

The Breath of Peace

PENELOPE WILCOCK



LION FICTION

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*For my dear friend Kay Bradbury who prayed me through the
writing of so many stories.*

Again Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' And with that he breathed on them...

John 20:21 NIV

I am the fool whose life's been spent between what's said and what is meant.

Carrie Newcomer

If you want to create evil in the world, all you have to do is pick on a little kid.

Clay Garner

Courage does not always roar. Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying, 'I will try again tomorrow.'

Mary Anne Radmacher

Today I bent the truth to be kind, and I have no regret, for I am far surer of what is kind than I am of what is true.

Robert Brault

Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.

Jesus of Nazareth – John 14:27 KJV

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The Community of St Alcuin's Abbey

(Not all members are mentioned in *The Breath of Peace*.)

Fully professed monks

Abbot John Hazell	<i>once the abbey's infirmarian</i>
Father Chad	<i>prior</i>
Brother Ambrose	<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 Francis	<i>scribe</i>
Father Bernard	<i>sacristan</i>
Brother Martin	<i>porter</i>
Brother Thaddeus	<i>potter</i>
Brother Michael	<i>infirmarian</i>
Brother Damian	<i>helps in the infirmary</i>
Brother Cormac	<i>kitchener</i>
Brother Conradus	<i>assists in the kitchen</i>
Brother Richard	<i>fraterer</i>
Brother Stephen	<i>oversees the abbey farm</i>
Brother Peter	<i>ostler</i>
Father Gerard	<i>almoner</i>
Brother Josephus	<i>acted as esquire for Father Chad between abbots; now working in the abbey school</i>
Brother Germanus	<i>has worked on the farm, occupied in the wood yard and gardens</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>
Father James	<i>makes and mends robes, occasionally works in the scriptorium</i>
Brother Walafrid	<i>herbalist, oversees the brew house</i>
Brother Giles	<i>assists Brother Walafrid and works in the laundry</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>assists 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 *novice master*
Brother Cyprian *porter*
Father Aelred *schoolmaster*
Father Lucanus *novice master before Father Matthew*
Father Anselm *once robe-maker*
Brother Andrew *kitchener*

Acknowledgments

My thanks to singer-songwriter Carrie Newcomer for allowing me to use the quotation from her song at the start of this book. Musicians are notoriously sticky about allowing song quotations, and she was very gracious in permitting me to do so. Information about Carrie's work can be found at CarrieNewcomer.com.

Notes on the Text

A note from the author on fourteenth-century English...

Once or twice, in a review or a passing comment, someone has remarked that occasionally this author loses her grip on fourteenth-century English, or that a word or phrase is used that seems out of place for the fourteenth century. Because I think readers may not always immediately see what I am doing here, I thought an explanatory note might be helpful.

The Hawk and the Dove series is set in the 1300s, and if it were written in fourteenth-century English, it would read something like this:

Fowles in the frith,
The fisshes in the flood,
And I mon waxe wood
Much sorwe I walke with
For beste of boon and blood.

Or this:

But nathelees, whil I have tyme and space,
Er that I ferther in this tale pace,
Me thynketh it acordaunt to resound
To telle yow al the condicioun
Of ech of hem, so as it semed me,
And whiche they weren, and of what degree,
And eek in what array that they were inne;
And at a knyght than wol I first bigynne.

Now, that would be fun! I would relish the challenge of employing my studies of English literature through the ages, and creating a modern novel written entirely in Middle English. The only snag

would be that no one would want to read it, and even they thatte started wolde gyve up in a litel space, ywys, I wot it roghte wele.

So the challenge I took up instead of that one, was how to write novels set in the fourteenth century that allowed the modern reader to enter that world *as if it were familiar territory*.

Reading Shakespeare, and Chaucer, and the seventeenth-century poets George Herbert and John Donne, something that strikes me every time is the vivid homeliness of their language. The images are domestic and friendly, down to earth somehow, connecting the writer to readers of any era with an almost startling immediacy.

Here's Donne tackling the teasing art of seduction by writing about a flea:

Marke but this flea, and marke in this,
How little that which thou deny'st me is;
Me it suck'd first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea our two bloods mingled bee...

And here's George Herbert, with holier matters in mind, writing in 1633, in his poem *The Elixir*, about the transformative power of undertaking lowly tasks 'for Thy sake':

A servant with this clause
Makes drudgerie divine
Who sweeps a room as for Thy laws
Makes that and th'action fine.

There is a forthrightness, an earthiness, a picturesque domesticity about the handling of language throughout the middle ages right up to the eighteenth century, at which point the age of enlightenment kicked in to make a change of emphasis.

In writing *The Hawk and the Dove* series, I have tried to capture not medieval *usage* of language, but medieval *flavour* – the drollery of its wit, the warmth and immediacy of its style.

In practice this means knotting and weaving modern phraseology into a net capable of catching that elusive earthy quality. So, for example, in this book (*The Breath of Peace*) there is a riff running about William's 'scary eyes'. In terms of the story, this works with the purpose of continuing the process, wrought over the course of the previous three novels, of allowing the reader to follow through deepening insight into a character whose presenting face is essentially unlikeable. Theologically, this is about redemption beginning with learning to love the unlovely – the heart of compassion and the nature of grace: 'while we were yet sinners...' (Romans 5:8). In introducing the question of the 'scary eyes', the theme of learning to see things from someone else's point of view begun in *The Hardest Thing To Do* is taken to the level of being actually behind or within the eyes of the individual whose gaze is threatening, disturbing and unsettling – and realizing that *to that person* the unnerving gaze is unintentional; and in any case he is the one person in the world who has no means of experiencing or perceiving it.

But the term 'scary' has a very modern ring to it. So the question I tossed about for a while was whether to avoid the modern idiom, or use it in this case. I decided to use it because the modern reader, familiar with it in daily speech, would grasp immediately its affectionate and less than serious application. If someone says to you, 'You have scary eyes!' they are not taking you entirely seriously – it's meant, but it's slightly teasing. The phrase originates with Madeleine in this story, and allows the reader to keep the awareness that William *has* a disquieting presence – even his wife finds him somewhat unnerving at times – while at the same time moving closer into this vulnerable and damaged person beset by the fears and shame that overrun his inner world.

'Scary' is flippant, teasing, affectionate, light, gently mocking – and, familiar with these nuances in daily speech, a reader will instantly catch these resonances. But how does this sit with a

fourteenth-century context? Of course this exact use of ‘scary’ does not carry over from the modern day to the fourteenth century, but the flavour – the gentle mockery, the teasing – does. To use an archaic form would have the disadvantage of imparting a mannered and wooden quality to the interaction, which was precisely the thing I wanted to avoid. Madeleine speaks to William within a relationship of intimacy – an intimacy further underlined by his being a man so very hard for anyone to get close to. Use of a term stiffened by the distance of history would not do here. The idiom is modern, but used with the purpose of bringing to life for the modern reader a domestic relationship from a distant historical context.

Similarly I will use phrases like ‘not the sharpest knife in the box’ or ‘what are you like?’, ‘does my head in’ or ‘I see where you’re coming from’ or ‘get a grip’, because there is no inherent reason why they could not have been formulated in the middle ages – they don’t rely on a specific historical context in the way that ‘on the level’ (a phrase imported from Freemasonry) or ‘all guns blazing’ (obviously post-medieval) or ‘nineteen to the dozen’ (from the nineteenth-century Cornish tin mines) would do.

