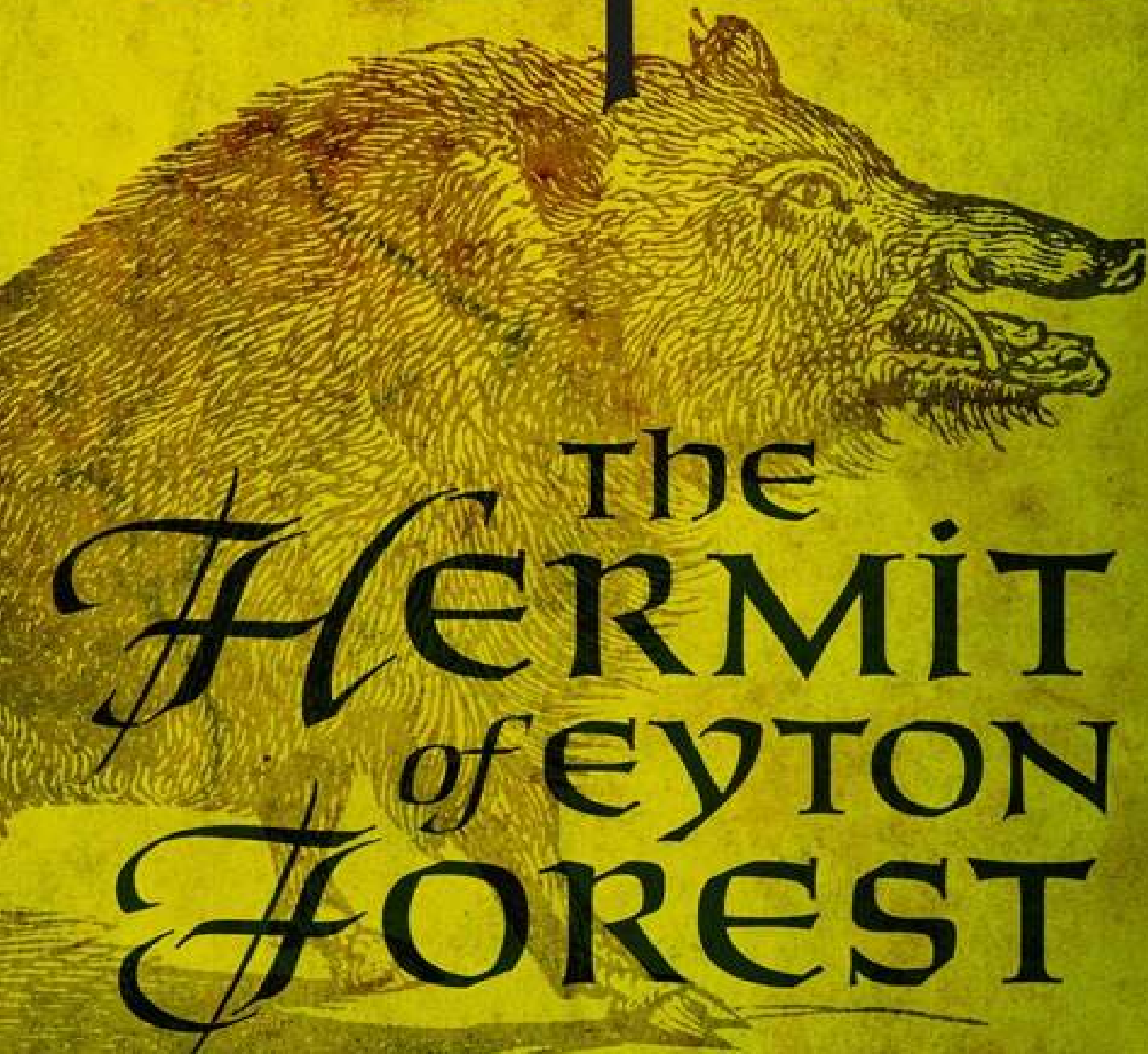


THE FOURTEENTH CHRONICLE OF BROTHER

CADFAEL



THE
*H*ERMIT
of EYTON
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ELLIS PETERS

