

The Beautiful Thread

PENELOPE WILCOCK



LION FICTION

Text copyright © 2016 Penelope Wilcock
This edition copyright © 2016 Lion Hudson

The right of Penelope Wilcock to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

All the characters in this book are fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Published by Lion Fiction
an imprint of
Lion Hudson plc
Wilkinson House, Jordan Hill Road
Oxford OX2 8DR, England
www.lionhudson.com/fiction

ISBN 978 1 78264 145 2
e-ISBN 978 1 78264 146 9

First edition 2015

Acknowledgments

Scripture quotations marked KJV taken from The Authorized (King James) Version. Rights in the Authorized Version are vested in the Crown. Reproduced by permission of the Crown's patentee, Cambridge University Press.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound in the UK, January 2016, LH26

This one is

*For Rosie, who has a glint of mischief in her eye, even when she is
being kind and forbearing.*

*For Grace, whose undeterred patience, tolerance and compassion is
a wonder to us all.*

*For Hebe, whose soul walks in bare feet, the Earth's friend, wisdom
and quietness her native territory.*

*For Alice, honest, loyal, true; who has the absolute humility of the
real artist.*

*For Fi, who tells me that "No" is not a bad thing to say, and who
feels her way to the heart of things.*

*For Tony, who always looks for the best, and covers my shortcomings
with gentleness, goes on believing in me when my hope runs out.*

And for Harvey Richardson, who was kind to me.

By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.

Jesus of Nazareth: John 13:35, KJV

This is my simple religion. There is no need for temples; no need for complicated philosophy. Our own brain, our own heart is our temple; the philosophy is kindness.

The Dalai Lama

Attachment to being right creates suffering. When you have a choice to be right, or to be kind, choose kind and watch your suffering disappear.

Dr Wayne Dyer

There are three ways to ultimate success:

The first way is to be kind.

The second way is to be kind.

The third way is to be kind.

Fred Rogers

Life goes by fast. Enjoy it. Calm down. It's all funny.

Joan Rivers

In your hearts enthrone him; there let him subdue all that is not holy, all that is not true.

Look to him, your Saviour, in temptation's hour; let his will enfold you in its light and power.

Caroline M. Noel

And be ye kind one to another...

Ephesians 4:32, KJV

Contents

The Community of St Alcuin's Abbey

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Glossary and Explanatory Notes

Monastic Day

Liturgical Calendar

The Community of St Alcuin's Abbey

(Not all members are mentioned in *The Beautiful Thread*)

Fully professed monks

Abbot John Hazell	<i>once the abbey's infirmarian</i>
Father Francis	<i>prior</i>
Brother Cormac	<i>cellarer</i>
Father Theodore	<i>novice master</i>
Father Gilbert	<i>precentor</i>
Father Clement	<i>overseer of the scriptorium</i>
Father Dominic	<i>guest master</i>
Brother Thomas	<i>abbot's esquire, also involved with the farm and building repairs</i>
Father Bernard	<i>sacristan</i>
Father Gerard	<i>almoner</i>
Brother Martin	<i>porter</i>
Brother Thaddeus	<i>potter</i>
Brother Michael	<i>infirmarian</i>
Brother Damian	<i>teaches in the school</i>
Brother Conradus	<i>kitchener</i>
Brother Richard	<i>fraterer</i>
Brother Stephen	<i>oversees the abbey farm</i>
Brother Peter	<i>ostler</i>
Brother Josephus	<i>teaches in the abbey school</i>
Father James	<i>makes and mends robes, occasionally works in the scriptorium</i>
Brother Germanus	<i>works on the farm, in the wood yard and gardens</i>
Brother Walafrid	<i>herbalist, oversees the brew house</i>
Brother Giles	<i>assists Brother Walafrid and works in laundry</i>

Brother Mark	<i>too old for taxing occupation, but keeps the bees</i>
Brother Paulinus	<i>works in the kitchen garden and orchards</i>
Brother Prudentius	<i>now old, helps on the farm and in the kitchen garden and orchards</i>
Brother Fidelis	<i>now old, oversees the flower gardens</i>
Brother Basil	<i>old, assists the sacristan – ringing the bell for the office hours, etc.</i>

Fully professed monks now confined to the infirmary through frailty of old age

Father Gerald	<i>once sacristan</i>
Brother Denis	<i>once a scribe</i>
Father Paul	<i>once precentor</i>
Brother Edward	<i>onetime infirmarian, now living in the infirmary but active enough to help there and occasionally attend Chapter and the daytime hours of worship</i>

Novices

Brother Benedict	<i>main assistant in the infirmary</i>
Brother Boniface	<i>helps in the scriptorium</i>
Brother Cassian	<i>works in the school</i>
Brother Cedd	<i>helps in the scriptorium and when required in the robing room</i>
Brother Felix	<i>helps Father Gilbert</i>
Brother Placidus	<i>helps on the farm</i>
Brother Robert	<i>assists in the pottery</i>

Members of the community mentioned in earlier stories and now deceased

Abbot Gregory of the Resurrection	
Abbot Columba du Fayel (also known as Father Peregrine)	
Father Matthew	<i>novice master</i>
Brother Andrew	<i>kitchener</i>

Brother Cyprian
Father Aelred
Father Lucanus
Father Anselm

porter
schoolmaster
novice master before Father Matthew
once robe-maker

Chapter One

William stared uncomprehending at the ceiling. Bewildered, he half raised himself on his elbows and turned his head towards the window where the early sun flooded through in such glory this May morning that it had awoken him. He sat up completely, in consternation now, his heart racing. This was not his cell. Moments ago he had been immersed in an exceedingly pleasant dream enjoying an interlude of sublimely conjugal sweetness with Madeleine, and now... This was not his cottage, either. For one fleeting instant he wondered if he was going mad, if he had dreamed his entire marriage; then he remembered where he was. Relief flooded over him. St Alcuin's guesthouse. He had come to help Cormac with the complications that had arisen from the bishop's visit coinciding with this infernal wedding.

Allowing himself to sink back, trembling, onto his uncompromising monastic pillow, he wondered bitterly why he seemed to have been doomed to spend his entire life in a perpetual panic.

He let no more than a few moments pass. Self-pity feeds on itself and is futile. He kicked the blanket off and swung his legs over the edge of the low bedframe.

Unsure of the time, he padded downstairs to the garderobe and lavatorium. Nobody about. They must be in chapel, then. Often the guestmaster would stay at his post, but William

guessed Brother Dominic must be taking advantage of the days remaining before visitors began to trickle in for the wedding. And the bishop. Best not forget him. But for the moment, Dominic probably judged William knew his way round well enough, and had gone to chapel. Putting his head round the refectory door, he saw a pewter plate set out on the table, a basket of bread rolls, a covered dish presumably containing butter, a flagon of ale, a beaker, a napkin. They'd not forgotten him, then.

