
22	Riley, Judith Merkle, <i>The Water Devil</i> (2007)	14 th Myth and magic	8 – nothing strikes me as not mediaeval. I have no evidence but I wonder if Riley was religious, because Margaret’s relationship with God seems very personal, though in a way that doesn’t seem particularly “mediaeval”...	6 – the protagonist is a healer, with magic powers. One of her friends is an alchemist. A whole passage is the dream or vision of a knight in his death throes, where he says it’s too soon for him to enter heaven and God says he can stay on earth. And there is a water devil... Lots of alterity, of a kind her fans clearly love...	8 – nothing strikes me as not mediaeval. It’s all based on social history and folklore, and the world picture does seem authentic enough.	3 – basically modern English, with contractions, and a few mediaeval words. One or two anachronistic words but nothing serious. But many of the characters seem to have verbal diarrhoea; the dialogue is verbose and confusing in places. I don’t like the writing style at all – it’s sort of jokey, which I don’t care for. There’s also a lot of telling and overwriting which I find tedious.

List of novels in alphabetical order with notes (continued)

	Author, Novel (Year first published)	Period, Type of historical novel	Mediaeval mindset	Alterity	"Mediaeval"?	Language
23	Robb, Candace, <i>The Riddle of St. Leonard's</i> (1997)	14 th Mystery	8 – definitely seems mediaeval	4 – nothing really	8 – what she writes <i>about</i> seems mediaeval rather than the way she says it.	4 – broadly modern English but with some archaic-sounding dialogue, which I find distracting, e.g. “‘Tis best Magda and thee know the worst.” Could be a way of presenting a sense of “strangeness”?
24	Sankaran, Vanitha, <i>Watermark</i> (2010)	14 th ? Social history	9 – lots of things contribute to the mediaeval thought-world. Demons, curses, church laws, religion, albino babies, “cursed omens, heralded ill fortune and despair...bad crops, drought, even the dying sickness”. Fear, superstitions, horror of the birth of a “deformed” child, Elena’s death in order to save the baby. Fear about heresy and witchery. Position of women generally. Auda is unusual in her ambitions – reading and writing – but she doesn’t seem out of her time, just different, whereas her sister is more traditional.	7 – as an example, the scene at the beginning with the midwife’s assistant cutting out the baby’s tongue so it “won’t never have the chance to spread the devil’s lies” is pretty “other”.	8 – details of herbal remedies, Church “law” (about cutting babies from dead wombs), picture of life and surroundings, all contribute to mediaeval feel. Details about papermaking and stationery supplies interesting and grounding to the period. Occasional possible anachronisms: larder where she slept? kitchen? History of inquisition in southern France gives good background.	4 – generally modern English, with contractions in narrative and dialogue. A few archaisms: “madness is afoot”, “two score of the condemned”, “the hope and the bane of us all”. They’re quite subtle but effective. Occasional mediaeval words. A baby “undercooked” is a nice phrase. Occasional anachronisms: on cue? needle in a haystack possibly 16 th c., normalcy 19 th c; “isn’t it, though?” sounds modern...
25	Seton, Anya, <i>Katherine</i> (1954)	14 th Traditional	8 – religion, superstition, saints, omens	3 – none	8 – begins with picture of life in a nunnery. Allusions to courtly women’s appearance and vanity. History grounds it. Pilgrims. Bugs and fleas in an abbey’s dorter. Reference to the hours (sext, tierce...) is common enough but helps the mediaeval flavour.	4 – plain English, with some contractions in dialogue, not I think in narrative. A few odd archaic-sounding words, e.g. “second great smiting” (of the plague), and occasional archaic phrasing, e.g. “we shall have some ado to guard your little sister’s maidenhead”. A few mediaeval words, e.g. chambress, simples, murrain, pallets in the dorter, meinie (as Chadwick’s mesnie), palmer (a variety of pilgrim), gleeman (minstrel). No anachronisms I noticed...