The HERMIT of EYTON FOREST

THE FOURTEENTH CHRONICLE OF BROTHER CADFAEL, OF THE BENEDICTINE ABBEY OF SAINT
PETER AND SAINT PAUL, AT SHREWSBURY

ELLIS PETERS

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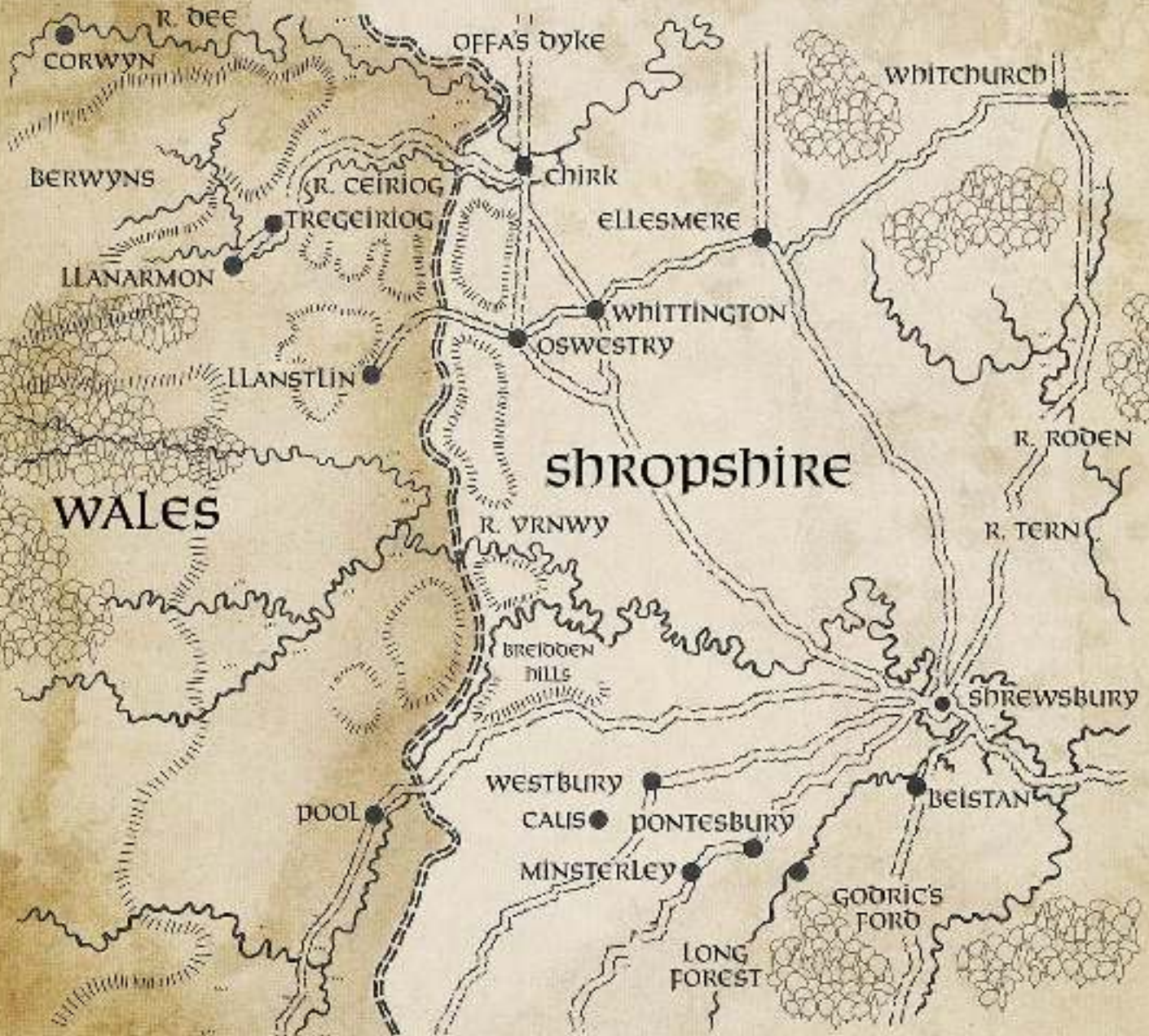
CADFAEL