As he loped up the stairs again to dress properly, he heard the Mass bell begin tolling, which let him know the time of day. He wondered what to do about that. Abbot John had in private given him Eucharist, but in the community setting he was as good as excommunicated, having broken his vows and walked out on them to marry Madeleine. Such things were not – ever – outlived. Best leave them to it and stick with Vespers and Compline. Or maybe go to the parish Mass later on, let folk assume he'd made his communion elsewhere earlier. Or...

Then, impatient at the uneasiness of it all, he shrugged the deliberations away and came out into the daylight. Now would be as good a time as any to prowl quietly round the kitchens, the stores, the stables, the scriptorium – take a look at the level of provision, judge if things looked healthy and well in hand. He wanted to see the infirmary (but that would not be unattended) and the sacristy (but that meant passing through the church within possible sight of the choir). Obviously he wanted to cast an eye over the books in the checker, but that would be locked. At least, he assumed Brother Cormac locked up when he left it empty. There was too much money and information in there not to turn a key against prying eyes and pilfering fingers. Brother Cormac... Abbot John had appointed him to the obedience of cellarer at William's recommendation. Was it turning out well? He dearly hoped so.

An hour later, having entered and inspected every storehouse and place of work he thought might be available and empty,

satisfied that all seemed in good order, William made his way to the abbot's house. Though his quiet, thorough searches had taken him into the cloister, he walked round to the door in the front range. Here in the abbey court guests would congregate. Across the greensward here they approached the church through its great west door. This door to the abbot's house was a public entrance, for visitors. The cloister door was for the community; and William no longer had a right to that entrance.

Knocking and, as expected, finding no answer – they would be in Chapter now – William tried the latch and found the door unbolted. This was a trusting place. And maybe kindness earned the freedom to trust. The village loved its abbey, and all who knew them held these brothers in high esteem. They were good men. It was like John to leave his door open for anyone who wanted to come in.

William stood quite still in the abbot's atelier, breathing the familiar scents of woodsmoke, beeswax, stone, herbs. He felt the movement of love in the private depths of his heart, for this man and this place; this community.

He sat down quietly on one of the two chairs close to the swept hearth. Sunlight diffused softly through the small windows. He watched motes of dust drift, catching the brightness of its rays. He allowed memories of this room in the abbot's house to emerge and float up inside him, some of healing, some of harsh agony. All of them of formation and transformation, the making of his soul. Without moving he let the ghosts of the past parade. He had no regret for his place here, but the bonds of affection... no; deeper than that – belonging, love... their roots grew into the living tissue of his being... or into the stonework of this house of prayer ... depending how you looked at it...

The sharp click of the latch to the cloister door curtailed his musing. He looked up, and rose to his feet as Brother Tom the abbot's esquire came into the room.

“I hope I’m not presumptuous, barging in like this – ” he began, but got no further, finding himself wrapped in Tom’s hearty embrace of welcome: “Eh, but it’s grand to have thee back!”

And then Abbot John was with them: “God love you, it’s so good to see you, William! So kind of you to come. Man, but it brings my heart joy to see the glare of those baleful eyes once again! Did you sleep well? Have you breakfasted? No? But they put something out for you? We haven’t left you to starve? When did you get in – last night? I looked for you at Compline. Brother Thomas – if it’s not too much trouble, would you fetch over some bread and cheese and ale for William to break his fast here – I’m getting somewhat of a sense of urgency about the tasks before us and we have much to discuss. Thank you, Brother, thank you. Now then – let’s bring your chair to my table here. That’s right. So. You’ll be pleased with me – I’ve a sheaf of lists and plans to keep us enthralled through the morning. What d’you want to talk about first? Cormac’s progress? The wedding? The bishop? Or have you news of your own? All is well with you and Madeleine?”

William sat down in his chair, the baleful eyes regarding his brother-in-law with a glow of pure happiness. It felt good to be back.

“I’ve given the place a quick once-over while you were in chapel,” he said. “Bishops and their Visitations are a familiar hell. So tell me about the wedding.”

“Very well, then. Let me relate but a little and you will quickly grasp – this is set fair to be the wedding of the century. Not like yours – a man, his wife and a witness. Oh no. We are expecting upwards of a hundred and fifty guests, despite my striving to keep the numbers down. A party of minstrels has been ordered – with jugglers, so I’m promised. We have a harpist coming, and talk of flutes, lutes, drums and horns. I’ve said an absolute no to wrestling but yes to skittles. And no to apple-bobbing because

what apples we have left we shall need to raid impressively to feed them all.

“The banns are read, no objections. Unless you count the profound opposition of the bridegroom’s mother.”

“Who is – ?”

“Nobody in particular – it’s not so much who she is as what she thinks she is – and the lip-curling lack of esteem with which she regards poor Hannah. Not that she need think we’d be putting ourselves out for them to this extent if Hannah were not Brother Damian’s sister.

“Damian’s father is a freeman, has about fourteen acres of his own land – put to barley, oats, peas, a few sheep and his house cows. The usual chickens and a pig of course; and then you’ve maybe seen Hannah out and about with her goats on the moor. She takes them to browse. Her family are good people. Cheerful, intelligent, kind. Hannah’s mother Margery’s a sensible woman, and her father works hard. There’s another lad – Peter – and the father’s Walter. Walter Mitchell. Honest, capable, pretty much what you’d expect if you know Brother Damian.

“But the lad Hannah’s set her heart on – Gervase Bonvallet – is born of a tribe with rather more airs and graces. Florence is his mother, comes with a *very* keen sense of her place in the world. Father is Cecil, and Gervase has two brothers, Hubert and Percival. The Bonvallets are farmers, same as the Mitchells, but the difference is that Cecil has a knighthood, two hundred acres, and plenty in store.

“The way Florence sees it, Hannah would do very well as a serving wench, but she’s no choice at all for a Bonvallet bride. A comely enough lass in a common way, but decidedly too rustic for Florence’s tastes. We’ve been all through it. Florence has argued and protested, stormed and pleaded, said this marriage has ruined her life’s work and will take her down to an early grave. She has no quarrel with Hannah as... er... a playmate for young Gervase;

Hannah's clean of lice and diseases, she's a fresh and pleasant, sweet-natured girl. It's just that Florence can't envisage her as a Bonvallet. She imagined an altogether more delicate and gently born helpmeet when it comes to the family name."

William listened to this with interest and amusement. "I see," he said. "And what about the menfolk? Sir Cecil? Walter? They like each other? Or do they oppose the match?"

John shrugged. "Up here in the hills – well, who is there? Sir Cecil has his head screwed on. Walter's a good farmer, and an honest man. Hannah may not be an aspirational catch, but her family will bring no shame or trouble. They aren't brawlers or drinkers. They do well with what they have. In this decade of wet summers when food has been so scarce, Walter's had meat salted away, grain in store, dried fruits aplenty. He's got through where others have starved – and helped his neighbours too. He's a shrewd man. And Sir Cecil's no fool; he respects ability.

