A Trail of Ink

The third chronicle of

Hugh de Singleton, surgeon

MEL STARR

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For Fran and Larry

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In the summer of 1990 my wife Susan and I discovered a lovely B&B in the village of Mavesyn Ridware. The proprietors, Tony and Lis Page, became friends. We visited them again in 2001, after they had moved to Bampton. I saw that the village would be an ideal setting for the tales I wished to write. Tony and Lis have been a wonderful resource for the history of Bampton. I owe them much.

When Dan Runyon, Professor of English at Spring Arbor University, learned that I was writing *The Unquiet Bones*, he invited me to speak to a fiction-writing class about the trials of a rookie writer. Dan sent some chapters to his friend Tony Collins. Thanks, Dan.

And many thanks to Tony Collins and the fine people of Monarch for their willingness to publish an untried author.

Thanks go also to Spring Arbor University student Brian Leyder, who suggested the title for Master Hugh's third chronicle.

Modern Oxford resembles the medieval city, but there have been many changes. Streets often bear different names than they did six hundred years ago. Dr John Blair, of Queen's College, has been a great help in navigating the differences between the modern and the medieval. However, if the reader becomes lost in medieval Oxford's narrow lanes the fault is mine, not Dr Blair's.

Mel Starr

Glossary

Angelus bell: Rung three times each day – dawn, noon, and dusk. Announced the times for the Angelus devotional.

Assart: Turning unused or "waste" land into cultivated farmland.

Bailiff: A lord's chief manorial representative. He oversaw all operations, collected rents and fines, and enforced labor service. Not a popular fellow.

Banns: A formal announcement, made in the parish church for three consecutive Sundays, of intent to marry.

Braes: Medieval underpants.

Calefactory: The warming room in a monastery. Benedictines allowed the fire to be lit on 1 November. The more rigorous Cistercians had no calefactory.

Candlemas: 2 February. The day marked the purification of Mary. Women traditionally paraded to church carrying lighted candles. Tillage of fields resumed this day.

Canon: A priest of the secular clergy who lived under rules comparable to monastic orders. Did not usually minister to the commons.

Chauces: Tight-fitting trousers, often parti-colored (having different colors for each leg).

Claret: Yellowish or light-red wine from the Bordeaux region.

Coney: Rabbit.

Cordwainer: A dealer in leather and leather goods imported from Cordova, Spain.

Cresset: A bowl of oil with a floating wick used for lighting.

Curate: A clergyman who often served as an assistant to the rector of a parish.

Dexter: A war horse, larger than pack-horses and palfreys. Also called a destrier. Also the right-hand direction.

Dower: The groom's financial contribution to marriage, designated for the bride's support during marriage and possible widowhood.

Dowry: A gift from the bride's family to the groom, intended for her support during marriage, and widowhood, should her husband predecease her.

Egg leaches: A very thick custard, often enriched with almonds, spices, and flour.

Farthing: One fourth of a penny. The smallest coin.

Free companies: At times of peace during the Hundred Years' War, bands of unemployed knights would organize themselves and ravage the countryside. France especially suffered.

Galantyne: A sauce made with cinnamon, ginger, vinegar, and breadcrumbs.

Gathering: Eight leaves of parchment, made by folding the prepared hide three times.

Groom: A lower-ranking servant to a lord. Often a teenaged youth. Occasionally assistant to a valet. Ranked above a page.

Hallmote: The manorial court. Royal courts judged free tenants accused of murder or felony. Otherwise manor courts had jurisdiction over legal matters concerning villagers. Villeins accused of murder might also be tried in a manor court.

Kirtle: The basic medieval undershirt.

Lammas Day: 1 August, when thanks was given for a successful wheat harvest. From the Old English "loaf mass".

Liripipe: A fashionably long tail attached to a man's cap.

Lych gate: A roofed gate in the churchyard wall under which the deceased rested during the initial part of a burial service.

Mark: 13 shillings and 4 pence – 160 pence.

Marshalsea: The stable and associated accoutrements.

Martinmas: 11 November. The traditional date to slaughter animals for winter food.

Maslin: Bread made with a mixture of grains, commonly wheat with barley or rye.

Matins: The first of the day's eight canonical hours (services). Also called Lauds.

Nones: The fifth canonical office, sung at the ninth hour of the day (about 3 p.m.).

Oyer et terminer: To hear and determine.

Palfrey: A gentle horse with a comfortable gait.

Pannage: A fee paid to the lord for permission to allow pigs to forage in an autumn forest.

Pottage: Anything cooked in one pot, from the meanest oatmeal to a savory stew.

Prebend: A subsistence allowance granted to a clergyman by a parish church.

Sacrist: A monastic official responsible for the upkeep of the church and vestments, and time-keeping.

St Catherine's Day: 25 November. St Catherine was the most popular female saint of medieval Europe. Processions were held in her honor on her feast day.

St Stephen's Day: 26 December.

Set books: The standard texts used by medieval university students.

Solar: A small private room, more easily heated than the great hall, where lords often preferred to spend time in winter. Usually on an upper floor.

Subtlety: An elaborate dessert, often more for show than consumption.

Terce: The canonical office (service) at 9 a.m.