On the other hand, when one of the people working editorially on the text, for one of the earlier novels, suggested that I put in the mouth of Abbot John the words ‘Are you kidding?’ I rejected that instinctually, because it has the wrong flavour – it is *too* American, too modern, too specifically rooted in our contemporary world – and because there are other words – jesting, joking, etc. – that serve the exact same purpose without stepping out of the medieval world.

Modern idiom in these novels is primarily chosen where it serves the purpose of conveying nuances of relationship – because these novels are about the delicate intermingling of gritty, earthy, difficult daily relationship in community with the leavening, beautifying, fragrant threads and root-hairs of divine grace.

The great cause of writing fiction is to weave a bag to carry truth. It is a means of bringing truth home. The art of storytelling is to present a context ‘long ago and far away’, allowing us to examine without feeling defensive the issues that belong to our lives, our dilemmas, our day. The marriage of the far-away and the here-and-now is achieved by the use of language. The Hawk and the Dove series comes from the days of fire and stone, of ox-carts and rushlights, the days before tomatoes and potatoes were on the menu: but the stories in it are yours and mine, and what we rely on to make the bridge is the way in which language is used.

My first love as a reader and as a writer is poetry – I came only gradually to prose and have learned to love the handling of it more slowly. Thus I write first and foremost as a poet, balancing the word-music and cadences of every sentence, sitting with a thesaurus always open in search of words that convey not approximately but precisely the heart-meaning of the trail of grace I am trying to coax the reader along – until you can see it; until a man’s weeping makes your belly contract with his, until his quiet joke and sly grin stays with you, and makes you smile as you remember it while you’re in your kitchen chopping vegetables for your supper.

Nobody could know better than I do that I cannot always have got the balance right – that sometimes my choices of modern idiom may have been ill-advised, and my research of an immersion into the medieval and monastic world is sometimes patchy and incomplete. But it has been a study and a love affair of a lifetime, and in this series of novels I give it my best shot.

Chapter One

An owl hooted, soft and eerie, in the blackness between the dripping trees that bordered and hung menacing over the lane. She took in the sound, and then she stopped dead. That was wrong. No owl perched so low. It was a signal. It was a man. Her heart thundered, battering erratic, high in her chest. Again the low, unearthly call floated through the cold mist. Madeleine stood trembling, sick with terror, her knees shaking, unable to move. How many of them were there? Footpads? Thieves? Or worse?

She almost fainted as she saw the human clot of shadow emerge from the trees against the wall.

‘Who goes there?’ She tried to sound sharp and challenging, but her voice shook with undisguisable fear.

As the man came towards her, she could not run, could do nothing; blind panic stopped her throat and then in the glimmers of moonlight shining fitful through the trees she recognized a familiar outline and gait in the vague shape approaching her... ‘W-W-William?’ She could hardly gasp out the question.

‘Oh, my sweet, did I scare you?’

And relief drained every ounce of strength from her so that she all but collapsed into his arms.

‘My darling!’ He was laughing at the situation, holding her close to him, laughing: ‘My darling, it’s only me!’

It was the laughter that did it. Incoherent rage took hold of her, and she pulled back from his arms.

‘What a stupid, stupid thing to do! It isn’t funny! How was I supposed to know it was you? You frightened the wits out of me! It could have been anybody standing there in the trees! Why didn’t you bring a lantern anyway? What did you think you were doing, crouched in the hedgerow mooing like a cow fallen in the ditch?’

‘I wasn’t mooing. I was being an owl!’

‘An owl? Oh, Lord! You almost scared the life out of me! All I knew, standing there in the dark, was that someone, something – some fell being, I knew not what, but no owl – was hiding in the trees! Saints alive, William de Bulmer – what kind of man are you?’

‘A penitent one.’ He tried to take her into his embrace again, and she would have nothing of it. He tried another tack. ‘Why were you out so late, anyway? I was worried about you. That’s why I came out to look for you.’

‘Look, let’s not stand here in the lane, shall we? It’s dark, it’s freezing cold, it’s wet, and I’ll bet you’ve let the fire go out!’

‘Madeleine...’ His hand found hers. ‘Don’t be cross with me. I didn’t mean to scare you. I didn’t think.’

She allowed him to hold her hand, but he felt no returning pressure of affection. The silence that emanated from her as they splashed through the mud and puddles of the rutted lane felt icier than the raw February night.

William cursed himself. To come upon an unidentified man waiting for her on the lonely road home would have been terrifying. Madeleine never spoke about the night the villagers had come for her and her mother, burned their cottage to the ground, killed or stole their livestock and left her mother dead and Madeleine stunned and bleeding. But she never mentioned it because she wanted to keep the horror sealed away, not because

she'd forgotten. And he should have realized. Should have been more thoughtful. As they trudged without speaking the last few yards to their gate, he tried desperately to remember if he had in fact thought to build up the fire before he set out. It was difficult to think. More anxiously pressing was the increasing certainty that he had forgotten to shut the hens in. This he dared not admit.

They walked in silence until they came to the stone walls that encircled their homestead, Caldbeck Cottage. He opened the gate and stood aside for her to enter, latching it securely behind them.

He had a bad feeling that she was probably right about the fire. He had taken scraps of left-over bread and vegetables to their sow, Lily, mixed in with her oat mash along with the buttermilk from the morning, and a few apples from the store. He had milked Marigold, Madeleine's much-loved goat brought with her from St Alcuin's. He spread fresh straw in her stall, in the pig sty, and in the palfrey's stable, when he fastened them in for the night. The animals had no need of mucking out. At the beginning and end of the short months of summer – in May and in September – they cleaned out the animal housing, but through the long cold months of the northern winter the build-up of litter on the floor offered a valuable source of warmth, and made the food go further – a cold animal is a hungry one. The goat's housing and the stable smelt sweet; the odour of their dung was not offensive. William felt less sure about the fragrance of a pig.

The trips across from the hay barn and the straw barn made extra work. Madeleine had wanted to store some bales in the goat shed and above the stable, but William had adamantly refused. There had been an argument about that as well, he recalled.

'No,' he had said: 'absolutely not. The hay cannot be stored in the same building with the straw, and neither one in the same building with the beasts. And the hay store cannot even be near the straw, or the beasts, or the house. It only takes one bale, just one damp bale, to combust, and we lose the hay, the straw, the

beasts and the house if they are all cheek by jowl. It must be separate. No, Madeleine! It *must* be.'

'William, you're being too particular. It's not a great farm! And anyway, we won't be buying damp hay, we'll be choosy, we'll check. It's just so much work traipsing back and forth all weathers to lug it in.'

'I am *not* being too particular. If we inadvertently roast that goat something tells me you, for one, won't be able to face eating her for supper. And we rely on the milk. Yes, we have enough money on deposit if we live frugally. We can hope to build up and increase what we have here, and we shall prosper. It would take only one fire to dash our hopes and dreams, and set back by several years everything we've planned. I've known barn fires, and seen the wind take them across the thatches of one building after another, wreaking devastation. We can't make ourselves safe against everything, but not doing what we can is just madness.'

'I still think you're making a mountain out of a molehill. I've husbanded animals all my life and always kept a few bales in with the beasts. It helps keep them warm, for one thing. I've never had a fire, not once.'