"The lads of both families all grew up together of course, they're good friends. Margery is proud as punch, thinks Hannah has an excellent catch in Gervase – as so she does. It's only Florence; but when I say 'only'... Well, Florence... still, you'll meet her maybe."

"And the wedding is in a fortnight's time, you tell me?"

"It is."

"All provisions in? Well prepared? Ready for the onslaught?"

John hesitated, evidently unsure.

"Well... we are; yes, we *are*. Thanks to the legacy from Mother Cottingham, we've been comfortably off this last year. We took heed of all you told us we lacked, and have set about stocking up with everything needed to bump up our earnings. Even in times when others are struggling under money troubles and failed harvests, we seem to be getting through without feeling the pinch too badly."

“Besides,” William interrupted him, “it’s presumably not you who will be paying for this wedding? John? Whatever of your comestibles may be sequestered for the feast, Sir Cecil will surely make good? Cormac is keeping careful tally? Reassure me!”

“Oh, aye.” John waved his hand vaguely. “We’ll keep account. We’ll get it back, I’ve no doubt. And if we didn’t it wouldn’t be the end of the world.”

William shook his head at this casual attitude, then addressed the hesitancy he had detected in John’s tone. “But?” He looked at the abbot enquiringly. “What’s the ‘but’? I can hear it in your voice.”

“Oh – it’s a question of finding enough hands for all the preparations. Brother Conradus is a wonder, and we have the lads from the village helping in the kitchen, as well as Brother Damian when he can be spared from the school – I moved him there from the infirmary, and he’s doing well. But every man here has his work to do, and I can’t see how we can release many of them for cooking. Besides which, even if we did, the sort of delicacies Brother Conradus has in mind will be beyond the abilities of Thaddeus or Germanus or Richard, even supposing they had time on their hands. Brother Conradus looks worried – which isn’t like him; he’s usually equal to anything culinary we ask of him. I’m not sure just exactly what we’re going to do. I thought of asking Madeleine to come and help, but I know how it is; you have fowls and beasts of your own, and soft fruit coming on. I don’t see how your place could do without the both of you.”

William frowned thoughtfully, turning the matter over in his mind. John was right. Their homestead could not possibly be left unattended.

Brother Tom crossed the room to answer a knock at the door leading into the cloister.

“Ah! Brother Conradus!” The abbot half rose from his chair. “Come in – we were just talking about making ready for the

wedding. William is here, as you see – come to give Brother Cormac a hand in the checker, juggling the bishop’s visit with Hannah’s marriage. I was only explaining this minute that though we have the provisions we’re woefully shorthanded. Have you a moment to tell him something of what you propose? Is it all carried about in your head or written down somewhere? I have the lists you gave me along with all the others here, if your memory needs a jog.”

William formed an impression of something in full sail as the young kitchener approached them. A few months of overseeing the abbey’s culinary provision had impressively augmented his girth. But more than this, the kindness, the enthusiasm in his smiling face billowed about him and shone ahead of him, like gulls and bright sunshine around a small ship making good headway on a fair, breezy day.

“Father William!” he exclaimed. “Good morrow! Ah, how splendid to see you!”

In the last hour William thought he’d been met by a more loving and magnificently hospitable welcome than in all of his life before. He noted the sense of happiness cautiously establishing in his core.

Brother Conradus began eagerly to outline the complexities and challenges of preparing his feast, while simultaneously keeping the brethren and their steep accumulation of overnight guests well fed. His exact and detailed knowledge of every morsel they had in store and on order became impressively clear as he talked. He knew the capacity of their milk cows and the laying averages of their hens. He knew how much of what they had could be used and how much should be kept back to see the community onward. He had calculated their likely harvest produce (if they were spared deluging rain this time, but also if they were not), and assessed how low they could therefore run down what they had put by. William listened to him with evident approval, pleased

to see the ambitious project ahead in such competent hands, as Conradus waved the list about, not needing to consult it to explain its many implications.

“It’s a joy – it’s all a joy, of course,” said the kitchener. “I’m tremendously looking forward to it. I’m just not quite sure how... well... there’s only one of me and nobody else quite up to – at least, of course... umm... The subtleties are what I’m really worried about.”

William nodded thoughtfully. He could see that.

“There must be three at least, possibly four if we have soup as well.”

“Four what?” John frowned, puzzled.

“Four subtleties.” Conradus looked at his abbot in helpful clarification, but quickly saw he’d drawn a blank. “There has to be a subtlety after every course,” he explained.

William grinned at John’s complete incomprehension. Raised by a wise-woman herbalist on the outskirts of a hamlet high in the hills at Motherwell, exchanging the moors and the woodland streams for a life of work and prayer in St Alcuin’s infirmary, John hadn’t even a nodding acquaintance with lavish and elaborate formal feasts.

“Oh!” The young monk flushed, perceiving his abbot to be at a loss and ashamed at having set his superior at a disadvantage. “Forgive me, Father – I should have expressed myself more clearly. So thoughtless. I was all trammelled with my own cares and preoccupations – like St Martha – I’m so sorry. I’ve been too wrapped up in myself.”

“Not to worry,” said his abbot. “So... ?”

“Oh! Well, a subtlety is the fantastical centrepiece that crowns each course. Something in pastry usually – though I’d thought I could make a dragon out of artfully arranged shortbreads, with a marzipan head and maybe spun sugar wings, for the sweet course.” Conradus gesticulated excitedly as he spoke, then caught himself.

He paused in recollection of appropriate humility. “That is – if I may have permission to get the sugar, of course. If the expense is not too great. Lady Florence said I shouldn’t cut corners, and I thought... well, a dragon would be easy.

“But the others should speak something of the occasion – a representation of the bride and the groom – but also of the holy solemnity. I ought to attempt a Holy Trinity in pastry, or a gingerbread monastery with gilded crenellations perhaps. I thought I could make a whole community and a bride and groom in bread dough, and a chalice and paten on an altar, egg-washed to make them shine. I haven’t really finished thinking it through, to be honest; because every time I hit the obstacle of shortage of time. I know the obstacle is the path, Father, and we should make light of adversity under every circumstance, and I do my best, truly. But even with the right attitude, time is pressing.”

Abbot John listened to him, trying to keep from his expression any trace of the incredulity he privately felt. “Subtlety” seemed the right word; and irrelevance, superfluity, inanity or extravagance would have done right well as an alternative. However he could have got his community mixed up in all this, with the bishop’s Visitation looming on the horizon, he could hardly begin to imagine.

Then, “Why don’t we send for your mother?” asked William. “She is but twenty miles away, is she not? Would she come? If someone rides today, we could have her back here in three days.”

The young man stopped short, his gaze arrested at William, his mouth dropped slightly ajar, his eyes shining. “What a wonderful, brilliant idea!” he exclaimed. “Oh, I wonder if she could.”

John now found himself fixed by the enquiring gaze of two pairs of eyes: one cool, amused, the colour of the sea, one brown and shining as new conkers.

“For sure,” he said. “That should get us out of a hole. Write her a note and some directions to your family’s home. I’ll send Father Chad.”