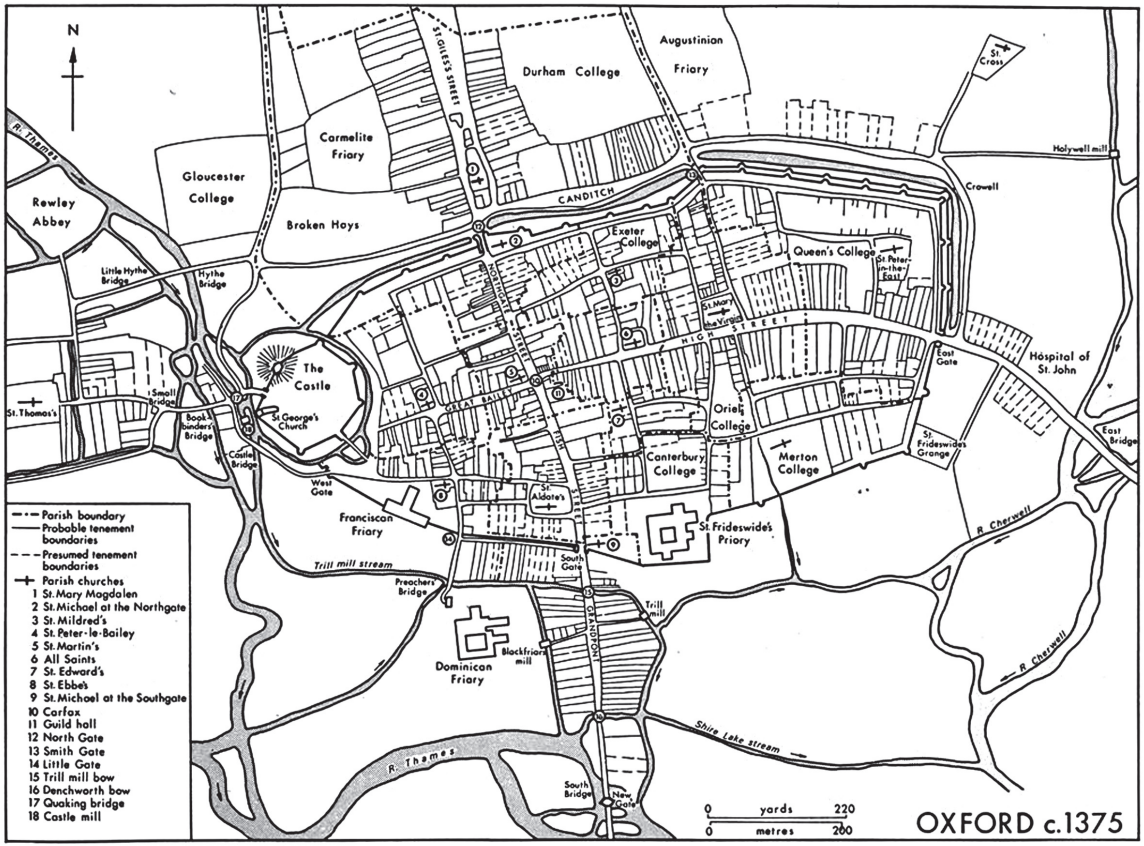
Toft: Land surrounding a house, in the medieval period often used for growing vegetables.

Valet: A high-ranking servant to a lord – a chamberlain, for example.

Vigils: The night office, celebrated at midnight. When it was completed, Benedictines went back to bed. Cistercians stayed up for the new day.

Villein: A non-free peasant. He could not leave his land or service to his lord, or sell animals without permission. But if he could escape his manor for a year and a day, he would be free.

Whiffletree: A pivoted swinging bar to which the traces of a harness are fastened and by which a cart is drawn.


N
R. Thames
Rewley Abbey
Gloucester College
Carmelite Friary
Broken Hays
St Giles's Street
Durham College
Augustinian Friary
St Cross
Holywell mill
Crowell
CANDITCH
Exeter College
Queen's College
St Peter-in-the-East
Little Hythe Bridge
Hythe Bridge
The Castle
St Mary the Virgin
HIGH STREET
East Gate
Hospital of St John
Small Bridge
St Thomas's
Bookbinders Bridge
St George's Church
Castle Bridge
West Gate
Great Baily
Oriel College
Canterbury College
Merton College
St Frideswide's Grange
East Bridge
St Aldate's
Franciscan Friary
St Frideswide's Priory
R. Cherwell
Trill mill stream
Preachers' Bridge
South Gate
CORNMARKET
Trill mill
Blackfriars mill
Dominican Friary
Shire Lake stream
R. Thames
South Bridge
New Gate
0 yards 220
0 metres 200
OXFORD c.1375
Parish boundary
Probable tenement boundaries
Presumed tenement boundaries
Parish churches
1 St. Mary Magdalen
2 St. Michael at the Northgate
3 St. Mildred's
4 St. Peter-le-Bailey
5 St. Martin's
6 All Saints
7 St. Edward's
8 St. Ebbe's
9 St. Michael at the Southgate
10 Carfax
11 Guild hall
12 North Gate
13 Smith Gate
14 Little Gate
15 Trill mill bow
16 Denchworth bow
17 Quaking bridge
18 Castle mill

Chapter 1

I had never seen Master John Wyclif so afflicted. He was rarely found at such a loss when in disputation with other masters. He told me later, when I had returned them to him, that it was as onerous to plunder a bachelor scholar's books as it would be to steal another man's wife. I had, at the time, no way to assess the accuracy of that opinion, for I had no wife and few books.

But I had come to Oxford on that October day, Monday, the twentieth, in the year of our Lord 1365, to see what progress I might make to remedy my solitary estate. I left my horse at the stable behind the Stag and Hounds and went straightaway to Robert Caxton's shop, where the stationer's comely daughter, Kate, helped attract business from the bachelor scholars, masters, clerks, and lawyers who infest Oxford like fleas on a hound.

My pretended reason to visit Caxton's shop was to purchase a gathering of parchment and a fresh pot of ink. I needed these to conclude my record of the deaths of Alan the beadle and of Henry atte Bridge. Alan's corpse was found, three days before Good Friday, near to St Andrew's Chapel, to the east of Bampton. And Henry, who it was who slew Alan, was found in a wood to the north of the town. As bailiff of Bampton Castle it was my business to sort out these murders, which I did, but not before I was attacked on the road returning from Witney and twice clubbed about the head in nocturnal churchyards. Had I known such assaults lay in my future, I might have rejected Lord Gilbert Talbot's offer to serve as his bailiff at Bampton Castle and remained but Hugh the surgeon, of Oxford High Street.