He looked at her. 'What are you talking about? Your house burnt down.'

Irritation twitched her face. This thrust annoyed her intensely. 'Aye, and yours did too, wherever you kept your dratted hay! That's not the point.'

And so it had continued, back and forth, for the best part of an afternoon: but he would not budge. When they moved in, he had not the skills to build and thatch a hovel for storing hay, so a precious portion of their money had been spent on hiring a handy neighbour to do that for them. The incident had made William feel suddenly defenceless and lonely. The shared skills of a monastic community of men had made for great strength and security. Leaving that behind at the age of fifty with very little experience

of mending and building made him very vulnerable by comparison with everything he had known so far, even if they had inherited an income as well as a house. This was what made him so adamant about the hay store. This house and money that had been left them represented the chance of a lifetime. It would not come again. He knew he would never be able to live with himself if he stood watching impotently as flames reached the thatch of his home, and he with no means of fighting it but himself, his wife, a well and a small stack of leather buckets. He refused to take the risk.

‘Nobody ever thinks they’re buying damp hay,’ he insisted. ‘Nobody goes to the farm and says, “Ooh, that’s cheap, must be damp, I’ll have it all.” It takes you by surprise. That’s why it pays to be cautious. It’s not the things you know are going to happen that ruin a man, it’s the things that catch him out.’

‘What?’ she snapped. ‘You mean, like spending the entire fortune of an abbey on a ship not safe in harbour and watching it go to the bottom of the sea?’ It was an unkind dig, raking up his past mistakes, and she felt a pang of guilt even as she said it and watched him turn his face away, stung by the taunt.

‘Aye,’ he replied quietly, after a moment’s silence: ‘exactly like that. Well, let’s not do it again. I haven’t been lucky with risks.’

Not even the risk of leaving a lifetime spent in monastic life to get married, he thought bitterly as he followed his wife into the house on this February night. Oh, the love between them was sweet at times, and no amount of spats between them came anywhere near denting the basic reality that he adored her: but it had been a very long time since his everyday life had brought him so many scoldings, and led him so inexorably into one kind of trouble after another.

He thought if he let her go first up to bed, he could slip out quietly to the henhouse and close it for the night. Even if (as was most likely) the fox had been at dusk and taken a bird, that would not become apparent until morning, and he could pretend he just

hadn't noticed the evening before. 'They were already roosting,' he could say. 'I couldn't tell how many were in.'

That would bring wrath on his head too, because her immediate rejoinder would be: 'If you couldn't tell how many were in, you might have left some shut out. You must count them! You must count them in every time!'

He slipped past her at the door as she bent to unfasten her pattens (the wooden clogs that kept the all-pervasive winter wet out of her boots) and went in ahead of her to attend to the fire. He found it almost dead. He had been longer out looking for her in the lane than he expected. Only a few tiny embers remained. He tore a fragment of lint from the small supply of it they had close by the hearth, drew the embers together, laid the scrap of charred linen over them and built above that a careful pyramid of dry sticks, balancing on top of everything a stiff dribble of candle wax they had saved. He bent low and blew patiently on the embers until the smoking scrap of fabric caught light. And then he prayed. He stayed on his knees, apparently watching the beginnings of the fire, but in reality he prayed. 'Please,' his heart whispered: 'Just this once. Please let the wretched thing take.' And it did. The sticks were dry enough, the lint scrap large enough, the embers just hot enough, and the remnant of wax proved adequate as it melted to give the necessary extra boost. As the kindling wood took light he added the next size up of split wood, carefully positioning the pieces. He had his fire. 'Thank you,' he said in the silence of his soul, 'for sparing me that.'

He got up from his knees to fetch the pot still half-full of stew from last night's supper, and set it low on the hook to warm through. His wife had hung her cloak on the nail and taken through to the pantry the bag of provisions she had walked into the town to buy, this having been market day.

'Well, at least I see you cleaned the hens' feeding bucket out this time when you shut them in,' she said as she came to the

fireside. The adrenalin rush of the fear she had felt in the lane, and its following sea of anger, had ebbed away now. Madeleine, left feeling flat and slightly guilty in its wake, thought she'd better look for something positive to say. She glanced at her husband, but he did not reply. He stirred the stew with more attention than it deserved and kept his eyes on the pot.

'William? You – you did feed the hens, didn't you? You did shut them in?'

He made no reply. She thought at first he was angry with her, and felt irritated with him for being so petty – after all, it was his fault she'd had such a scare, he shouldn't have been hanging about in the hedge playing the fool. Madeleine glared at him in frustration. And then some instinct took her past her first assumptions through to the reality. Her eyes widened.

'You haven't fed them at all, have you? You forgot all about them. You haven't shut them in!'

Still he did not look at her, but he felt the force of her gaze on him like wind and fire, just as clear and honest and direct as her brother's eyes, and just as capable of the most fiery indignation. William recognized a moment of truth when it came towards him. He abandoned the self-protective lie half formed in his mind. But his mouth went dry.

'I was scared to tell you,' he admitted, his voice so low she could hardly make out the words. She stared at him in disbelief, then whirled about, snatched up the half loaf from the table, struggled her pattens back onto her feet; then the door slammed behind her as she disappeared out into the night once more.

William fetched the bowls and spoons for their supper, wondered whether to follow her but thought better of it, and sat down by the fire he had made, to wait miserably for her return. She was gone longer than throwing bread into the henhouse and bolting its door could have taken. It came as no surprise when she flung open the door and stood there leaning on one hand

against the frame as she pulled off her clogs, the corpses of two hens dangling reproachfully by their feet from her other hand. She spared her husband no glance, but stalked through into the scullery and hung the birds on a rafter nail to be dealt with in the morning.

She came back in silence then to the fireside, stopping at the table to pick up their bowls. She set one down on the hearth, stirring the pot, then ladling barely warm stew into first one bowl, which she thrust in her husband's direction with neither a word nor a look, then the other, with which she retreated to the far side of their table.

William received his bowl from her humbly. Never had he felt less like eating, though he'd been hungry enough an hour before. He dared not refuse the food, dared not even raise his eyes to her or thank her when she gave him the dish. He took it, and in silence they ate the tepid stew with the little white discs of congealed fat barely melted. William felt sick at the sight of it, but he ate it. When they were finished, he took her bowl along with his through to the room on the back of the house that did for storage and scullery and preparation space, scooped some water out of the tubful that stood near the door, swilled one bowl into the other, swilled the second bowl round, then opened the window and flung the swill-water into the night. That would have to do until morning. Some grease left on the bowls and spoons wouldn't hurt; they could be scoured along with the pot the next day.

He left them on the table there and returned with slow reluctance into their living room. He had a strip of hide cut for a belt, and wanted to make holes in it for the buckle. He took it, along with the spike to make the holes and a stool from the table, to the fireside where his wife sat in angry silence thinking about hens. The spike was too blunt. One end hurt his hand as he tried to push it through, the other end slipped and punctured the palm of his other hand, though it had completely failed to make more

than a mark on the leather. He swore and sucked the bruised and bleeding place, while Madeleine watched him moodily, too cross with him even to point out he'd do better with the bradawl than a simple spike. She thought he ought to know that anyway.

Some evenings, as they sat by their fire through the winter darkness, Madeleine, her carding or spinning done for the day, would lift down her vielle from where it hung on the wall to play the folk songs and ballads of childhood remembrance, and William loved that. It was evidently not going to be one of those evenings. Even the fire was sulking. The wind was wrong.