“Shall I go and tell him?” offered Brother Tom; and within the hour the matter was settled. Armed with a letter from Conradus, with a postscript from the abbot and closed with his seal, and a carefully drawn map of where to find the homestead, Father Chad saddled up and set off in search of Brother Conradus’s mother. She had by this time become established as a legend at St Alcuin’s, so much had they heard from Conradus of her guiding wisdom and gentle counsel. If Brother Conradus’s mother was on her way, things would be all right.

“William, that was an excellent suggestion. Remind me of her name, Brother,” said Abbot John.

“Rose.” Conradus spoke softly, his voice full of affection and pride. “My mother is called Rose.”

His abbot smiled. “A lovely name,” he said. “Like a summer’s day. I look forward to meeting her.” For a moment the thoughts conjured up by her name distracted him. Fragrant blossom. Blue skies. Honey bees. Warm afternoons drifting gently into the peace of evening. A world away from endless administration and the management of difficult people. Rose. So pretty.

“Ah,” said Conradus, earnest and happy, “you will love her, Father John. You will absolutely love her. Everyone loves my mother. She has the gift.”

Looking at Brother Conradus, John thought that was probably true. Certainly she’d done a good job raising her son, he thought, as he watched that young man heading back to the kitchen fifteen minutes later, excited and happy at the prospect of his mother – so dearly beloved – being on hand to help him.

But for now the abbot had to put his mind to Lady Florence Bonvallet. “Will you join us, William?” he asked. “I know you have matters in hand with Brother Cormac; but I’d like you to meet her. How can we work that, I wonder?”

William shrugged. “Tell her you’ve engaged me as the steward for the feast.”

“Oh – yes, that would suffice. She will be coming to see me later on this morning. Can I send to the checker for you, when she arrives?”

“You may indeed. But will you show me your own inventories before I go, so I have clear in my mind what’s expected specifically for the wedding?” He reached out for the sheaf of lists John passed him across the table. “Thank you,” he said, scanning the contents with interest. Without pausing in his perusal he added, “And tell me a bit about the bishop’s visit before I get going. I can listen and read at the same time. He is coming when?”

“He’s due in four days’ time, and – God willing – his stay will in no way overlap with the Bonvallet wedding. He should take maybe three days to look over everything and ask anything he wishes. Then on his way, and we’re done for another year, with a week in hand to get everything ready for the wedding.”

“Bishop Eric, isn’t it? I know him well enough, of course, but how do you find him as a Visitor? Picky, I should imagine, and demanding. Not easy.”

The abbot shifted uneasily in his chair. He did not like Bishop Eric, but to say so would be disloyal and arrogant. He hesitated.

“Oh dear,” said William, without looking up.

“No, no! All will be well, I have no doubt. He... Bishop Eric – well, you know him – he has very traditional views. He can be insistent on points of church law – likes to make sure we follow to a nicety all that the Rule lays upon us; as so we should. He... well, he can seem inflexible at times, but... on the other hand, it’s always possible to jolly him up with something tasty to eat, because he does like his food. He can be searching in his enquiries about our fiscal arrangements.”

“In what sense?” William glanced up momentarily. “You mean he’ll be sniffing around to see if there’s any money to be had? Yes? Ah, then in heaven’s name do yourself a favour, John, and brush across the tracks of Ellen Cottingham’s massive legacy. You had

an elderly widow leave some money to the abbey, but times are hard; you had big losses – a ship lost at sea, harvests failing year after year in the rains. It's cost you dear, you've about scraped through, but –”

John interrupted him, laughing. “I get the picture! Yes, surely, I'll do what I can.”

William nodded, satisfied, laying down the inventory of pewter-ware and spoons on his pile of checked lists, as he looked at Brother Thaddeus's rough jottings from the pottery, indicating what would go into the next firing. It was hard to decipher this. Some of the numbers were back to front, he wrote every “d” as a “b”, and much of what he'd set down had been obscured by spatters and smears of clay slip. William peered at it, adjusting the angle he held it to catch the light.

“And his staff? Who's he got for his equerry – that's who will be his main go-between with Brother Cormac. Anyone I know?”

Abbot John picked up his stylus and tablet from the tabletop in front of him, and fiddled with them. “Brainard LePrique,” he said. At that, William raised his eyes from the stack of parchments.

“What? Who did you say? Brainard LePrique?”

The abbot refused to be drawn by his incredulous grin. He said only, “I think it sounds better with a French accent.”

“Oh! I beg his pardon! *Brrrain-arrrrr*? Is that better?”

John would not rise to this. “They did not elect me abbot to mock my guests,” he said simply. William just looked at him. Thirty years in a monastery had taught him the habit of saying everything while saying nothing. “Well? Do you know him?” John asked.

“No, *mon Père*. I have never had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of *Brainard LePrique*. But I certainly know Bishop Eric. Self-righteous, cruel, greedy, unforgiving, and does not like me one tiny little bit.”

“It would seem that's mutual,” said John. “You do have a remarkable gift for making friends.”

William shrugged. “It’s been said. But not by many.” He flicked the parchment in his left hand with the fingers of his right. “Well, this lot’s looking... terrifying. I see why you sent for me. Who’s been helping Brother Cormac in the checker up until now? By my soul, these nuptials are going to rack up a prodigious bill.” He began to tot up Brother Conradus’s careful itemization. “It comes to...”

“It seemed to me,” said the abbot, “that the man best placed to understand what Cormac needs to know is Father Chad. He’s so long been our prior. Francis is new in that obedience; he’s having to learn as fast as Cormac is. So I asked Chad to advise him a bit.”

William didn’t look up. “Oh, yes – Father Chad,” he murmured, running his finger down the column of figures, calculating as he went: “taking mediocrity to the next level. What would you do without him?”

He continued to peruse the document until he was no longer able to ignore John’s silence. He let his hand rest on the parchment, quite still, and raised his eyes from the tidy lines of figures.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “That wasn’t kind, was it? To sneer at a man who is doing the best he can. Of your charity, will you overlook that? It reflects badly on me, not on him. This is why I have my gift for making friends you mentioned. I’m sorry, John. Anyway –” He got to his feet. “This all makes sense and I have it in mind now. If that’s everything for the moment, I’ll head on over to the checker; see if your cellarer has the same tight grasp on all the goings-on as your kitchener.” He paused. “Am I forgiven?”

“For your caustic and merciless contempt of your fellow man? Yes, I should think so.”

“Thank you.” William offered the abbot a small ceremonial bow.

As the door closed behind him, Abbot John wondered if perhaps he had worried unnecessarily about the days ahead. With such competent, able men under his roof, maybe everything would roll smoothly. In three weeks' time he might be looking back wondering why he'd felt so apprehensive. He said as much to Brother Tom. "And it's good to see William again," he added. "He brings a certain something that no one else does!"

"Oh, yes," said Tom. "Makes my heart glad to see that familiar scowl about the place again – finding fault with everything and keeping us all on our toes."