The LANDSCAPE OF
MEDIEVAL WALES



CADFAEL

THE COUNTY OF SHROPSHIRE
AND THE WELSH BORDERS



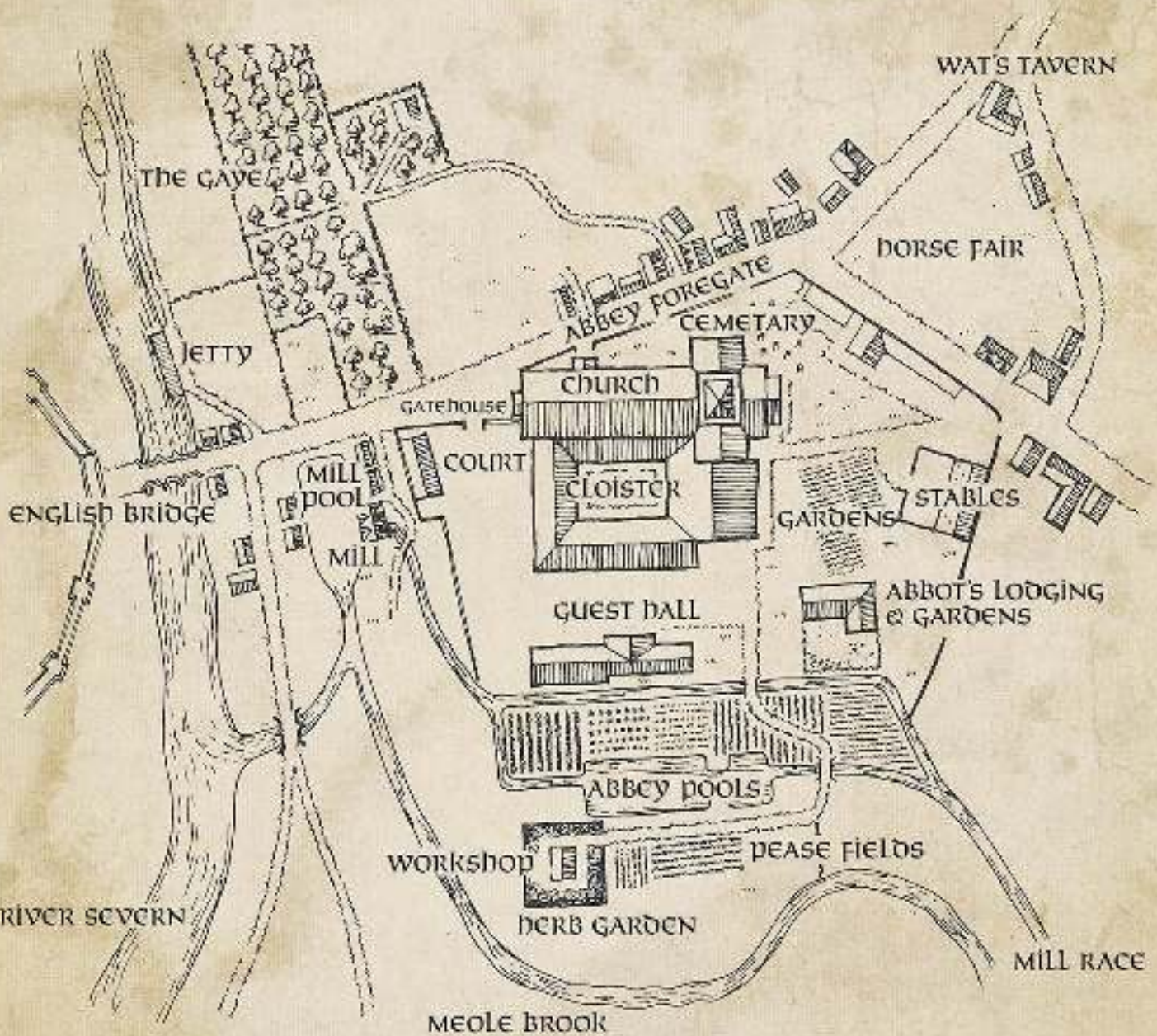
CADFAEL

THE TOWN OF SHREWSBURY
IN THE COUNTY OF
SHROPSHIRE



CADFAEL

The BENEDICTINE ABBEY
OF SAINT PETER AND
SAINT PAUL AT SHREWSBURY



It was on the eighteenth day of October of that year 1142 that Richard Ludel, hereditary tenant of the manor of Eaton, died of a debilitating weakness, left after wounds received at the battle of Lincoln, in the service of King Stephen.