Eventually they gave up on the day, and Madeleine stood holding the candle while William tidied the fire together, and then followed her up to bed.

They undressed in silence. It was too cold to sleep naked. William kept his undershirt on, and his socks. The sheepskins spread on their mattress under the linen sheet made their bed warmer as well as softer, and the fire in the room below kept the winter damp from their chamber. Even so he shivered as he slipped between the sheets. Their bed felt distinctly inhospitable. Madeleine said nothing, and did not turn toward him for their usual goodnight kiss.

William lay rigid in the cold bed at her side, longing for her to hold him, longing for this to be over now and forgiven, for mistakes to be allowable, for things to be simple and just all right. His hand throbbed where the spike had pierced it. He felt cold and wretched and completely forlorn.

'*What?*' said Madeleine, sudden and fierce into the darkness, acutely aware of William's frozen silence, angry with him for having the temerity to exude this chill on top of everything else. '*What's the matter?*'

Bewildered, William wondered what he could possibly reply to this. She knew what was wrong. He had frightened her without meaning to in the lane. He had let the fire go too low to heat

their supper. He had forgotten the hens and let the fox take two more precious birds. He was in total disgrace. He tried to frame some kind of understanding that would allow him to see why she was asking him what was the matter.

‘Just grow up!’ Her voice shook with passion, and she kept it low with an effort. ‘I know why *I’m* angry, but I can’t see that you have anything to be so resentful about! What’s wrong with you?’

Grow up... The words fastened on to William. Hearing this he recognized what was happening. It had been an occurrence of almost monotonous regularity in his childhood and his early years in monastic life as a novice. Others being angry about the original misdemeanour was never enough for them. There followed the complicated matter of his own response. If he kept his body still and his face without expression, he was mulish, insolent, insubordinate. If he attempted any kind of remonstrance, he provoked indignation and outrage. If he lowered his eyes or turned his head away, he was sulking. If he tried to behave normally, he was indifferent and insensitive or unrepentant. If he kept his expression and tone carefully neutral, he was rebellious or cold or rude. And if in the end he was reduced to tears, he was snivelling... self-piteous... complaining... attention-seeking. He wondered how often in the first decade of his life the threat of ‘If you don’t stop that grizzling, I’ll give you something to cry about!’ had screamed and raged around his head. It was happening again now. Someone was angry with him for perpetuating his crimes by continuing to exist. Nothing he said would be right. Even here in bed at night he was in the wrong because his wakefulness had been detected. And he had no doubt that if he’d fallen asleep his callousness would have been unforgiveable. He had no alternative but to ride this out as best he could.

Madeleine heard his breathing change from his nose to his mouth. She felt his cautious movement, and saw in the moonlight,

as she turned her head to glare at him, the surreptitious wiping of his eyes with the heel of his hand. Impatient with this, she turned her face away again. He deserved to be in trouble. How could he be so thoughtless and so careless – *all the time*?

Careful to minimize any disturbance he might make, William turned over on his side, with his back to her. Madeleine lay in the frigid darkness, furious about the hens, and doubly furious because she could feel the tremor of his misery. She didn't want to have to deal with that, or pretend his incompetence didn't matter after all. A long time passed. The night was very cold.

Eventually, exasperated, all hope of sleep exiled completely, Madeleine rolled over to him. She felt his body tense as she laid her hand on his arm.

'William...'

He did not move, but she knew without doubt that he lay painfully awake.

'William, come back to me.'

There was nothing wheedling, nothing coaxing in her voice. Not one corner of Madeleine's spirit lent itself to accommodating other people's petulance or moods.

'William.'

He turned over again to face her. She took him in her arms.

'I'm sorry I spoke so sharp,' she said simply. He shook his head, past speaking, and she held him close to her. The hopelessness and despair in him had its talons into his gut, and he clung to her desperately. She realized then that he had not been angry with her at all, only terribly ashamed and needing to be forgiven. Her body relaxed and softened, and she lifted her hand to stroke his head as she cradled him. 'It's all right,' she whispered, soothing him. 'It's all right...'

'I know it's not the same, but I'll get you some more hens,' he eventually managed to say.

She kissed the end of his nose, as light as a butterfly. 'Moorhens'

eggs taste of mud,’ she teased him gently: ‘let’s stick to chickens.’

With peace restored between them, Madeleine resigned herself to accept the depredations of the fox, and held her husband in her arms until she gradually dozed off and her embrace slackened and released as she drifted into sleep.

William lay awake, his mind still battered by the tumult of emotion.

Barely more than a year ago, his body lapped in peace, lying entwined in afterglow of love, when they were first married, he had felt all fear, all shame, slip out of his soul. Everything had just been all right. That was then. In the intervening time, the householder’s round had taken its toll. William was well used to people holding him in contempt and being angry with him, finding him a source of outrage and indignation; but never since his childhood had his intelligence been found wanting. Domestic life had made him into a dunce; and he hated that.

He lay without moving, aware of the sound of the wind blustering about the roof, of the smell of herbs and stew and woodsmoke and cured hams that pervaded their house, of the warm presence of his wife beside him in the bed, her breath whistling slightly. He was glad she didn’t snore – or not very often. He lay still, his mind seething with memories, his heart in turmoil. He felt relieved they had ended the day on speaking terms at least, but it had left him with a confusion of shame and self-loathing and hurt that he couldn’t begin to sort out. He remained alert in every sense the whole night through, and by the time the sun rose he felt weary beyond description. Desiring no interaction of any kind at all, he slipped out of bed quietly, leaving Madeleine to sleep on as he crept downstairs. If he walked on the edges of the treads, they barely creaked at all.

He raked the ashes and found enough life left to revive a fire. Their money had stretched far enough to buy a second good-sized iron pot. He unhooked last night’s stew and sniffed it. The

smell of it this morning had become less than inviting. He carried it through to their scullery to take out to the sow. The pitiful sight of their dead hens hung by their feet from the rafters sent a fresh shaft of guilt, like an icicle used as a weapon, stabbing through his belly. He averted his eyes from them, measuring out a cup of oatmeal, a cup of milk and two cups of well-water into the other pot to begin breakfast. He added a generous pinch of salt, took the pot through to the fire, and hooked it up onto the chains. He fetched one of several long-handled wooden spoons to give the porridge a stir as it began to seethe over the fire. This spoon was of his own making, his first foray into shaping wood. Madeleine said he had made the bowl of it too shallow to be very useful, but he had felt proud to have made it nonetheless – at the time. It seemed a clumsy, graceless piece of workmanship when he looked at it again this morning.

The porridge would take a while. He scraped the remnants of yesterday's pottage into an earthenware dish, and took it out to the pigsty. Later, one of them would drive Lily out into the forest, where she could scavenge what little remained of beechmast and acorns, beetles, slugs and fungi and anything else that would take her fancy under the rattling canopy of bare winter twigs below the steel-grey sky. For now, Lily immersed her snout happily in their left-overs, devouring them greedily.

The sun had scarcely cleared the rim of the hills, and the light of its rising still reflected crimson on the underbelly of heavy clouds. The ground was muddy where it had thawed here and there, but the days still continued cold enough to hold the land as if it had been banded by a wheelwright. It had not got so soft as to make it slippery or slow to walk over. Ice still fringed the puddles.