Kate promised to prepare a fresh pot of ink, which

I might have next day, and when she quit the shop to continue her duties in the workroom I spoke to her father. Robert Caxton surely knew the effect Kate had upon young men. He displayed no surprise when I asked leave to court his daughter.

I had feared raised eyebrows at best, and perhaps a refusal. I am but a surgeon and a bailiff. Surgeons own little prestige in Oxford, full of physicians as it is, and few honest men wish to see a daughter wed to a bailiff. There were surely sons of wealthy Oxford burghers, and young masters of the law, set on a path to wealth, who had eyes for the comely Kate. But Caxton nodded agreement when I requested his permission to pay court to his daughter. Perhaps my earlier service to mend his wounded back helped my suit.

I left the stationer's shop with both joy and apprehension. The joy you will understand, or would had you seen Kate and spent time in her presence. I was apprehensive because next day I must begin a thing for which I had no training and in which I had little experience. While at Balliol College I was too much absorbed in my set books to concern myself with the proper way to impress a lass, and none of those volumes dealt with the subject. Certainly the study of logic avoided the topic. Since then my duties as surgeon and bailiff allowed small opportunity to practice discourse with a maiden. And there are few females of my age and station in Bampton.

I made my way from Caxton's shop on Holywell Street to Catte Street and thence to the gate of Canterbury Hall, on Schidyard Street. As I walked I composed speeches in my mind with which I might impress Kate Caxton. I had forgotten most of these inventions by next day. This was just as well.

Master John Wyclif, former Master of Balliol College and my teacher there, was newly appointed Warden of Canterbury Hall. Several months earlier, frustrated at my inability to discover who had slain Alan the beadle and Henry atte Bridge, I had called upon Master John to lament my ignorance and seek his wisdom. He provided

encouragement, and an empty chamber in the Hall where I might stay the night, safe from the snores and vermin at the Stag and Hounds.

When I left him those months earlier he enjoined me to call when I was next in Oxford and tell him of the resolution of these mysteries. At the time of his request I was not sure there ever would be a resolution to the business.

But there was, and so I sought Master John to tell him of it, and seek again his charity and an empty cell for the night. The porter recognized me, and sent me to Master John's chamber. I expected to find him bent over a book, as was his usual posture when I called. But not so. He opened the door to my knock, recognized me, and blurted, "Master Hugh… they've stolen my books."

The greeting startled me. I peered over the scholar's shoulder as if I expected to see the miscreants and the plundered volumes. I saw Master John's table, and a cupboard where his books were kept. Both were bare. He turned to follow my gaze.

"Gone," he whispered. "All of them."

"Who?" I asked stupidly. Had Master John known that, he would have set after the thieves and recovered the books. Or sent the sheriff to do so.

"I know not," Wyclif replied. "I went to my supper three days past. When I returned the books were gone… even the volume I left open on my table."

Master John is not a wealthy man. He has the living of Fillingham, and the prebend of Aust, but these provide a thin subsistence for an Oxford master of arts at work on a degree in theology. The loss of books accumulated in a life of study would be a blow to any scholar, rich or poor.

"The porter saw no stranger enter or leave the Hall while we supped," Wyclif continued. "I went next day to the sheriff, but Sir John has other matters to mind."

"Sir John?"

"Aye. Roger de Cottesford is replaced. The new high sheriff is Sir John Trillowe."

"He offered no aid?"

"He sent a sergeant 'round to the stationers in the town, to see did any man come to them with books he offered to sell. Two I borrowed from Nicholas de Redyng. He will grieve to learn they are lost."

"And the stationers… they have been offered no books?"

"None of mine missing. And Sir John has no interest, I think, in pursuing my loss further."

The colleges have always wished to rule themselves, free of interference from the town and its government. No doubt the sheriff was minded to allow Canterbury Hall the freedom to apprehend its own thief, without his aid or interference.

"How many?"

"My books? Twenty… and the two borrowed."

I performed some mental arithmetic. Master John read my thoughts.

"The books I borrowed from Master Nicholas… one was Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, worth near thirty shillings. One of mine was of paper, a cheap-set book, but the others were of parchment and well bound."

"Your loss is great, then. Twenty pounds or more."

"Aye," Wyclif sighed. "Four were of my own devising. Some might say they were worth little. But the others… Aristotle, Grossteste, Boethius, all gone."

Master John sighed again, and gazed about his chamber as if the stolen books were but misplaced, and with closer inspection of dark corners might yet be discovered.

"I am pleased to see you," Master John continued. "I had thought to send for you."

"For me?"

"Aye. I have hope that you will seek my stolen books and see them returned to me."

"Me? Surely the sheriff…"

"Sir John is not interested in any crime for which the solution will not bring him a handsome fine. Rumor is he paid King Edward sixty pounds for the office. He will be about recouping his investment, not seeking stolen books.

"And you are skilled at solving mysteries," Wyclif continued. "You found who 'twas in Lord Gilbert's cesspit, and unless I mistake me, you know by now who killed your beadle and the fellow found slain in the forest. Well, do you not?"

"Aye. It was as I thought. Henry atte Bridge, found dead in the wood, slew Alan the beadle. Alan had followed him during the night as Henry took a haunch of venison poached from Lord Gilbert's forest, to the curate at St Andrew's Chapel."

"Venison? To a priest?"

"Aye… a long story."

"I have nothing but time, and no books with which to fill it. Tell me."

So I told Master John of the scandal of the betrayed confessional of the priest at St Andrew's Chapel. And of the blackmail he plotted with Henry atte Bridge – and Henry's brother, Thomas – of those who confessed to poaching, adultery, and cheating at their business.

"I came to Oxford this day to buy more ink and parchment so I may write of these felonies while details remain fresh in my memory."

"And what stationer receives your custom?"