The news was duly brought to Hugh Beringar in Shrewsbury castle, since Eaton was one of the many manors in the shire which had been expropriated from William Fitz Alan, after that powerful nobleman took arms on the wrong side in the struggle for the throne, he fled from Shrewsbury for the Empress Maud, and took to flight when Stephen besieged and captured the town. His wide lands, forfeited to the crown, had been placed in the sheriff's care as an overlord, but their tenants of long standing had been left undisturbed, once it was clear that they had wisely accepted the judgement of battle, and pledged their allegiance to the king. Ludel, indeed, had done more than declare his loyalty, he had proved it in arms at Lincoln, and now, it seemed, paid a high price for his fealty, for he was no more than thirty-five years old at his death.

Hugh received the news with the mild regret natural to one who had barely known the man, and whose duties were unlikely to be complicated by any closer contact with the dead. There was an heir, and no second son to cloud the issue of inheritance, certainly no need to interfere with the smooth succession. The Ludels were Stephen's men, and loyal, even if the new incumbent was hardly likely to take arms for his king for many years to come, being, as Hugh recalled, about ten years old. The boy was in school at the abbey, placed there by his father when the mother died, most likely, so rumour said, to get him out of the hands of his domineering grandmother, rather than simply to ensure that he learned his letters.

It seemed, therefore, that the abbey, if not the castle, had some unenviable responsibility in the matter, for someone would have to tell young Richard that his father was dead. The funeral rites would not fall to the abbey, Eaton having its own church and parish priest, but the custody of the heir was a matter of importance. And as for me, thought Hugh, I had better make certain how competent a steward Ludel has left to manage the boy's estate, while he is not yet of age to manage it himself.

"You have not taken this word to the lord abbot yet?" he asked the groom who had brought the message.

"No, my lord, I came first to you."

"And have you orders from the lady to speak with the heir himself?"

"No, my lord, and would as soon leave that to those who have the daily care of him."

"You may well be right there," Hugh agreed. "I'll go myself and speak with Abbot Radulfus. He'll know best how to deal. As to the succession, Dame Dionisia need have no concern, the boy's title is secure enough."

In times full of trouble, with cousins contending bitterly for the throne, and opportunists changing their coats according to the pendulum fortunes of this desultory war, Hugh was only too glad to be guardian of a shire which had changed hands but once, and settle down doggedly thereafter to keep King Stephen's title unchallenged and the tide of unrest

bay from its borders, whether the threat came from the empress's forces, the unpredictable cantrips of the wild Welshmen of Powys to the west, or the calculating ambition of the earl of Chester in the north. Hugh had balanced his relationships with all these perilous neighbours for some years now with fair success, it would have been folly to consider handing over Eaton to another tenant, whatever the possible drawbacks of allowing the succession to pass unbroken to a child. Why upset a family which had remained submissive and loyal, and dug in its heels sturdily to await events when its overlord fled to France? Recent rumour had it that William Fitz Alan was back in England, and had joined the empress in Oxford, and the sense of his presence, even at that distance, might stir older loyalties among his former tenants, but that was a risk to be met when it showed signs of arising. To give Eaton to another tenant might well be to rouse the old allegiance needlessly from its prudent slumber. No, Ludel's son should have his rights. But it would be well to have a look at the steward, and make sure he could be trusted, both to keep to his late lord's policies and to take good care of his new lord's interests and lands.