Back in the cottage, William stirred the porridge again to prevent it sticking, fetched the tub of honey and two bowls and spoons to the table, and took a bucket of water and the milk pail across to Marigold's stable, where she waited impatiently,

reared up with her front hooves on the rim of her stall. The hay in her net had all gone. He led her out to the milking block, and she jumped up willingly, knowing her routine. Even so he chained her. Nothing in him trusted a goat to co-operate reliably.

He had flung a generous handful of barley and another of oatmeal into a crock, and this he tipped into her bowl, washing down her udder without delay, before she got bored. He took no more than half a can of milk from her this morning. She would be kidding late, her milk would just take them through the worst of the winter, but until someone's milk-cows calved in March he could see they would have a few lean weeks to go through with no milk at all. They would be pulling in their belts for a while. Especially now they had lost two more hens – if indeed it proved on inspection to be no more than two.

This year, he thought, they should try to afford a second milch goat. Even if the kid Marigold carried in her belly turned out to be female, nothing would come of that this coming year. With a second fully grown animal they could alternate breeding and milking through.

The browsing was almost non-existent now, and most of the evergreens did even goats no good. William tethered Marigold with care where he judged her busy teeth could do no lasting damage in stripping bark from the trees, promising to come back with some kale stalks from the leavings later on. He took a minute to scratch her bony head, and Marigold butted him in return; affectionately, but painfully.

William paused to pluck a sprig of rosemary as he hastened back to the house. He left the precious yield of milk in the scullery to deal with later, while he stirred the porridge, now thick enough to eat. He decided to leave the palfrey and the hens until he had called Madeleine to eat. They needed attention, but he thought burnt porridge would not bless the morning.

He ran light up the stairs to their bedroom, where he found the bedclothes folded back neatly that the mattress might air, and his wife already almost dressed although only half awake.

‘Breakfast,’ he said, and she nodded still sleepily, saying nothing, absorbed in lacing her kirtle. She couldn’t understand it. The strings seemed shorter than they used to be.

William retreated down the stairs and ladled out their porridge, as it had now reached a critical stage and he could smell it just starting to burn. He lifted the pot off the fire and set it down on the hearth. Just before he sat down to eat, he found the thick, squat earthenware jug for making hot drinks, dipped it full of well-water from the pail in the scullery, and left it at the fireside to heat. He dropped in it the sprig of rosemary and a hot stone, which he lifted with tongs from the heart of the fire and blew free of ashes before he set it into the jug.

Madeleine joined him as he sat down at the table.

She sniffed the steam that rose from the porridge appraisingly. ‘A bit burnt,’ she commented. She opened the tub of honey and dug some out with her spoon. ‘Well? How many hens have we left?’

‘I haven’t been to the hens yet,’ her husband replied, trying a spoonful of the porridge. He agreed with her. He had been too late to stop it catching, and now it tasted burnt.

‘Haven’t – William, are you serious? You haven’t been to see how many hens are left?’

William took another spoonful of porridge. ‘I’ve been doing other things.’

‘Other things? What could be more important than checking the hens, after you knew the fox had been in there last night? And you ought to take honey with your porridge, it’s good for you.’

‘I don’t like porridge with honey on it. I don’t like honey at all. I know it’s important to check the hens, but it’s important to get the fire going and make breakfast and milk the goat and tether

her out to get what little there is to eat while it's not dark. And feed the pig.'

'It doesn't matter if you don't like honey, you should still eat it; it keeps colds away. And the goat isn't so important now she's drying off. I would have gone to the hens first.'

Her husband put down his spoon. 'Checking the hens,' he said quietly, 'was not your priority. Staying in bed was.'

'Oh, William, for goodness' sake! Don't be so petty! What's the matter, are you all full of churning resentment just because I slept in and you had to make the breakfast for a change? Well, I should have got up, shouldn't I, because you burnt it anyway. Where are you going now?'

William had got up from the table, taking his bowl of porridge with him. In the pantry he took the wooden lid from the crock of barley grain and scooped a handful, which he dropped into his porridge, replacing the lid of the jar with quiet precision.

'To feed the hens,' he replied, as he came back through the room where Madeleine sat staring at him in astonishment as he passed. 'There's tea in the pot if you want it.'

'Oh, don't be ridiculous, William! Honestly, you're always so touchy about everything! And for mercy's sake put your pattens over your boots – you'll ruin them if you go out in this weather like –'

He latched the door behind him with the same quiet precision he had used to put back the lid on the crock of barley.

'– that.' Shaking her head in disbelief, Madeleine turned her attention to her breakfast again. It was, she acknowledged, not badly burned. It still tasted good, especially with honey on it from bees that gathered nectar from the herbs and blossoms in the garden. It tasted different from the abbey's honey; their bees concentrated on the moorland heather.

She finished her porridge and went to the fireside to pour herself a mug of fragrant rosemary tea. While she was there, she

added a couple of small logs to the fire. She wondered whether to pour a cup for William too, but thought it better to leave it where it would keep hot.

By the hearth, Madeleine had a low chair with a sheepskin on it, where she sat in the evenings, and there she took her cup of tea now, to drink peacefully by the fire. Despite the loss of her hens and her husband's incomprehensible moods, life felt good. She considered the tasks of the day waiting to be done. Just as soon as she'd finished her tea she would put some dried peas to soak, and some barley. It was hard to tell from indoors exactly how the weather might be, but rays of sunlight shone in through their small windows. William had taken down the shutters. He knew she liked the sun. Some people didn't bother, and left them shut all winter – old habits died hard, and everyone had done that before they had glass. But William would put them up in the evening and take them down in the morning every day. And they hardly ever closed the shutters to their bedroom, only in a gale: they both loved the light of the moon.

She sipped her tea. Rosemary... for strengthening joy and love in the soul, for the heart and the flow of blood in the veins... for cheerfulness, vitality and peace... William loved the scent of it; he said it smelled clean and healthy. Madeleine closed her eyes, her hands warm around the heat of the cup of tea in her lap. So peaceful.

Outside the house, William had taken his bowl of porridge and the barley grain to their henhouse. Made of clapboard and raised off the ground to discourage the inevitable attention of rats, it had been built big enough for ten birds, a dozen at a squeeze. Three weeks ago their flock had been eight in number, enough to keep them in eggs and sell a few as well. A visit in broad daylight from a hungry fox had taken the number down to six. He hoped he would still find four this morning, and the two corpses Madeleine had retrieved last night would be their only losses. He could hear the sound of them crooning and muttering

inside.

He set his bowl on the ground and slid back the hatch. Two birds emerged, lurching eagerly across the trodden earth around their hut to peck at the warm porridge and grain.

Despondently, William unlatched the bigger door located at the rear of the henhouse for cleaning it out. He lifted the hinged lid of the nest boxes. The other two birds were missing. He considered going back to the house to add the protection of pattens to his boots, and rejected the idea. Aware that his patience had been frayed to the point of giving way, he thought it might be preferable if he and Madeleine went their separate ways for the morning.