"Robert Caxton. It was you who sent me first to Caxton's shop. You knew I would find more there than books, ink, and parchment."

"I did? Yes, I remember now telling you of the new stationer, come from Cambridge with his daughter… ah, that is your meaning. I am slow of wit these days. I think of nothing but my books."

"You did not guess I might be interested in the stationer's daughter?"

"Nay," Wyclif grimaced. "I surprise myself for my lack of perception. You are a young man with two good eyes. The stationer's daughter…"

"Kate," I said.

"Aye, Kate is a winsome lass."

"She is. And this day I have gained her father's permission to seek her as my wife."

Master John's doleful expression brightened. The corners of his mouth and eyes lifted into a grin. "I congratulate you, Hugh."

"Do not be too quick to do so. I must woo and win her, and I fear for my ability."

"I have no competency in such matters. You are on your own. 'Tis your competency solving puzzles I seek."

"But I am already employed."

Master John's countenance fell. "I had not considered that," he admitted. "Lord Gilbert requires your service… and pays well for it, I imagine."

"Aye. I am well able to afford a wife."

"But could not the town spare you for a week or two, until my books are found? Surely a surgeon… never mind. You see how little I heed other men's troubles when I meet my own."

"All men think first of themselves. Why should you be different?" I asked.

"Why? Because my misplaced esteem tells me I must. Do you not wish the same, Hugh? To be unlike the commons? They scratch when and where they itch and belch when and where they will and the letters on a page are as foreign to them as Malta."

"But… I remember a lecture…"

Wyclif grimaced.

"… when you spoke of all men being the same when standing before God. No gentlemen, no villeins, all sinners."

"Hah; run through by my own pike. 'Tis true. I recite the same sermon each year, but though we be all sinners, and all equally in need of God's grace, all sins are not, on earth, equal, as they may be in God's eyes. Else all punishments would be the same, regardless of the crime."

"And what would be a fitting penalty for one who stole twenty books?"

Wyclif scowled again. "Twenty-two," he muttered. "My thoughts change daily," he continued. "When I first discovered the offense I raged about the Hall threatening the thief with a noose."

"And now?"

Master John smiled grimly. "I have thought much on that. Was the thief a poor man needing to keep his children from starvation, I might ask no penalty at all, so long as my books be returned. But if the miscreant be another scholar, with means to purchase his own books, I would see him fined heavily and driven from Oxford, and never permitted to study here again, or teach, be he a master.

"Both holy and secular wisdom," Wyclif mused, "teach that we must not do to another what we find objectionable when done to us. No man should hold a place at Oxford who denies both God and Aristotle."

"You think an Oxford man has done this?"

Wyclif chewed upon a fingernail, then spoke. "Who else would want my books, or know their worth?"

"That, it seems to me, is the crux of the matter," I replied. "Some scholar wished to add to his library, or needed money, and saw your books as a way to raise funds."

As it happened, there was a third reason a man might wish to rob Master John of his books, but that explanation for the theft did not occur to me until later.

"I am lost," Wyclif sighed. "I am a master with no books, and I see no way to retrieve them."

I felt guilty that, for all his aid given to me, I could offer no assistance to the scholar. I could but commiserate, cluck my tongue, and sit in his presence with a long face.

The autumn sun set behind the old Oxford Castle keep while we talked. Wyclif was about to speak again when a small bell sounded from across the courtyard.

"Supper," he explained, and invited me to follow him to the refectory.

Scholars at Canterbury Hall are fed well, but simply. For this supper there were loaves of maslin – wheat and barley – cheese, a pease pottage flavored with bits of pork, and tankards of watered ale. I wondered at the pork, for some of the scholars were Benedictines. Students peered up from under lowered brows as we entered. They all

knew of the theft, and, I considered later, suspected each other of complicity in the deed.

A watery autumn sun struggled to rise above the forest and water meadow east of Oxford when I awoke next morning. Wyclif bid me farewell with stooped shoulders and eyes dark from lack of sleep. I wished the scholar well, and expressed my prayer that his books be speedily recovered. Master John believes in prayer, but my promise to petition our Lord Christ on his behalf seemed to bring him small comfort. I think he would rather have my time and effort than my prayers. Or would have both. Prayers may be offered cheaply. They require small effort from men, and much from God. The Lord Christ has told us we may ask of Him what we will, but I suspect He would be pleased to see men set to their work, and call upon Him only when tasks be beyond them.

I thought on this as I walked through the awakening lanes of Oxford to Holywell Street and Robert Caxton's shop. Was it really my duty to Lord Gilbert which prevented me from seeking Wyclif's stolen books, or was I too slothful to do aught but pray for their return? I did not like the answer which came to me.

As I approached the stationer's shop I saw a tall young man standing before it, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. The fellow was no scholar. He wore a deep red cotehardie, cut short to show a good leg. His chauces were parti-colored, grey and black, and his cap ended in a long yellow liripipe coiled stylishly about his head. The color of his cap surprised me. All who visit London know that the whores of that city are required by law to wear yellow caps so respectable maidens and wives be left unmolested on the street. He was shod in fine leather, and the pointed toes of his shoes curled up in ungainly fashion.

The fellow seemed impatient; while I watched he strode purposefully past Caxton's shop, then reversed his steps and walked past in the opposite direction, toward my approach. I drew closer to the shop, so that at each turn I could see his face more clearly. His countenance

and beard were dark, as were his eyes. The beard was neatly trimmed, and his eyes peered at my approach from above an impressive nose – although, unlike mine, his nose pointed straight out at the world, whereas mine turns to the dexter side. He seemed about my own age – twenty-five years or so. He was broad of shoulder and yet slender, but good living was beginning to produce a paunch.

I slowed my pace as I approached the shuttered shop. Caxton would open his business soon, and I assumed this dandy needed parchment, ink, or a book, although he did not seem the type to be much interested in words on a page.