Pleased to find Brother Cormac alone in the checker, William asked to see the ledgers, any orders or unpaid bills, along with any lists from the guesthouse to help get a grip on numbers and timing for the hospitality required of them in the next few weeks.

"It's not only the details you have to get right," he commented, looking swiftly – but thoroughly – through the stack of parchments Cormac thumped onto the table in front of him: "it's the principles. Attitudes of mind. Anticipation – you have to see what's coming before it gets here. This isn't Cana in Galilee. We'll have to be sure we do actually have enough wine in the cellar. Flexibility – you must be ready to move men, money, stores to cover whatever's needed, plug gaps. To do that, to respond quickly and appropriately, keep everything running smoothly, you have to know exactly what's available to you. What's in store, what's coming in, where to put it all with everything accessible and in the right order, oldest stuff closest to hand. And of course you have to bear in mind any regular outgoings that may alter what you can count on. It has to be all there in your imagination, like a landscape continually before your inner eye, everything charted and repeatedly checked."

Intent on his explanation, simultaneously examining the stacks of reminders, lists, notes and bills, he glanced quickly at Cormac for his response, then relaxed into a grin.

“I’ll help you,” he reassured him. “It’s mostly about application and familiarity. You have to know it and care about it. It’s the body of the abbey, this obedience. The abbot looks after its soul and the prior should be its mind – noticing, remembering – but you care for its body. Just as if you have a horse, you must make sure it’s not too hot or cold, has been fed enough of the right things at the right time but not too much, that it’s exercised, groomed, has somewhere to shelter, is properly shod, dosed when need be, mucked out. The list is long, true enough, but second nature for anyone who knows horses. This abbey is the same, like a living thing you’re caring for. There’s nothing static about it, it’s dynamic, nothing ever stays the same for two hours together. You have to be paying attention and alert to the consequences implicit in every change.”

Cormac looked overwhelmed.

“This is the importance of meticulous record-keeping and faithful checking. It’s not easy, but it isn’t hard either, if you see what I mean. It just has to be done.”

Both men looked up as a shadow in the doorway heralded the approach of a stranger. The checker stood alone in the abbey court, between the gatehouse and the west range of the main buildings. The door stood open when warm weather permitted, and after the porter’s lodge and the guesthouse, this was where any visitors at a loss or with an enquiry often called. All tradesmen brought their bills of work and were paid off here. The two men took in the twinkling eyes and curving lips, the expensively attired figure, of a man neither of them recognized.

“Can I help you?” Brother Cormac rose to his feet.

“Ah! It’s a beautiful day in a beautiful world,” announced the newcomer. “Everyday blessings keep us smiling! His Lordship

sends warmest kindly greetings, and wants to let you know we made good time so we're here a day earlier than expected. Our smiles have travelled the miles to share in great fellowship with you, and we trust we won't be putting you to any inconvenience."

"Er... what? His Lordship? You're saying... the bishop is here already? He's arrived?"

"Yes, his Lordship is waiting at the guesthouse. I've been looking for your abbot but found only his esquire – so I came here. Our horses will need watering, and his Lordship will be pleased with a hearty repast – we've been on the road three hours."

Cormac felt, beneath the cover of the table behind which he stood, the meaningful pressure of his companion's boot against his ankle. Press, press, press. Why? He realized that his response must sound distinctly lukewarm in respect of its hospitality.

"I'll... um... I'll be right over," he said hastily. "If you'll make yourselves comfortable, I'll just dash down to the kitchen and see what... I'll be right there. Is there anything else I can do for you meanwhile?"

The man cocked his head, bright eyes sparkling. "Smile!" he reprimanded. His own smile remained fixedly in place, encouraging emulation. Cormac stared at him, bewildered.

"Who... who are you?" he asked. The visitor threw back his head and laughed.

"I am Brainard LePriquet!"

If Cormac had not felt so taken aback, he might well have laughed at that himself; but as things were, the information just made everything feel even more bizarre.

"His Lordship's equerry?" prompted the enquirer, his head at so sharp an angle now and his eyebrows raised so high that he looked definitely peculiar.

"Oh. I see. Er... welcome. You are welcome indeed. Right then, I'll cut along to the kitchen directly."

The equerry gave a blithe little chuckle, and turned on his heel. “We’ll expect you very soon,” he said. “His Lordship enjoys paté and red wine, but does not care for pickles. He likes plenty of butter and will never say no to cold cuts of pigeon or guinea-fowl – even peacock if you have it. Lark’s tongue paté is his favourite. Or the livers. Oh! Cheer up, Brother! Remember – a smile is the candle in your window that lets the world know a caring, sharing man is there within!”

He headed off with no further remarks. Stupefied, Brother Cormac stared after him, then said to his silent companion. “What the –?”

“A well-fed snake, if I’m not mistaken,” responded William tersely. “Expect trouble and keep him where you can see him.”

Like a man in a dream, Cormac turned to look at him after a moment’s silence. “William,” he said, “I – I – I can’t do that. I can’t.”

William frowned, perplexed, then his face cleared. “Oh. Eating skylarks. No. Good for you! Look, all he means is dainties. Cormac, Brother Conradus is your secret weapon here. Tell him to slather on the butter and gild the gingerbread. What that man wants is power, that’s all. He’s just letting you know how important he is. Play up to it, and quietly forget about the larks. Oh, and Brother Cormac – it would seem this is your chance to unleash the magic of your smile. Or just throw up. Your choice.”

Before Cormac could reply to this, a footfall outside and a tap on the door claimed their attention; the porter, Brother Martin.

“Pardon if I’m intruding when you’re busy. I’ve just come from the abbot’s house. Lady Florence is here, and Father John asked would I let William know. He says, sorry to trouble you but he’ll be glad if you can go over directly.”

“Thanks, Brother Martin; I’m on my way. Have you told him Bishop Eric’s arrived? Yes? Good. And that’s all in hand, is it? The

guesthouse, the kitchen – everyone aware? Yes? My word, this place runs like an oiled wheel these days!”

William set out briskly across the broad, open space of the abbey court, enjoying the fragrance of the flowers now blooming in its borders – gillyflowers and violets, some late primroses, cowslips and irises, hellebores, lungwort and lily of the valley. Rosemary bushes in first flower, new green growth of lavender thrusting out from the silver foliage left from last year. And sprays of roses fastened back against the walls, their young leaves shiny copper red, and the buds still small. Such life here, he thought; such happiness.

Brother Thomas opened the door to his knock at the abbot’s house, and William stepped in to be introduced as steward of the feast, to Lady Florence Bonvallet and an upright, aged dame occupying the other chair – “Lady Gunhilde Neville – Lady Florence’s mother.”

“My lady... my lady...” William bowed low, did not attempt to kiss the hand of either, his declared role being too subordinate for such intimacy.

“The steward of the feast,” observed Lady Florence, her eye resting appraisingly on William. “So it’s too late. It’s really happening, and there’s nothing more that can be done to stop it.”

