

Chapter Ten

The crowd moved aside for our parents as they helped the four battered watchmen onto the green. Some had their heads bandaged, and David Gamble had his arm around Father's shoulder to help him stay on his feet. They sat on the grass while Father spoke to the crowd.



"The watchmen were ambushed by a large gang of thieves sometime around midnight. They were beaten, bound, and gagged down by Richard-the-Smith's."

"Well? What are we waiting for Goodfellow?" said Wat's father. "You're the constable. You must lead every man in the village to catch them, and then we'll hang them from the nearest tree!"

"No!" cried Nick's father. "First we'll give them a good thrashing with our flails and then we'll hang them."

"These are good ideas," said Father calmly, "and I'm sure that we're all keen to join in the chase, but does anyone know which way the thieves went?" Nobody answered, so Father continued. "They've had a big head start, so they'll be miles ahead of us, even if we did know which way they went."

"I'll bet they're from Martock," said Nick's father. "We should go there and look for them!"

"Did you recognize any of them?" asked Father.

"No, but I'd bet they're being sheltered in Martock. The men there are likely getting a cut of our stolen property in return!"

"Yeah! Let's go to Martock," shouted his friend, Richard-the-Colt, and many in the crowd yelled in agreement.

"Let's not make a bad situation worse by starting another brawl with Martock," said Father. "We have no reason to suspect them."

"Sure we do," said Nick's father. "They're always trying to move the parish boundary and steal our land, and they cheat at football!"

Just two weeks ago, the villagers of Tintinhull and Martock had met on the boundary between the two parishes during the annual beating-of-the-bounds parade. There had been a nasty argument about whose side of the old Roman Road the boundary was on.

Things soon came to blows, and then a full-scale brawl started. Even the priests from Tintinhull and Martock, who were leading the parades, joined in swinging their large crosses as weapons. Nobody from our village has dared go into Martock since, and none of them have set foot in Tintinhull either.

"I don't like Martock any more than the rest of you," said Father, "but I can't believe they would stoop this low. Helping thieves is a hanging crime. They are prosperous farmers. They wouldn't want to risk their lives just to harm us.

"And besides, if we go there and start a fight we'll be charged with assault and disturbing the King's Peace. Then we'll all have to pay big fines on top of the losses we've already had tonight."



I was glad to see that this last point about money really sunk in. Francis had been about to say something, but now he stopped to think. Father made the most of the turning tide.

"I will go to Ilchester right away and report this to the sheriff. He will want to hunt this gang down before they strike again. Those of you who were robbed stay here and tell me any details about the thieves that you can remember. The rest of you can go back to your beds."

There was a great deal of grumbling, but the crowd began to disperse. Mother made her way over to us. "Let's go home now," she said. "Your father's going to be up the rest of the night, so we won't wait for him."

"Daddy's a good constable, isn't he?" said Edward.

"Yes," Mother replied with a sigh. "He handled that pretty well. Most constables would have led that mob to Martock without a second thought. If only village constables were paid for their work, we'd be rich. I just hope the sheriff takes this seriously, or else your father will be in trouble."

We crossed the street to our home and got back into our beds. We started talking about what had happened, but a few thumps on the wall and a muffled scolding from Mother quickly put an end to that. Soon we were all drifting off to sleep.

Our sleep was far too short, even though we woke up later than usual. The sun was already up. We were awakened by the loud mooing of our two cows, Agnes and Lucy, who are usually fed and milked by this time of day.

Mother came into our room. "Time to get up, you lazy badgers! Elizabeth and Emily, the cows are waiting for you." Then she went to get the fire going. We slowly got out of bed, put on our tunics, and went into the main room.

"Where's Father?" asked Margaret.

"He hasn't got back from Ilchester yet," said Mother. "If he's lucky, he'll just be seeing the sheriff now, so he still won't be home for a while."

Elizabeth and Emily went out the back door to milk the complaining cows. The cattle byre is attached to our house, so you can look after the cows, oxen, and horse without going outside. This is really handy in winter. The wealthier farmers in Tintinhull keep their beasts in separate buildings now, but I think the old way makes more sense.

"Robert and William," said Mother, "You'd better get Congar and

Wulfric ready to work." Those are our oxen. By the way, Mother names all our beasts, and she always names them after saints.

Robert and I went out to the granary, which is a small shed for storing grain. It sits on mushroom-shaped stones that mice and rats can't climb up over. Our cat, Dominic, helps keep the mice away too. The granary is a neat place. Sometimes I hide in there. I love the smell of all the grain.