I stood in the street, keeping the impatient coxcomb company, until Robert Caxton opened his shop door and pushed up his shutters to begin business for the day. The stationer looked from me to his other customer and I thought his eyes widened. I bowed to the other client and motioned him to precede me into the shop. He was there before me.

The morning sun was low in the southeast, and did not penetrate far into the shop. But dark as the place was, I could see that Kate was not within. He of the red cotehardie saw the same, and spoke before I could.

"Is Mistress Kate at leisure?" he asked.

Caxton glanced at me, then answered, "Near so. Preparing a pot of ink in the workroom. Be done shortly."

"I'll wait," the fellow said with a smile. "'Tis a pleasant morning. And if Kate has no other concerns, I'd have her walk with me along the water meadow."

He might as well have swatted me over my skull with a ridge pole. My jaw went slack and I fear both Caxton and this unknown suitor got a fine view of my tonsils.

Robert Caxton was not so discomfited that he forgot his manners. He introduced me to Sir Simon Trillowe. A knight. And of some relation to the new sheriff of Oxford, I guessed.

When he learned that I was but a surgeon and bailiff to Lord Gilbert Talbot, Sir Simon nodded briefly

and turned away, his actions speaking what polite words could not: I was beneath his rank and unworthy of his consideration.

"We heard naught of you for many months, Master Hugh," Caxton remarked.

This was true. I had neglected pursuit of Kate Caxton while about Lord Gilbert's business in Bampton. And, to be true, I feared Kate might dismiss my suit should I press it. A man cannot be disappointed in love who does not seek it.

"No doubt a bailiff has much to occupy his time," the stationer continued.

Sir Simon doubtless thought that I was but a customer, not that I was in competition with him for the fair Kate. He would learn that soon enough.

The door to Caxton's workroom was open. Kate surely heard this exchange, which was a good thing. It gave her opportunity to compose herself. A moment later she entered the shop, carrying my pot of promised ink, and bestowed a tranquil smile upon both me and Sir Simon. I smiled in return, Trillowe did not. Perhaps he had guessed already that it was not ink I most wished to take from Caxton's shop.

"Mistress Kate," Sir Simon stepped toward her as she passed through the door. "'Tis a pleasant autumn morn… there will be few more before winter. Perhaps we might walk the path along the Cherwell… if your father can spare you for the morning."

With these words Trillowe turned to the stationer. Caxton shrugged a reply.

"Good." Sir Simon offered his arm and, with a brief smile and raised brows in my direction, Kate set the pot of ink on her father's table and took Trillowe's arm. They departed the shop wordlessly.

Caxton apparently thought some explanation in order. "You didn't call through the summer. Kate thought you'd no interest. I told her last night you'd asked to pay court. But Sir Simon's been by a dozen times since Lammas Day… others, too."

"Others?"

"Aye. My Kate does draw lads to the shop. None has asked me might they pay court, though. But for you."

"Not Sir Simon?"

"Nay. Second son of the sheriff, and a knight. He'll not ask leave of one like me to do aught."

"And Kate returns his interest?"

Caxton shrugged. "She's walked out with him three times now. A knight, mind you. And son of the sheriff. Can't blame a lass for that."

"No," I agreed.

"Can't think how his father'd be pleased, though. A stationer's daughter! A scandal in Oxford Castle when word gets out, as it surely has, by now," Caxton mused.

"Aye. What lands his father may hold will pass to his brother. The sheriff will want Sir Simon seeking a wife with lands of her own."

I hoped that was so. But if a second or third son acts to displease his father, it is difficult to correct him. How can a man disinherit a son who is due to receive little or nothing anyway? So if a son courting Kate Caxton displeased the sheriff of Oxford, such offense might escape retribution. This thought did not bring me joy.

Chapter 2

Nothing much else of that day in Oxford brought joy, either. Even Caxton's refusal to accept payment for parchment and ink could not raise my spirits. I trudged through the mud to the Stag and Hounds, retrieved Bruce from the stables, and from the old horse's broad back watched as the castle keep faded into the distance while we two, horse and rider, sauntered past Oseney Abbey toward Bampton and home.

I arrived at the castle at the ninth hour, in time for supper. Lord Gilbert was in residence, so this was a more elaborate meal than when he resided at another of his castles, with several guests, and many grooms and valets occupying lower tables.

A groom brought an ewer, basin, and towel to the high table and I washed the dust of the Oxford Road from my face and hands. The water was pleasingly scented with mint.

I had enjoyed no dinner that day, so as soon as Lord Gilbert's chaplain offered thanks to our Lord Christ for the meal I broke the loaf of wheaten bread before me, spread butter on the fragments with my knife, and set about calming my growling stomach.

It was during the third remove, a game pie, that I noticed Lady Petronilla peering at me from the other end of the high table. There are, I believe, subtle signals of sorrow which women perceive more readily than men. I was unaware that my discontent was plain to another. And to Lord Gilbert it was not.

The game pie this day seemed beneath the cook's usual standard. I had little desire to finish my portion. And the subtlety also seemed to lack appeal. Perhaps the

wheaten loaf poisoned my appetite.

Three days later, after a supper of eels baked in vinegar and spices, pike in galantine, and salmon in syrup, John the chamberlain approached me as I entered my chamber. Lord Gilbert, he said, was in the solar and would see me.

A blaze in the fireplace both lit the solar and warmed it against the chill of an autumn evening. Lady Petronilla glanced up at me from her needlework as John ushered me into the chamber, and Lord Gilbert looked my way briefly before continuing his conversation with Sir Watkin Kidwell, a guest to whom I had been introduced at Tuesday supper when I returned from Oxford.

I stood, confused about the summons, until Lord Gilbert nodded toward a bench which rested, unoccupied, between him and Lady Petronilla. This seat was pleasingly near the fire, and while I sat a groom replenished the logs to the accompaniment of a great salvo of sparks which swirled up the chimney. I was tired, and had recently supped. The combination produced drowsiness. I feared I might topple into the fire.