John invited William to sit with a friendly gesture, and they both sat on stools since the ladies had the chairs.

“Too late?” the abbot enquired cautiously.

“Oh! Maybe you don’t think so?” A shaft of hope gleamed in Lady Florence’s penetrating eye. “Well, at least I can console myself I’ve done what I can. I had a most stormy interview with Gervase last week. I thought I was being fair to the girl. I even offered for us to take on the children – save her the expense of their upbringing. I expect we could find a place for them, and a suitable occupation.”

“The children?” Abbot John frowned, perplexed. “*Hannab’s* children? An occupation? One’s barely three and the other but a babe.”

“Yes, yes, I know. Well I expect they could be accommodated out of the way somewhere.”

“But... why...?”

“Presumably” – Lady Florence fixed the abbot coldly with her gaze and explained with exaggerated clarity – “what she wants is money. And the children will be an impediment if this match does not go ahead. So I offered to step in. If that’s what it takes to get rid of her, we can take the children so she is free of that burden, and even give her some small settlement in consideration of the time and expense involved in rearing them thus far. I am sensible of our obligations. I suppose they must *be* Gervase’s.”

John blinked.

“In my day,” interposed the lady’s ancient mother, her eyes glittering like jewels of Whitby jet set into a lacy skein of wrinkles, “such audacity would have been unthinkable. Even the most froward upstart would have stopped short of thinking herself capable of worming a way into the Neville family. Or the Bonvallets. Nobody in my generation would have contemplated anything of the sort. Young people nowadays seem to think family doesn’t matter – it’s all about love. Love! Ha! What do they know? Abandoning all standards, all sense of decency.”

She drew back slightly in her chair, her face giving the impression of having detected an offensive odour in the near vicinity. Whether the abbot replied or not seemed a matter of complete indifference to her.

“Gervase said he would have none of it,” Lady Florence continued. “He spoke to me most pugnaciously – with extreme disrespect. He insists on seeing this whim through. But what will he do with her once he’s got her? Does he imagine he can bring her home? To our manor? She is coarse – common in the extreme.

She is of most inferior stuff. She has a certain competence in practical matters, I suppose. I gather she tends a flock of goats out on the moors. But her accomplishments and abilities are those of the lower orders. Gervase brought her once to our house – it was an absolute disaster. They had a fair on the green that day, and he'd promised to take her. She wanted to see the man with the hurdy-gurdy, she said, and the children dancing.” (Lady Gunhilde’s lip curled as she heard this, and she turned aside her head in incredulous disdain.) “But Gervase and his brothers – Hubert and Percival; I think you know them – wanted to practise their bowmanship, out upon the lawns. Her duty of course was to encourage and admire, but after only a couple of hours she became positively petulant. She wandered away eventually, and Gervase had to stop what he was doing and go in search of her. He found her curled up like a child on a garden bench, *weeping*. Can you imagine? All because she’d missed the fair! That’s the kind of girl she is, you see: childish. She can’t help it; it’s just that she’s from that kind of family. Preoccupied with trinkets and baubles, with diversions and amusements. She has no backbone, she doesn’t know her duty – she has no idea how to behave.”

“It wouldn’t have been like that in my day,” Lady Gunhilde observed. “*We* knew how to behave. My generation had the highest standards instilled into us. Young people today think any slipshod nonsense will do. I expect it’s the way I grew up, but my generation had values. We knew what was expected of us.”

“So I felt there was no more I could do,” Lady Florence concluded. “I told Gervase it was still not too late to bring things to a halt. But he refused even to answer me – he turned away with extreme discourtesy. I shall entreat him one last time, on the night before his wedding – because I cannot believe he really wants to marry this wench. It can come to no good. What can he possibly see in her, after all?”

Bleak and arid, her coldly questioning eye directed its glance

at the abbot. Evidently this was the moment for his response.

William raised his head and looked at John, at the ladies, impassively observing. John sat thinking, rubbed his chin, his mouth.

“I regard this as a very poor return on all we have invested in him,” added Lady Florence, seeing the abbot not about to speak. “I don’t know how much your father put into your education, Father John – into the moulding of you to become a man fit to enter society – but you will realize it is a costly endeavour, in terms of effort, time and money. One needs a proper foundation to know how to comport oneself with refinement and dignity. It doesn’t just come naturally. It is very disappointing to see it thrown away like this. Very disappointing indeed. Gervase has wasted the family resources. One could call it theft, without overstating the matter.”

“My lady,” asked William quietly and smoothly into the silence that followed this; “are you intimating that the planned marriage may actually not take place?”

“Not if I can help it.” Lady Florence sounded not so much vehement as resigned. “But it seems my counsel is not wanted. A mother is not to be consulted. So far as I know it will go ahead. But not by my wish.”

“When I grew up,” added her mother, “young people respected their parents: ‘Honour thy father and thy mother that it may go well with thee, and thou mayest dwell long in the land.’ What happened to that? Young people today are grown so headstrong – they think of nothing but pleasing themselves and going their own way. My generation would never have dreamed of such a thing. But I suppose it must have been the way I grew up.”

“Yes, my lady,” murmured William in the familiar dulcet tone that filled John with immediate alarm, “I suppose it must have been.”

Lady Florence’s calm, implacable gaze continued to rest on

the abbot.

“I know what you are thinking, Father John,” she said. That recalled his attention from William.

Few things irritated John more than people telling him they knew what he was thinking. Knowing his annoyance likely to show, however hard he tried to hide it, he lowered his eyes. Flashing unbidden into his mind, a memory of his father surprised him. From his childhood, when Jude had been briefly at home between military skirmishes. They had stood outside in the breezy air, Jude showing his small son how to handle a longbow.

Beautiful yew wood, John could still remember the feel of the thing, ludicrously big for him. His father’s touch light upon him – his back, his shoulders, his arms. The kindly voice explaining, “It’s not the strength of your arms, lad, you press your whole body into it. Rest your hand so – that’s it – and lay your body into the thing. Steady. Hold steady. Hold the strength of your core. Feel it in your belly. That’s it, lad.” His father’s smile. “That’s it, lad.”

And John, holding steady, raised his eyes to her ladyship, feeling more than seeing William’s quick, perceptive, appraising glance checking that all was well.

“You are thinking,” said Lady Florence, “that I am a heartless and selfish woman; but you are wrong. Why should I care what happens to Hannah? I have nothing against her – except that she means to ruin the life of my son. I am a mother, and it is in the nature of things that a mother will fight for her child’s wellbeing. I do not want that... chit... to exploit my son’s vulnerability as a man to press her own advantage. I would spare him the pain such an alliance must bring him in the end, when lust is spent and she and he tire of each other. I would save my son.”