List of novels in alphabetical order with notes (continued)

	Author, Novel (Year first published)	Period, Type of historical novel	Mediaeval mindset	Alterity	"Mediaeval"?	Language
26	Starr, Mel, <i>The Tainted Coin</i> (2012)	14 th Mystery	8 – generally, I think so – plenty of religious stuff, anyway.	4 – not particularly	7 - general picture of houses, furniture, etc, seems mediaeval. Though I'm not sure about some details, e.g. roast mutton cooked by a surgeon's wife? a pepperer's business in Abingdon?	5 – modern English with some archaisms, some of which I find annoying, such as morn, 'tis, atop, whoso, 'twas – I could go on. They just seem unnecessary. Some "dialect" for dialogue, though not consistently... But mediaeval words, such as hamsoken, Angelus Bell, are useful. Generally the novel is overwritten, with too much tell and explanation, and repetition.
27	Thorpe, Adam, <i>Hodd</i> (2009)	13 th Literary	9 – narrator is a monk, so brings a religious mind. Wrinkled goblins that travel unseen on the saddle. Sick from a witch's curse. Angels and devils, evil spirits.	9 – first page speaks of strange things, hard to understand but gives the impression of a mediaeval vision. Later speaks of the "upper sea" again, with the lights of sea-monsters "like pin-pricks in a black drape". Bit on the work of glaziers, their fires and crucibles takes on both a demonic air, and the result (glass) that of a miracle.	9 – constantly changing spellings of names make it seem genuine mediaeval MS. Small details, mantle furred with miniver, reference to a French romance, stuff about the leech in the alehouse, telling gruesome tales of touching women's parts, thus rendering him untouchable by others, seems very mediaeval... Certainly no modern anachronisms!	7 – language is modern but formal, with phrasing that is somehow archaic, and occasional archaic words, ne'er, e'en, ope, mayhap, marge (margin), descried (noticed), journeyings. Some dialogue consciously archaic, e.g. thou dost, as night descendeth. Mediaeval words, e.g. scrivener, hospitium, swink, dorter, leech, oblate. Latin phrases... This purports to be a translation from the Middle English, though it's nothing of the sort.
28	Unsworth, Barry, <i>Morality Play</i> (1995)	14 th Literary	9 – nothing I can think of to suggest any character other than entirely mediaeval. "I saw them...start back to give the soul passage".	9 – angels, demons, allusion to "little folk". Keeping the body on the cart for days.	9 – lots of religion (the narrator is a priest) and superstition. Travelling players – so lots of images of devils, demons, angels. Lowly status of Margaret ("his woman"). Small things – clothes, atmosphere, smell, grubbiness, artefacts – all seem authentic. Difficulty of cleaning and freshening costumes – you can "smell" the odours. No anachronisms.	6 – language is modern but slightly formal, with no contractions! Occasionally archaic and slightly odd, e.g. "I saw the moment of it", "she was too hasty and hot", "bethought me of the figure I must cut". Scraps of Latin from the narrator. No anachronisms.

List of novels in alphabetical order with notes (continued)

	Author, Novel (Year first published)	Period, Type of historical novel	Mediaeval mindset	Alterity	"Mediaeval"?	Language
29	Vantrease, Brenda Rickman, <i>The Illuminator</i> (2005)	14 th Social history	6 – Finn and Kathryn both sceptics, but I don't have much of a problem with that. Kathryn does seem to understand her difficult social status. Finn is just a rebel... But some reviewers think they are too modern.	4 – none. Half-Tom could be seen as strange, but he just seems normal.	5 – plenty about religion, relics and the like. But picture is confused by things that seem too late, e.g. four poster beds, Renaissance-style clothes, 16 th c + coinage, sitting room, rapier, stiletto, Danelaw (three centuries too late...)	2 – mostly just straightforward English with the occasional archaic word. But too many anachronistic words for my taste, so many it's hard to see past them...
30	Zelitch, Simone, <i>Confession of Jack Straw</i> (1991)	14 th Traditional	4 – not overtly modern, but not necessarily medieval either	2 - none	2 – too many factual anachronisms make it difficult to judge. It just doesn't feel right.	2 – quite a lot of odd usages and rather vague writing.

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