The hum of conversation ceased. I awoke from my lethargy to see Sir Watkin rise, bow, and bid Lord Gilbert and Lady Petronilla "Good night." I stood, perhaps a bit wobbly, to honor Sir Watkin's departure, as did Lord Gilbert.

When the guest had departed Lord Gilbert resumed his chair and motioned me back to my bench. I drew it away from the fire, for the logs recently placed on the blaze were now burning furiously.

"Lady Petronilla," Lord Gilbert began, "would have me speak to you."

Lady Petronilla looked up briefly from her work and smiled from under lowered brows. I could not guess why she thought conversation necessary, but her gentle smile reassured me that the discussion was probably not going to center upon some malfeasance on my part. Few men enjoy a command to meet with their employer, and I admit to some apprehension when John delivered

Lord Gilbert's summons. I had been reluctant, two years past, to accept Lord Gilbert's offer to become bailiff of his Bampton estate. But now I found myself equally reluctant to leave the post should Lord Gilbert have detected some dereliction on my part.

It was not Lord Gilbert, but his wife, who had detected a change in my manner, and it was this she had noted and urged her husband to investigate. Therefore my summons this evening.

"M'lady," he continued, "believes some thing is amiss with you, and would have me seek it out."

"Amiss, m'lord?"

"Aye." Lady Petronilla laid her work in her lap and spoke. "You were laughing and in good spirit when you departed for Oxford Monday. But since your return you are morose. I have watched you at table… you eat but little. I told m'lord, 'Some mishap has overtaken Master Hugh while at Oxford.'"

"M'lady," Lord Gilbert interjected, "has a meddlesome imagination."

"Meddlesome I am not," Lady Petronilla barked. "I am… observant."

"Aye," Lord Gilbert chuckled and nodded toward me. "She is that."

"I told m'lord 'tis not good for a young man, so full of life and joy one day, to be so glum the next."

"And I told her this was not our concern." He paused. "She disagreed."

Lady Petronilla nodded and pursed her lips.

"So I have called you here to learn what has gone amiss in Oxford. Or," he hesitated, "to learn if my wife's imagination has…"

"'Tis no imagining," Lady Petronilla rejoined.

Lord Gilbert was to my right hand, Lady Petronilla to my left. Their dispute caused my head to swivel. I made no reply to Lady Petronilla's assertion, but she would not accept my silence.

"Come, Master Hugh. When a young man cannot finish a tasty game pie for his supper, or salmon in syrup,

then something is much awry."

"Hmm," Lord Gilbert muttered, pulling at his beard. "This is true? You did not finish your salmon?"

"He did not."

"I have never known you to reject a salmon. M'lady speaks true… What troubles you, Hugh?"

I dislike encumbering others with my own misfortune. And I have observed that, on most occasions, others prefer not to share the burden anyway. I hesitated to reply.

Lady Petronilla understood what my silence implied.

"You do not protest, Master Hugh. So 'tis true. Were it not so, you would be quick to object."

"It is a matter for my own concern," I finally replied. "I do not wish to vex others."

"I told you 'twas so," Lady Petronilla said triumphantly to her husband. Lord Gilbert raised one eyebrow and went to pulling at his beard. These mannerisms I knew well. He stroked his chin when deep in thought, and raised an eyebrow when puzzled. This last expression I had tried to emulate. Unsuccessfully.

"It is not good for a man to carry his worries alone," Lord Gilbert remarked. "You have no wife to share your sorrows."

"Or joys," Lady Petronilla smiled.

"'Tis more difficult for you, of course… finding a wife. You must search her out for yourself. Our fathers," Lord Gilbert smiled at his wife, "placed us together. For the which I am grateful, as is, I trust, m'lady."

Lady Petronilla beamed in reply. This conversation had somehow got around to wives and marriage. Perhaps Lord Gilbert had an intuition that a young man's woe might have to do with a lass.

"I would be much pleased to find a good wife," I agreed. "I know that marriage may bring sorrow, but bachelorhood brings little joy."

"Well," Lord Gilbert chuckled, "you had best get you back to Oxford. You will not find her in Bampton Castle…

nor anywhere in the town, I think."

"But I have duties here."

"What? Michaelmas is long past. The harvest is in, and John Holcutt has matters well in hand for winter. You are at leisure to pursue your own ends and seek a wife. A prosperous burgher's daughter, I think, or, with luck, the only child of a knight, with lands she might bring with her."

Lady Petronilla nodded agreement. Gentlemen and their ladies are much alike. Get land; this is nearly all they think on. Kate Caxton will have small dowry, I think. Her father is a burgher, but I am not privy to the depth of his purse. Knowing Lord Gilbert as I do, however, should he lay eyes on Kate, he will approve my choice.

My choice. Little good my decision would do me now, with the handsome Sir Simon Trillowe in pursuit of Kate.

"You have friends in Oxford," Lord Gilbert continued. "Surely some will know of a suitable lass."

"Perhaps more than one might suit," Lady Petronilla smiled. "'Tis always good to have a choice in such matters."

Lord Gilbert frowned at this remark. "You would have preferred a choice?"

"You think I did not have one?" she rejoined. "Our fathers placed us together, 'tis true, but my father would not match me with a man I rejected."

"So you…"

"Aye," Lady Petronilla smiled. "My father knew who I would have and who I would not."

"There were others you would have accepted? Who?"

"I will say no more," she laughed, "but that choice of a spouse is good. Neither you nor Master Hugh need know more."

"Master Wyclif is a friend, is he not?" Lord Gilbert returned to his subject. "You should seek him and learn if he knows of suitable maids about Oxford."

"But m'lord," Lady Petronilla scoffed, "Master John

is a bachelor scholar. What will he know of marriageable maids?"

"He has lived in Oxford many years, and even scholars, with their noses pressed to their books, have two eyes and can appreciate a comely lass, and two ears and can hear of virtue."