He picked up the board by the pigsty and opened the stout, well-fitted gate to let Lily out. Deft now at managing the tricky business of driving a pig, he guided her across their land to the woodland at its borders, where she would forage all day until the inviting rattle of the pail called her home as the light went off the afternoon when the sun began to sink in the west. William didn't really like his sow foraging on common land. She was too valuable an animal. But Madeleine had views on this. Every other homesteader kept her sow in the sty after she had bred and until she had farrowed, once the best of the autumn fodder had been taken from the forest floor. But Madeleine said the lack of exercise was bad for a sow, making farrowing harder. The winter days were short; Lily went out late and came in early – but out she did go; Madeleine insisted upon it.

As he walked across to the edge of the woods, William's eyes roved here and there for any sign of their missing hens. Just on the fringe of the woodland he spotted one forlorn corpse. Evidently the fox had left it there for later. He bent and picked it up by its cold yellow feet curled in death and turned to go home, leaving Lily rooting contentedly under the trees.

Aware of his mood darkening to something like entrenched bitterness, and unable to lift it despite determined effort and

the clear brightness of the morning with its blackbird song and catkins coming on the trees, William trudged back to the house. The soft, heavy weight of the dead bird hung from his hand, the wind-ruffled feathers kissing his skin, the loose hanging head at the end of the broken neck dangling and bobbling and nagging at his knees with every step. He laid the corpse he carried on the roof of the henhouse, temporarily, while he went for an armful of hay to set down within Marigold's reach, and another for his palfrey. He filled her hayrack, but by this time the winter wet had seeped through the layers of leather that soled his boots, and his feet were freezing. He retrieved the dead hen, and carried it indoors, hoping Madeleine would have found something else to occupy her by now.

She stood at the table kneading dough as he came through the door. The sight of her there went through him like a blade. This was a scene he had imagined as he hungered and longed for her, suffered and yearned to make her his own when, as a monk at St Alcuin's Abbey, that dream seemed impossible. That they might have a cottage somewhere, a place to call home, and he could come in through his own front door and find her kneading dough for their daily bread. What had not been part of his imaginings was a dead hen in one hand and an intractable pattern of domestic bickering.

'Oh, no! Another one! We have only three left, then?'

'Two,' he said, miserably. 'I haven't been able to find the other one. I guess the fox took her. This one was all the way across to the wood. Whether he killed it there or dragged it to have by for a larder I couldn't say. I'm sorry, Madeleine. I'm really sorry.'

He sounded sombre, his face morose as he went through to hook the dead bird up from the rafters with her sisters.

'Is there any tea left?' He came through to the fireside, sat in the low chair Madeleine had vacated and picked up the empty mug from the hearth. He wanted to be by himself, but his feet were so cold they hurt badly and his boots were wet through. The

fireside offered a solution to both problems. He poured himself a cup of the tepid tea, and replenished the fire with the last of the wood in the basket.

‘We’re low on kindling, too,’ he commented. ‘I’ll split some more in a minute. I’ll just have this.’

His wife watched the steam rising from his boots as he sat in the chair and stretched his feet towards the fire-glow.

She couldn’t help making the observation: ‘I did say you should’ve worn the pattens.’

‘You did, and I heard you, and I was an idiot, and will you kindly shut up about it now?’

She continued her kneading. The silence between them did not feel friendly.

Eventually she felt the dough turn pliable and then silky under her hands. She gave it a little more time, and then returned it to the huge, beautiful terracotta bowl with the creamy glaze, that Brother Thaddeus had made, and John to their astonishment and delight had given them for a wedding present. They had not expected a wedding gift. As abbot of the community, her brother had flagrantly transgressed in offering to consecrate the marriage of a renegade monk from his own flock. The kindness of a wedding gift went beyond anything they might have expected, and they cherished it all the more because of that. Madeleine covered the dough with a wet cloth, taking the bowl and setting it on the hearthstone for the bread to rise.

‘What’s still to do outdoors?’ she asked.

William shrugged. ‘I want to brush down the horse, and they all need fresh water. Not much else. There’s always something needs doing, isn’t there, but nothing for you to bother with unless you want to. I should think you’ve enough to be getting on with in here. And it’s still cold out. Wind’s sharp.’

She stood looking down at him and, despite the dour set to his face this morning, thought it safe to risk an affectionate ruffling

of his hair.

‘Well, take those boots off before you go out again,’ she chided kindly. ‘It’ll take those hours to dry, not to mention you’ll get chilblains going out in wet boots in this cold and sticking your feet right close to the blaze like that – yes, you *will*. You can take that look off your face! Set your boots in yon chimney corner there; I’ll stuff a cloth in them so they dry in shape. Give your feet a good rub down and put two pairs of thick stockings on; wear your clogs.’

William hated wooden clogs with a passion, but not as much as he hated being told what to do. And he had very little appetite for feeling foolish while somebody else lectured him with what was perfectly obvious, that he should have had the sense to do for himself.

‘Madeleine, leave me alone,’ he answered quietly.

She frowned, baffled. There seemed to be no shifting of the black mood that had settled on him. ‘Well, I will,’ she said, ‘but don’t you be such a numskull then. Take care of your boots and take care of your feet. We’ve no money for more of one and God’s broken the mould for the other. Think!’

William clenched his jaw hard shut to prevent himself replying. He set down the mug of tea half-finished and bent forward to untie his boots, which he removed and set exactly where Madeleine had said, to forestall further comment. He undid the strips of cloth that fastened his stockings in place, for they were wet too, and peeled them off, laying them on the hearthstone to dry. His feet still felt cold, and he wanted to toast them by the fire for a few minutes, but his wife was still watching and he knew she was perfectly right about the chilblains. So he contented himself with briefly rubbing his toes in his hands, and then picked up the sock ties and reluctantly left the hearth to climb the stairs in search of dry stockings to put on. It was a mercy they would indeed be dry too, he reflected. At St Alcuin’s monastery in this

weather, the only dry clothes would be what men were wearing. There, damp seeped right into the stones, and the cold was bone-freezing. Here in the cottage the fire warmed everything through. The chimney rose up through the middle of the house, and the other two rooms downstairs had the edge taken off the chill even with the doors shut. But they lived almost entirely in this main room through the winter, and the rising warmth also reached their bedroom, linked by the open staircase, as well as the warmth of the chimney by the head of their bed.

Obediently he further chafed his cold feet with the edge of the blanket, to restore circulation, and found two pairs of thick woollen socks to put on one over the other. He tied them in place, and rummaged in the chest for his hood to keep the cold out of his ears. ‘You’re not fat enough,’ Madeleine commented sometimes. ‘It’s your own fault you’re always so cold. You don’t eat enough. You’re forever wandering off and not finishing your food.’

It had been William’s habit through three decades of monastic life to find refuge in order and control. He had wrapped the predictable, unvarying routine of liturgy and work and silence around him like a blanket. To say it had brought him peace would be inaccurate, but it had offered respite and a means of stemming chaos. When, on an unexpected impulse of yearning that had grown out of watching Abbot John’s face and observing the life at St Alcuin’s, he had been moved to un-shutter his heart and invite in the living Christ, everything had changed. He had imagined improvement. He had imagined at last a capacity to love, gentleness in him strengthened, and the streak of ruthless cruelty that ran through him, like a glittering black seam in a rock, chiselled out. He had been unprepared for a return to vulnerability, bringing emotions that connected in turn to memories he would prefer to forget forever. Certainly he, who had regarded women as creatures of no use to him, and therefore

of less interest than the cattle on the priory grange, had never expected to fall in love. They say love is an affair of the heart. William felt, in letting its longings lead him forth from the safe cleft in the rock where he had sheltered to the uncertain ground of domestic life, that it had opened up his heart and his gut and probably his liver and kidneys for good measure. The turbulence and difficulty of the everyday, in its present form, hooked onto the memories of household norms in the period of his life before he had entered religion, and brought to the surface memory after buried memory to torment his waking mind and harass his dreams. Incidents he had locked down in irons and refused the light of day had come straggling into conscious recollection and muddled together with his interactions with Madeleine, opening him up painfully and pitilessly to despair and self-loathing he had thought was settled and done with. As he sat pulling on his stockings, one pair over another, and folding them and lacing them carefully round his feet and legs, his soul seemed to be in danger of disembowelment. Something savage and desperate battened down in him in self-defence.