The day was starting out fine. I love this time of year. There were no clouds to be seen. The singing of the birds was the loudest I'd heard this year. There were so many different songs mixed together, I could barely tell which bird was which. It sounded like a great celebration.

I couldn't see many villagers up doing their chores yet. Everyone normally gets up before dawn when the roosters are crowing, but many were still in bed because of the sleep they'd lost last night. A month earlier, during seed planting, everyone would have been up earlier, but the work is not so urgent in April once the planting is finished.

We went into the granary and startled Elizabeth and Emily who were filling buckets with oats. "Why aren't you milking the cows?" asked Robert.

"Someone forgot to fill the feedbox yesterday," said Elizabeth, glaring at Emily. "So there was none in the byre."

"You didn't remember either," said Emily.

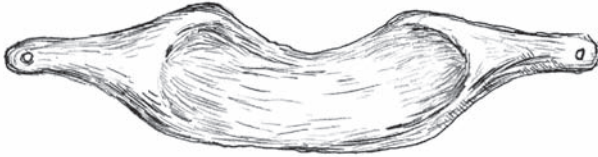
"There aren't enough buckets for all of us to use," said Robert. "Let's fill these buckets right up full so we only have to make one trip and we can feed all the cattle at once."



“Alright,” said Elizabeth. “But since we were here first, you have to carry them.”

Robert doesn’t usually argue with Elizabeth. She is a few years older than him, and she’s still stronger. I don’t argue with her either. One time she threw me into the manure pile.

“Fine,” said Robert. “William, run over to the well and get the bucket yoke. I might as well make this easier.” I quickly got him the yoke. He placed it on his shoulders and used it to carry the oats to the byre.



“Don’t spill any,” said Elizabeth. “We’re going to run out of oats before harvest and Father will have to buy more.”

“Please don’t nag at me,” said Robert through gritted teeth.

Inside the byre, the noise was really loud. The oxen and cows were bawling, and our horse Wilfred was neighing too. I checked the charms in the stable to make sure the beasts were still protected from evil. The last thing we needed was possessed cows. The onions and the holed stones were still hanging from the rafters, and there were still sprigs of wicken tree attached to their collars.

We poured the oats into the manger at the front of the stalls where the beasts were tied. Elizabeth and Emily set up their three-legged stools and milk buckets. Soon all you could hear was the sound of the milk filling the buckets and the beasts eating their oats.

“William, you’d better start filling the water trough. I’ll yoke the oxen,” said Robert as he lifted the big wooden ox yoke off of its pegs on the wall. I went to the well and began winching up the bucket from the bottom. It takes a lot of buckets of water to satisfy the oxen.

I saw Edward come out of the house with the slop bucket filled with kitchen scraps. He dumped it into the pigsty, and our three hogs quickly ate it up. Edward loves those hogs. Father thinks he’ll make a fine swineherd one day. Perhaps he’ll work for the Lord of the Manor

Margaret came out of our little chicken coop with a small basket of eggs she had gathered. I wondered if she got pecked by any of the hens. Soon Robert had the oxen yoked and he brought them to the

trough at the well to drink.

"We'll just leave them here until Uncle Roger comes," said Robert. "They'll be fine. If they drink all the water before the cows get here then Elizabeth can get more herself. Let's go eat."

I knew that this was asking for trouble, but I was really hungry so I went inside with him. Edward and Margaret were already sitting on the benches at the trestle table. Mother served us some bread, herring, and leeks, with cider to drink. Emily and Elizabeth came in a bit later.

"You could have put more water in the trough William," said Elizabeth.

"Sorry," I said sheepishly.

"Robert and Edward," said Mother, "Since your father won't be back for a while, I want you to take the cows and the horse out to Westfield pasture this morning." Westfield is a large common pasture west of Tintinhull. Anyone in the village can take their animals there to eat the grass.

"Why can't Elizabeth do that?" said Robert.

"Elizabeth is going to help me here this morning," said Mother. "Just because your father's away doesn't mean it's a holy day for you. When he returns and has eaten and rested you can go to the fields with him to plough."

"Emily and Margaret, I am sending you over to Prince's Woods to get some comfrey plants with your grandmother. You can stay there for the morning and give her some help too. William can go with you and gather a basket of firewood. You should gather one. . ."

There was a knock at the door. "What now?" said Mother as she went to answer it.