Lady Petronilla had no reply to this logic, so returned to her needle. I decided to speak plainly to Lord Gilbert.

"I visited Master John Monday eve. He is much distressed. Some thief has stolen his books."

Lord Gilbert raised both eyebrows. "Indeed? He has told the sheriff of the loss?"

"Aye. Sir John Trillowe is newly appointed High Sheriff of Oxford. He seems little interested in seeking stolen books."

Lord Gilbert's eyes narrowed and his lips compressed to a fine line. "He would not."

"You know Sir John?"

"I do."

I awaited an explanation of Lord Gilbert's expression when he heard the name. None was forthcoming, but I knew my employer well enough to know that he must think little of this new sheriff. In the past two years I had found Lord Gilbert's estimation of other men to be fair, so was prepared to think little of a man I had never met. I had met his son. An acorn does not fall far from the oak. But I am prejudiced.

"Master Wyclif has no clue as to who has taken his books?" Lord Gilbert continued.

"None."

He raised an eyebrow and went to tugging at his chin, but it was Lady Petronilla who spoke: "Is not Master Wyclif a favorite of Duke John?"

"Aye," Lord Gilbert replied. "The Duke of Lancaster is Master Wyclif's patron. The scholar comes from lands in Yorkshire which are in the Duke's gift."

"I wonder," Lady Petronilla laid her needlework in her lap and looked up, "that Master Wyclif does not seek help from Duke John. Surely the king's son should have

ways and means to find stolen books."

"The Duke will be in London, enjoying his palace, or at Pontefract. I think he cares little for books… although he might be pleased did another discover the thief and return the books to his favorite." As he said this Lord Gilbert went to pulling at his chin again.

"Master Hugh, you have few duties now 'til hallmote. And you are proven adept at solving mysteries. Perhaps you should return to Oxford and seek Master Wyclif's books."

"And while he is there," Lady Petronilla added, "he might also seek a wife. I cannot tell which may be easier to discover."

Before I could think of an objection Lord Gilbert spoke again, and my fate was sealed. "I think John of Gaunt would be much pleased to learn 'twas my bailiff who discovered the thief who stole his favorite's books."

Lord Gilbert, Third Baron Talbot, is one of the most powerful nobles in the realm. But even he would like the good will of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, son of the King Edward that now is, and brother of the King Edward to be, the fourth of that name, the Black Prince.

In matter of fact, with the old king ill, and the Black Prince often waging war in France, it is Duke John who runs the kingdom. So some say. But not where others may hear.

"John Holcutt is competent to deal with the manor. And I will remain until St Catherine's Day. So that's settled, then. Nothing to keep you. You may be off tomorrow. Take Arthur, if you wish. Might be well to have an assistant along. Arthur's no fool, and worth three in a fray, should you find the felons and they not wish to surrender their loot."

I awoke next morning, cold, at the ringing of the Angelus Bell. The Church of St Beornwald is several hundred paces north of Bampton Castle, but the dawn was still and sound carried well. I thought how pleasant it would be to have a good wife to warm my bed on such mornings. This musing was not new to me, and brought no

joy, for as I tossed in my cold bed I thought on Lady Joan Talbot, now the Lady de Burgh, and of Kate Caxton.

The fire in my chamber was but black coals. A few embers glowed when I blew on the ashes; enough that I was able to resurrect the blaze with a few carefully placed splinters and then two logs. My feet were cold on the flags, so I climbed back into my bed until the fire might warm the chamber. Cold as the bed was, it was warmer than the floor.

After a loaf of maslin and a wedge of cheese I mounted Bruce, the old gelding Lord Gilbert had assigned to my use, and Arthur climbed astride an ancient palfrey which had once borne Lady Petronilla. Riding the shaggy old beast did not seem to displease Arthur. Most grooms, when forced to travel, must do so afoot. I slung a leather-and-wood box containing my surgical instruments, and a pouch of herbs, across Bruce's broad rump. What use these might be to me I did not know, but I dislike being without my implements.

A slanting sun illuminated the tops of the oaks in Lord Gilbert's forest to the west of Bampton as Arthur and I rode under the portcullis and set off toward Mill Street and the bridge over Shill Brook. It was a fine day for travel, did a man have a joyous reason and pleasant destination in mind. I had neither.

Lord Gilbert had set me to a task for which I felt unequal. And the pursuit of Kate Caxton, which a week past brought cheer when I thought on it, now lay leaden on my heart.

Villeins and tenants were busy in the fields we passed. Wheat and rye had been sown, and oxen and the occasional horse drew harrows across the fields to cover the seed with soil. Children shivered in the morning air, their fists filled with rocks to toss at birds which would steal the seed before the harrow could do its work.

Acorns and beech nuts had fallen, so swineherds had driven their hogs into the forest for pannaging. The pigs might regret their appetite on Martinmas. Pigs are much like men. Or perhaps men are like pigs: we think

little of what today's pleasure may cost tomorrow.

The sky was pale blue and the sun lacked warmth. It was not only swine which roamed the forest. Tenants and villeins also stalked the woodland, gathering fuel for the winter soon to be upon us.

The tower of Oseney Abbey was a welcome sight when it appeared above the trees which lined the Thames. I appreciated the gift of Bruce, the old dexter which had borne Lord Gilbert at the Battle of Poitiers, but I have never become inured to the saddle. True, it is better to ride than walk sixteen miles. Better yet to stay home at Bampton Castle and have neither sore rump nor legs.

But I had a duty to Lord Gilbert, and, indeed, to Master Wyclif as well. By the time Bruce clattered across the Castle Mill Stream Bridge I was resolved to exert myself in the matter of Master John's books. And in the matter of Mistress Kate Caxton, also. But I admit I felt more confidence regarding the discovery of missing books than the winning of a fair maid. Thieves are more predictable than a lass.