He padded soft-foot down the stairs in his socks. His wife, seated on a stool close by the window mending a difficult tear in his loose-woven russet hemp smock that he loved, lifted her head from her task to watch him push his feet into the wooden overshoes. Whether socks and pattens would suffice against the mud and wet grass she felt unsure. She thought of his best boots upstairs, but decided he had better save those for going to Mass and for when they had any kind of business abroad that required respectable appearance – which happened not often, it was true, but occasionally. So she said nothing, just observed the grim, dogged set to his face, and realized that he neither spoke to her nor looked at her – not because other things were on his mind but because right now he could bear no more of her company: which felt unjust.

William latched the door quietly and carefully behind him. Hating the inflexibility of clogs, and their tendency to turn the ankle so that walking in them was an occupation of itself requiring vigilance, he longed for the barefoot days of summer. He trudged along the path round the house to the woodshed, then stopped and swore under his breath. He'd forgotten the basket. Retracing his steps, he found it set out on the doorstep. Evidently Madeleine had noticed he'd forgotten it as well.

The woodshed, with its dusty quiet fragrance, offering shelter from the wind, was a sanctuary William appreciated. He took off the loathed pattens, and fetched the whet-stone and the hand-axe. Patiently he ground the blade until it was sharp enough to satisfy him, then he took three logs from the pile and sat on the ground with a log held in his hand in the space between his knees, and began steadily to reduce it to fine kindling sticks.

The rhythmic, methodical work felt soothing, but there was not enough in it to keep his mind busy, and before long the old memories that had all somehow got out of their dungeon began to creep up into consciousness with their sour reek of humiliation and soul-destroying shame. One by one he pushed them away, persisting with the rhythmic, gentle chop and split as the sharpened axe bit through the unresisting wood.

A boyhood memory surfaced of one day among many leaving him knocked to the floor while the blurred drunken voice of his father roared in rage for him to get to his feet and take it like a man, and he had been lost between fear of the consequences of obeying or of disobeying. That particular day he had tried to get up and been kicked off balance before he was properly on his feet, falling against the corner of the table. Even the furniture of the house had something against him, and the spiteful point of the corner hurt the soft part of his body agonizingly. Collapsing again in a sea of pain, the immoderate cackle of mocking laughter had cascaded round his senses like bright leaves of molten hate, as he tried and

failed to find some vestige of self-respect and dignity to hold on to.

William did not pause in his present task. He placed each stick freed from the old log on the pile of wood dealt with, and went on to the next. Something in his belly squirmed and bucked in protest against the unbearable memories, but he held himself calm by sheer determined self-discipline, persevering doggedly with the job in hand.

He had almost finished the last of the three logs when Madeleine appeared in the doorway. He looked up at her, in time to catch the mystified expression on her face dissolve into laughter. 'What on earth are you doing it like that for?'

'Doing what like what?' He sounded none too pleased to see her.

'Sitting on the floor to split wood.'

'I'm comfortable like this. I've got the job done – what more do you want, and what business is it of yours anyway?'

'Oh! I beg your pardon! None at all! You can split wood standing on your head for all I care. Only most people would want to be bending over the task to let the force of their weight help with the chopping.'

'Fine. But not me. Is that what you came out to tell me – that I'm splitting the wood wrong as well as everything else – or did you have something further that you wanted of me?'

William did not raise his voice when he was angry. He spoke softly always, but when she annoyed him his tone assumed a dangerous quality that sounded menacing and implacably hostile. It disturbed her, and put her on the defensive.

'Have it your own way. What do I know? And I came out to see if you'd got the kindling ready because I want to heat up the bread oven and I need small sticks for that – and we have none left indoors.'

Without replying, he gathered up the stack of split wood and dropped it into the basket, then stood up and handed it to her.

‘Thank you,’ she said, and her tone had become distinctly chilly. He had irritated her now. ‘Can you do some more, then, so we have enough for later? This will all get used up firing the oven.’

‘Yes,’ he said curtly, with a small nod. She sighed. This wasn’t necessary. It shouldn’t be like this. Why was he so impossible?

‘William –’

‘Just leave me alone!’ he snapped. ‘For mercy’s sake, leave me in peace!’

She stood a moment longer with the basket, then wheeled about and marched back down the path, offended and hurt.

Left alone in the woodshed, William took three more logs from the pile. He thought Madeleine would probably be right about bending over the wood to chop it, which made him the more determined to do it his own way. He resumed the rhythm of cutting and splitting, but it no longer felt soothing. Like guts spilling out of an animal taken down by predators, memories tumbled unchecked out of their storehouse, merciless, maddening. He concentrated on cutting the sticks fine, as narrow and slender as he could. It made a focus. But the last log had a knot in it and wouldn’t split at all. He got into an absurd and mindless battle with it, determined to get the better of it and reduce it to sticks as small as splinters. With an almighty whack he drove the axe a little way into it, and there it stuck. Getting up onto his knees, he picked up the axe with the log fixed tight on the end of it, and smacked the whole thing twice without result on the ground. The third time the axe handle broke. Almost out of his mind with rage and misery, William gathered up the pile of sticks he had completed and, without stopping to put his clogs back on his feet, walked back to the house in his socks. Struggling with the door latch, he dropped the sticks in the puddle of water on the worn stone step. As he bent with iron patience to gather them again, Madeleine, having heard the latch rattle, opened the

door from inside.

‘William, what in the world –’ She took in the sight of her husband in wet stockinged feet, his face set pale and hard, and she stepped back to let him pass into the house.

‘William, whatever ails you today? Look, won’t you just –’

‘*What?* Won’t I just *what?*’

His eyes, the colour of flint and every bit as soft and yielding, glared at her, formidably cold. The quiet, biting control of his voice bewildered her.

‘Oh, nothing! Walk through the mire in your socks, why don’t you? Just drop the wood in the basket and go! But your boots are sodden and so are your socks – what will you wear to go and retrieve your clogs?’

In William’s path to the fireplace, Madeleine had left a stool standing. His hands full of sticks, he kicked it to move it out of his way. As it toppled and fell, Madeleine’s cry of sorrow as she saw what was coming preceded by an instant the crash of breaking crockery as the seat of the stool hit the breadbowl on the hearthstone, the beautiful bowl John had given them and Brother Thaddeus had made.

‘You *stupid* blasted clumsy idiot!’ Madeleine yelled at her husband, who stood frozen, the sticks still held in his hands, unable to bear or believe what he had done.

Beside herself with anger and grief, she pulled the linen cap off her head and threw it to the ground in a gesture of despair as he walked with absolute quietness and control to the fireside, dropped the sticks into the basket, and knelt on one knee by the hearthstone to lift the dough from the broken bowl.