John’s hand moved in a gesture of involuntary protest. “I do see – but my lady, is that really what’s happening? I have met with Gervase and Hannah, counselled them, heard then, listened

carefully to what they have to say. Their betrothal has been long – heavens, they have two children already – and the love between them seems real and abiding, to me. The Mitchells are not the Nevilles nor the Bonvallets, I grant you, but they are worthy people. Walter Mitchell is a fine and honourable man. Hannah is the soul of kindness – not gently born maybe, not always dignified – but surely she could learn from you? She is a good mother and she would be a good wife. She has been steadfast in her affections for Gervase these three or four years; Hannah is nothing to be ashamed of.”

Lady Florence’s lips curved faintly in a small, dismissive smile. Her gaze beheld the abbot in cool pity. “Father John,” she said, “how can I put it to you? You are the abbot of a monastery. Whatever your own background, you must surely see the rectitude of precedence, of keeping to the place to which one is assigned. In your abbey, when you enter the room, the brothers rise to their feet. When you reprimand them, they kiss the floor. When you bid them, they go. That’s how it is. They do not command you, but you them. This is not because of any tie of personal affection, nor does it imply they have a slavish disposition. It is simply that they know their place and keep to it – and that is what divine order *is*. Knowing and fulfilling our position in life. You are the abbot of St Alcuin’s. I am the wife of Sir Cecil Bonvallet and the daughter of Sir Arthur Nevill. I am the mother of my three sons. My role in life is to uphold the wellbeing of my family and to advance its interests as best I may, just as yours is to safeguard the integrity of the Benedictine life in this community. Hannah is nothing to me. I bear her no personal animosity. But she is not of our kind. She does not belong in my family. And if I can get rid of her, I will. But I perceive you to be intractable in your adherence to the point of view Gervase thinks he has. I would request only that you ask yourself, whose side are you on?”

“Whose *side*? Lady Florence, is that what it must come to? I

thought this was a marriage, a union – a family – not a war! I’m not on your side or Hannah’s side – I see no sides, no opposition. I am on the side of Christ, of love, of finding our way together as best we might, finding something gentle and hopeful in life, some way to purposefully channel our humanity. I’m not signing up to a fight!”

“I see,” she replied, her voice chill and remote. “Then since we have the steward of the feast present with us, shall we come to terms? Have you the lists I supplied, of our requirements?”

William rose to his feet and fetched the scroll from the pile on John’s table. He had taken in its contents and could answer to it with convincing familiarity.

Wearily, an hour later, the abbot made his carefully courteous farewells of both ladies. They wanted to make a thorough inspection of the area where the marriage vows would be made, the refectory in which the feast would take place, and the abbey church where High Mass would follow the nuptials. John sent Brother Tom in search of Francis to be their escort; he took his leave of them with all pleasant kindness at his door – but declined to go beyond it, and left them to begin their inspections alone, with the promise that Francis would find them without delay. And he shut the door.

“You have to admit,” said William, “she has a point.”

“I do not,” replied the abbot, shortly. He glared at William. “Hannah is a decent girl. She and Gervase love one another. Her family are good people. She deserves a chance. *And* – if you meant that as a joke, it isn’t funny.” His eyes blazed at William, but then he stopped himself and half-turned away. He took a deep breath and started again, more quietly: “Anyway, what about you? Haven’t you got something to do? Doesn’t Cormac need you?”

William grinned. He knew a man doing his best when he saw one. He made himself scarce.

John closed his eyes, counted to ten, prayed silently and

fervently to remain courteous and patient, then turned his mind to the early arrival of the bishop. Skirting the court to avoid Lady Bonvallet now deep in conversation with his prior, he crossed to the guesthouse to tackle the beginning of their Visitation.

By some miracle of divine kindness, though Bishop Eric spent time with Abbot John in the afternoon, having amply lunched, and had some searching questions to ask about what John considered to be the strengths and weaknesses of this community and his own fulfilment of his role within it, the bishop felt sufficiently wearied by his journey to retire early, stating a preference to eat in privacy in the guesthouse. John took the opportunity to take his supper in the abbot's house in William's company. He felt he owed William that honour, as his guest and in thanks for his help. Besides that, it had not been an easy day, and in William's company he felt completely accepted – that here was one soul who never asked him to give an account of himself, but had the perception simply to understand.

Over supper, he told William something of his time with the bishop in the afternoon. He expressed bemusement at the distinctly odd equerry, who had urged him to smile and let slip his hidden sunshine. He took note of the wariness in William's eyes as he considered the man – “Don't trust him, John.” He thought back on their encounter with Lady Florence Bonvallet and her mother, but decided no good could come of mulling over that, and left it alone. And then they ate in companionable silence.

“John... I've a kindness to beg of you.”

The abbot looked up from his dinner. William seemed unsettled, he thought, out of sorts. “And it is?”

“I wondered – I do appreciate why the answer should be ‘no’ – but... could I – may I – come to Chapter in the morning?”

Abbot John finished chewing his mouthful of food, but he was already shaking his head before he spoke. “I'm afraid it does have to be ‘no’,” he said. “Chapter must remain sacrosanct for

the community. It has to be that way. You have considerable freedom while you're here – to be with us in the cloister, sit with the community at Compline and in the early morning. We recognize our special relationship with you; but there must also be boundaries. And Chapter is for the brethren. Anyway, Bishop Eric may well be there, and anyone dressed as a layman would stick out like a sore thumb. I am so sorry. Why did you want to come?"

William toyed with his broken bread. "I suppose... I just wanted to hear something honest and wholesome and good. It's been a strange day. The equerry, the Bonvallets. They have their point of view, but I feel... sort of ... besmirched."

John nodded, understanding, sympathy in his eyes. "I can believe it."

"I wanted to listen to the abbot's Chapter." William spoke quietly, and John felt the containment of his spirit, the way the man kept himself held inside, furred. The world corroded him, perhaps.

"Thank you for the compliment," said John with a smile. "I assure you there are not that many men over-eager to wait upon my wisdom. I am so sorry to deny you access. Sometimes..." He reached for the carafe of ale, and poured a little into his ale-pot to enjoy with the remnants of his cheese. "... it's not unknown for men to fall asleep in my Chapter talks. These summer days it can be stuffy in there. Fresh air is helpful for staying awake, and good for us anyway. The door – not the entrance from the covered way, the little one handy for the infirmarians and anyone coming down from the farm – sometimes we leave it open on a sunny day. It's nice to hear the birds sing. I should think we'd be likely to leave it open tomorrow."

He saw his friend's face relax into gratitude and amusement.



There was this nook out of the wind's way, tucked between the belling out of the octagonal chapter house and the buttressed wall of the main body of the church. Here William sat on the tufting grass, smelling the fragrance of lavender, sage and rosemary growing there. Herbs were planted everywhere at St Alcuin's – because they were useful and beautiful, healing and fragrant, low maintenance and extremely easy to grow. Absently, he stretched out his hand and rubbed the leaves of the lavender... the rosemary... breathing in the clean, wholesome scent.

Screened from view in this discreet cleft, he listened to Father Gilbert reading the chapter of the Rule set for today, his voice carrying out through the small door that this morning stood wide open, propped back with a rock.