Canterbury Hall owns no stable, so Arthur and I left our beasts at the Stag and Hounds. Oxford's streets were crowded as we walked south toward St John Street and Canterbury Hall. Perhaps among the throng was a thief, or more than one. How I was to find him I knew not.

The porter at Canterbury Hall recognized me and sent me straightaway to Master Wyclif's chamber. Arthur had walked before me as we pressed through the crowd on the High Street, but trod respectfully behind after we approached the porter. Arthur is a good man to have about when it is necessary to make a path through the throng. He is not so tall as me, but weighs, I think, two stone more. His neck is as thick as my thigh.

The scholar was absent. There was no response to my knock on his chamber door. The Michaelmas Term was begun, so I assumed Master John to be at his work, lecturing students. Perhaps he had been at the business long enough that he could carry on without his set books.

While I stood, uncertain, before the door I heard a voice raised in argument. Cells for the students of Canterbury Hall lined the enclosure opposite the warden's chamber, and a kitchen and hall closed the western side of the yard. Three glass windows gave light to the interior of this hall, and although they were closed to the autumn air, they permitted the sound of angry dispute to flood the enclosure.

Arthur also heard the argument and peered at me under a furrowed brow. I left Master John's door and walked to the nearest of the three windows. Arthur followed.

From beside the window I could hear the dispute plainly. I had the gist of the quarrel in less time than it takes to pare a fingernail. The inhabitants of the Hall were divided into two opposing camps, each accusing the other of complicity in the matter of their warden's stolen books. Occasionally I thought I heard Master John over the din, trying to calm the debate. A man might as well try to arrest the wind as silence an Oxford scholar who wishes to make known his opinion.

In addition to the three windows, the east wall of the hall included a door. It was behind me as I stood at the window, so I heard, rather than saw, the door open abruptly and immediately slam shut. Arthur and I turned and watched Master John stalk across the yard toward his chamber. He had not seen us against the wall, for the open door blocked his view, although the afternoon sun bathed the enclosure in a golden glow.

Wyclif did not hear us follow; he was muttering to himself as he strode. So he pushed through his chamber door and slammed it in our faces unknowingly. Arthur stared goggle-eyed, first at me, then at the door. I was accustomed to scholarly disputes. Indeed, I had shouted my way through several in my youth. But such discord was new to Arthur. He thought he was to spend some days in the peaceful company of scholars and masters. But there are few men so disputatious as scholars. Arthur was learning this and the knowledge startled him. I think

had I released him at that moment he would have sought out the Stag and Hounds, mounted the old palfrey, and scurried off for Bampton.

I rapped on Master John's chamber door and a heartbeat later it was flung open.

"What?!" Wyclif roared, then clamped his lips shut when he saw it was me. "I beg pardon, Master Hugh. I thought… never mind what I thought. Come in."

Master John held open the door and stood to one side as a welcome. Arthur, his cap in his hands, followed me into the gloomy chamber. The scholar had had no time, and perhaps no desire, to light a cresset to bolster the thin light of a late October afternoon which managed to penetrate the chamber through a single narrow window.

There were but two benches in the room. Arthur noted this and stood aside, in a shadowy corner, as Wyclif motioned to a bench and sat silently upon the other. Neither of us spoke for a moment.

"You forgot some business in Oxford?" Master John finally asked.

"No. I am come to offer my service, as you desired, in the matter of your stolen books."

"Ah," Wyclif smiled. "Some good tidings for a change."

"You have made no progress in discovering the books, or who it was who took them?"

"None. And the issue divides the Hall… more so than it already was."

"I… we, uh, overheard some debate just now."

"Hah. Debate. Indeed, Master Hugh, you are a tactful man. The monks and seculars are at each other's throats, each thinking the other's responsible."

"And you," I asked, "what think you?"

Wyclif was silent, his lips pursed and brow furrowed. The only sound was Arthur shifting his weight from one foot to another.

"Thinking on my loss leaves an ache, so I try not to think on it at all."

"You are successful?"

"Nay," Wyclif grimaced. "'Tis sure that the more a man tries not to consider a thing, the more he will so do."

"You think much on the loss, then?"

"Aye, but to no purpose."

The ringing of a small bell interrupted our conversation. "Supper," Master John muttered. "I care little for food this day, but you and your man are hungry, surely. Come."

Wyclif led the way from his chamber across the yard to the hall. The scholars who preceded us there were in muttered conversation but fell silent when they saw Master John's scowl.

Supper was a pottage of peas, leeks, and white beans, with a maslin loaf, wheat and rye. Saturday is a fast day. Nevertheless I detected a few bits of bacon flavoring the pottage. A man watching might have thought this a monastic house where the residents observed silence while in the refectory. There was no resumption of the afternoon argument. The scholars ate warily, one eye on their fellows, the other on Master John.

Arthur and I ate heartily. We'd enjoyed no dinner. We might have dined at the Stag and Hounds when we left the horses, and, indeed, Arthur had peered beseechingly at me as we left the place. But I have dined many times at the Stag and Hounds. Too many times.

It was dark when we left the hall. A sliver of moon gave enough light that I did not stumble on the cobbles of the yard. Arthur did. The ale served with supper was fresh. Arthur drank copiously.

Master John led us to his chamber, and while he lighted a cresset I resumed my bench and Arthur took his place in the corner. But he did not remain standing. His back slid down the wall until he was seated in a crouch on the flags. He released a contented belch as the descent concluded.

"Lord Gilbert has released you to do service for me?" Wyclif inquired.

"Aye."

"I am in his debt."

"Not yet. I have found no books nor a malefactor."

"Ah, but you will. I have faith."

Arthur greeted Master John's judgment with a snore. The scholar smiled and peered into the corner where Arthur sat, elbows on knees and head on arms.

"You will be weary from your journey this day. I will have straw brought to the guest's cell for your man and you may seek your rest. Time enough on the morrow to begin your search."