‘Leave it!’ Madeleine screamed at him. ‘Leave it alone! Don’t touch it! God alone knows what more damage you’ll manage to do. You seem to bring the kiss of death to everything. Just leave it be!’

Very slowly, his face white, William stood up and turned to

face her. He looked at her, his gaze appraising and cold, his voice still quiet and perfectly controlled.

“Witch” doesn’t meet the case – I’d have said “bitch” would be better!”

As Madeleine stepped up close to him, he would under normal circumstances have admired the magnificence of her hair tumbling out of its fastenings, and the flash of fire in her eyes. This day he didn’t care what she looked like; he was just furious at himself and at her and at everything.

Without stopping to think, incandescent with rage, she lifted her hand to slap his face, but he was quicker, and she found her wrist seized and held with a grip like steel.

‘Don’t do that,’ he said, his voice icy.

‘Well, you deserve it!’ she bawled at him. ‘You *deserve* it!’

‘I don’t care.’ This was a simple sentence, and its import should have been easy enough to grasp. But it took Madeleine a few seconds’ pause to pick those three words clear of all the expletives and profanities that came with them. She was not high-born, and in the course of her work as a healer she had mixed with some vulgar folk; but she had never in her life heard such a gross stream of obscenity as William, his voice low and cold and focused, levelled at her then.

He released her wrist and, in his wet socks, walked quietly past her to let himself out of the house. She burst into tears. Weeping, she knelt and lifted blindly the dough in its cloth from the bowl, carried it to the table to deal with later, then picked up the shattered pieces of pottery, and stood with them, heartsick, her tears falling on them. After a moment’s indecision, she carried them up to their chamber and laid them on the bed. She took a kerchief from the store of linen in her chest, and swaddled the forlorn and useless heap of broken shards in its soft folds. She buried the bundle beneath her clothes, right at the bottom of the chest. The idea of parting from that gift felt unbearable. It was

meant to be forever. She closed the lid of the chest and sank down on the floor beside it, sobbing inconsolably.

She had no idea how long she stayed there, grieving. Her imagination could frame no way forward. But eventually she wiped her eyes and blew her nose on her apron. The dough would be ready. Life had to go on. She went downstairs again, unwrapped the bread sponge from its cloth and picked out two fragments of pottery that had got past the linen to the dough, then kneaded it again for a minute or two, shaped the loaf, and left it to prove while she tended to the oven, lighting another bundle of sticks and hoarded brushwood to bring it up to full heat. She waited patiently until the time and temperature were right, raked the ashes aside and pushed in the dough, sealing up the gaps with flour and water paste as she set the stone in the aperture.

She scrubbed down the table and washed her hands, set the fallen stool on its feet again, under the table this time. Finally, reluctantly, she faced the fact that she'd better go and make peace with her husband. Underneath her sense of injustice and indignation and outrage, she knew he hadn't meant to break the bowl. She knew how much he loved the place of its making and the man whose gift it was.

Madeleine pushed her feet into her clogs and went in search of her man. She wondered if he was still angry with her, and if intrusion would still be unwelcome.

Though the days continued cold, especially in the wind, the air held a promise of spring. It was wet underfoot everywhere, and the twigs of trees and herbs still stood stark and bare in the sunshine, but in the living boughs the bark shone red now, not dull black or sere dun, and Madeleine could feel the rising of life, the turning of the year towards the light. There was hope in the air, and it hummed its healing song in her soul. She went down the path and looked for William in the woodshed, where

she saw the flung log with its buried axe-head and the broken haft, and shook her head in wondering disapproval. She looked in the stable, which she found empty – then she saw he had taken the palfrey and tethered her outside.

Eventually she found him, in the barn where they stored the straw and some of the implements they used around their holding. He had been setting new teeth in the rake, replacing the damaged and missing ones. She saw that he had taken off his hood and thrown it across the barn. It lay on the floor near the doorway. She knew why that was. Sometimes, especially when he felt upset or under stress, he could not tolerate anything tight around his throat – around the place where once a rope had tightened when, in utter despair, two years ago he'd tried to hang himself. She bent and picked up the hood.

He had heard her clogs on the stones set into the track and straightened up from the bench against the wall where he had been working, the rake in his hand, turning to face her as she stood in the doorway and looked in.

He did not speak. In the pale, bright February sunshine she saw his face still set grim and bleak. She wondered what to say to him. Evidently he intended to say nothing at all to her. She supposed he must still be angry with her, then.

'Love...' she said at last, 'love is not a matter of endearments murmured in the bedroom and forgotten in the day's work around the yard. Love is for the everyday, and its courtesies are for the ordinary round, not just for the conquest of seduction.'

She sounded bolder than she felt. The clear challenge of her voice showed him no sign of the odd quailing weakness in her belly. She did not like to admit it, but she had felt afraid of him when he grabbed her arm and swore at her. His face had been possessed of so fierce an intensity, with not a glimmer of kindness anywhere – just cruel, cold fury in his eyes. She was not sure what his reaction to this might be. The prospect of another

wave of anger like the last one frightened her. But she stood, chin up, feet planted, and looked him in the eye. He remained quite immobile for a moment, the rake held in his hand. Then he placed it with precision against a frame-joint where it could not slide and fall. The deliberate stillness about him scared her even more. It felt somehow threatening. Such self-control filled her with foreboding. She wondered if he might even hit her. He turned to face her, and the sun from the open doorway behind her shone into his eyes. He squinted to see her, then raised his hand to shield his gaze from the sun. She saw that his mouth was being repeatedly dragged sideways now, by a tic that had started up in his face. The effect was ominous. Even so, she stood her ground. She clutched the hood she had picked up, her grip tightening in fear.

‘I know,’ he said simply, in reply to what she had said. He took a step towards her. ‘Madeleine, I can’t see you properly; the sun’s in my eyes. I can’t see what you’re thinking. Are you still angry with me? If I... may I... will it be acceptable to you if I hold you in my arms?’

This struck Madeleine as a very strange question for a man to ask his wife. She was learning that a childhood with no playmates and no affection, followed by three decades in a monastery, had left her husband without any easy instinct for family relationship. Her heart still pounded erratically at the outburst of anger she had imagined. Suddenly she felt quite drained and spent.

‘For goodness’ sake!’ She hadn’t meant it to come out sounding so peevish.

She closed the gap between them, and put her arms close around him. She expected him to speak to her, say sorry, explain himself, but he lowered his head onto her shoulder, pressed his face against her neck, held her to him tightly, saying nothing. They stood like that for a long time.

Eventually she stepped back a little from his embrace, and

lifted her hands to cup his face, her eyes searching his. Vulnerable, open, he let her look at him, her face still blotched and her eyes red and swollen from weeping over the calamity of the bread bowl.

‘I feel so ashamed,’ he whispered. ‘I feel so guilty. I... can you... will you... forgive me? For the bowl and the hens, and for swearing at you... and I think I might have hurt you too – hurt your arm. Please... it’s unbearable... I just need you to forgive me; I can’t bear it otherwise, can’t bear what I’ve done.’

Madeleine wondered if the day would ever dawn when she finally felt she’d understood her husband. She thought probably not. So she kissed him instead, and that seemed to go well.

‘It’s all right,’ she consoled him. ‘It was an accident.’