“Behold, here I am’,” Benedict quoted Psalm 33. And Father Gilbert concluded the portion set: “Behold, in his loving kindness the Lord shows us the way of life.”

William was by now familiar with the effect the place had on him, and experienced without surprise the curious reaching forth, the yearning hunger that called from the very depths of his viscera to the unknown blue mystery of the infinite. *Amen*, his soul in silence saluted the words.

And then, what he wanted to hear: Abbot John addressed the sons of his house.

“In loving kindness, the Lord shows us the way of life. My brothers, opposing contrasts are often used to guide us. One such is *perfecta caritas foras mittit timorem* – perfect love casts out fear. What an interesting opposition. At first thought we incline to perceive hatred as opposed to love. Yet often hatred turns out to be wounded or distorted love, the result of abuse and rejection. It's a steep task, turning hatred to love, certainly – but the true opposition is fear. You cannot love where you fear – you *cannot*. Fear is inherently self-concerned, where love of its nature looks outwards, self-forgetful. Fear wants to get away where love wants to connect.

“Thinking of kindness, then, of loving kindness – I asked myself, for our guidance, the deepening of our wisdom – what is the opposite of kindness. The first thing that springs to mind is cruelty, naturally enough. Or meanness – mean-spiritedness, maybe. But cruelty... well... it is, you might say, a *secondary* thing. A fruit, not a root. The same with meanness. They are what we see. They are the behaviour, not the attitude.

“Tentatively, I want to propose to you, the root attitude in opposition to loving kindness is scorn – contempt.

“Kindness sees vulnerability, sees someone at a loss or disadvantage, and reaches out to shelter, to help. Kindness sees where someone is hurt or angry, and wants to listen, to understand; if it may be, to heal.

“Scorn sees the same things and sneers. Scorn turns away where kindness turns towards. Contempt sees someone struggling or out of their depth, and blames them. Contempt sees someone angry, smarting under an injustice perhaps, and punishes them. Above all, kindness draws people together into community, where scornful contempt isolates and divides them, keeps them forever apart.

“Christ was of no account, once. He was the child of a poor woman, born in shame, homeless. He was a prisoner brought to stand and answer for his words – he who had said, ‘Tear down this temple and in three days I will build it again.’ He, the healer, nailed to the cross, attracted derision – ‘Messiah? Save yourself!’

“He died. But when he rose again, he didn’t come back with a list drawn up of his enemies. Even in dying, what he said was, ‘Father, forgive them – they don’t know what they’re doing.’ He understood, you see. Even then.

“There’s a fair amount about scorn in the Gospels. I’m thinking of the older brother of the prodigal, of the Pharisee and the Publican, of Simon the Pharisee and the woman who anointed the feet of Jesus, among others. We identify hypocrisy as

the sin Jesus spoke out against – but just like cruelty, hypocrisy is a secondary thing. Hypocrisy, like cruelty, proceeds from contempt. The Pharisee held the publican in absolute contempt – as did the older brother regard the returning prodigal. He scorned him. And Simon the Pharisee looked down on the woman of ill repute; she was beneath him. Or so he thought. He made the mistake of expecting Jesus would look at her in the same way. Contempt belittles people, sees them as nothing, as insignificant, where kindness restores dignity, helps people grow.

“There’s something going on here about the predilection for always being right that afflicts religious people. Wanting to be right and feeling guilty and ashamed when we get things wrong. Anxious to be in the right, we hold in utter contempt those who fail, who fall below the standards we have set. We make them into a ladder we climb, thinking to elevate ourselves. But, in heaven’s name – doesn’t everybody make mistakes? Isn’t that how we learn? Should we not shelter our fallen brothers with kindness? Should we not overlook their follies and lift them up gently when they stumble? Guilt, shame, contempt – this becomes a morass of rancour feeding off itself. It’s a knot you can untangle only with kindness.

“Kindness. Such a homely, ordinary thing at first glance. But so majestic, so spacious; the thumbprint of a generous God. ‘In loving kindness, the Lord shows us the way of life.’”

William stayed where he was in the silence that followed these words. He explored the perimeter of the familiar sinkhole – shame – at his well-defended core. He thought of the derision with which he so easily dismissed men he judged to be weak or mediocre. They drew from him not kindness but contempt. He knew how scornful he could be. He bent his head, quite still, except that the fingers of his left hand strayed among the blades of grass where he sat, plucking at them as his thoughts wandered. Then as he heard the abbot open the business of the meeting,

asking for the confessions of the novices, William crept from his hiding place and stole away, keeping close to the church wall where he could not be observed from the chapter house. It would be, he thought, a breach of trust to eavesdrop on the defencelessness of brothers confessing to one another, and on the private concerns of the community. He had no wish to pry.

He went into the cloister, crossed the garth all blossoming in the flowers of spring, going through to the far side of the cloister, the refectory door, and from there out to the abbey court. He thought Bishop Eric, whom he wished to avoid, would be in Chapter with the community, so he took the chance to find something to eat in the guesthouse, and to move his belongings out to a more discreet lodging, out from under the eye of the bishop. Near its door in the sunshine, he found the bishop's equerry seated at a garden table with some bread and ale.

The man raised his hand against the morning light, and offered a jocund smile. "Here's a merry thing!" he exclaimed, showing William a small spider who had been spinning her thread, using the corner of the table to attach the web she had strung between its silvered oak and the rosemary. It glinted in the sunshine. "Look!" The equerry laughed as he trapped one of her legs beneath his finger, detaching it from her body. He did it to a second leg, a third, a fourth, two more. William stood immobile, watching the futile movement of the last two legs. Smiling, the equerry took these away one by one, leaving only her body and the tiny threads of her scattered legs. Then, laughing, he reached down and brushed the web away.

William stepped forward to the table, neither looking at nor speaking to the man. With delicate care, he lifted the still body of the garden spider, placed her on the sunwarmed flag of stone where he stood, and with one decisive movement crushed her absolutely. He did not turn his head to see if the equerry was still smiling. He went into the guesthouse; but there he walked past

the table where food had been set out for the taking. He took the stairs two at a time and retrieved his bag and cloak from the bed where he'd been sleeping. The house had a kitchen of its own, and by that way he made his exit, to avoid being seen by LePriquet or, for that matter, having to look at him. Quietly and swiftly he walked along under the trees to the stables, and climbed the wooden ladder into the big hayloft. He swung himself up through the hatch, and crossed the boarded space, strewn with fragrant grass and seeds. Mice, he knew, would confine their activities mainly to the floor. He climbed onto the hay pile, to the very back of the loft, crouching to make himself a hollow close against the wall just beneath the small window, where the scanty light would find him, he could hear what passed outside, but would be unseen should anyone come up to investigate. He wrapped his cloak around him and lay down, curling up into the nest he had made. There he lay quite still, thinking of the bishop, the equerry, the spider. Even wrapped in his cloak and bedded in the hay, he felt cold now, not entirely sure it had been the right choice to come back here again.