Hugh rode out unhurriedly through the town, in the fine mid-morning after the early mist had lifted, gently uphill to the High Cross, steeply downhill again by the winding Wyle to the eastward gate, and across the stone bridge towards the Foregate, where the crossing tower of the abbey church loomed solidly against a pale blue sky. The Severn ran rapid but tranquil under the arches of the bridge, still at its mild summer level, its two small, grassy islands rimmed with a narrow edging of bleached brown which would be covered again when the first heavy rain brought storm-water down from Wales. To the left, where the highroad opened before him, the clustering bushes and trees rising from the riverside just touched the dusty rim of the road, before the small houses and yards and gardens of the Foregate began. To the right the mill-pool stretched away between its grassy banks, a faint bloom of lingering mist blurring its silver surface, and beyond, the wall of the abbey enclave arose, and the arch of the gatehouse.

Hugh dismounted as the porter came out to take his bridle. He was as well known here as any who wore the Benedictine habit and belonged within the walls.

"If you're wanting Brother Cadfael, my lord," offered the porter helpfully, "he's away to Saint Giles to replenish their medicine cupboard. But he's been gone an hour or so now, he left after chapter. He'll be back soon, surely, if you're minded to wait for him."

"My business is with the lord abbot first," said Hugh, acknowledging without protest the assumption that his every visit here must inevitably be in search of one close crony. "Though no doubt Cadfael will hear the same word afterwards, if he hasn't heard it in advance! The winds always seem to blow news his way before they trouble about the rest of us."

"His duties take him forth, more than most of us ever get the chance," said the porter good-humouredly. "Come to that, how do the poor afflicted souls at Saint Giles ever come to hear so much of what goes on in the wide world? For he seldom comes back without some piece of gossip that's amazement to everybody this end of the Foregate. Father Abbot's down in his own garden. He's been closeted over accounts with the sacristan for an hour or more, but I saw Brother Benedict leave him a little while ago." He reached a veined brown hand to caress the horse's neck, very respectfully, for Hugh's big, raw-boned grey, as cross-grained as he was strong, had little but contempt for all things human except his master, and even he

was regarded rather as an equal, to be respected but kept in his place. "There's no news from Oxford yet?"

Even within the cloister they could not choose but keep one ear cocked for news of the siege. Success there now might well see the empress a prisoner, and force an end at last to this dissension that tore the land apart.

"Not since the king got his armies through the ford and into the town. We may hear something soon, if some who had time to get out of the city drift up this way. But the garrison will have made sure the castle larders were well filled. I doubt it will drag on for many weeks yet."

Siege is slow strangulation, and King Stephen had never been noted for patience and tenacity, and might yet find it tedious to sit waiting for his enemies to reach starvation, and take himself off to find brisker action elsewhere. It had happened before, and could happen again.

Hugh shrugged off his liege lord's shortcomings, and set off down the great court to the abbot's lodging, to distract Father Radulfus from his cherished if slightly jaded roses.

Brother Cadfael was back from the hospital of Saint Giles and busy in his workshop sorting beans for next year's seed, when Hugh came back from the abbot's lodging and made his way to the herbarium. Recognising the swift, light tread on the gravel, Cadfael greeted him without turning his head.

"Brother Porter told me you'd be here. Business with Father Abbot, he says. What's in the wind? Nothing new from Oxford?"

"No," said Hugh, seating himself comfortably on the bench against the timber wall, "nearer home. This is from no farther off than Eaton. Richard Ludel is dead. The dowager sent a groom with the news this morning. You've got the boy here at school."

Cadfael turned then, with one of the clay saucers, full of seed dried on the vine, in his hand. "So we have. Well, so his sire's gone, is he? We heard he was dwindling. The youngsters was no more than five when he was sent here, and they fetch him home very seldom. I think his father thought the child was better here with a few fellows near his own age than kept around a sick man's bed."

"And under the rule of a strong-willed grandmother, from all I hear. I don't know the lady," said Hugh thoughtfully, "except by reputation. I did know the man, though I've seen nothing of him since we got our wounded back from Lincoln. A good fighter and a decent soul, but dour, no talker. What's the boy like?"

"Sharp—venturesome... A very fetching imp, truth to tell, but as often in trouble as out of it. Bright at his letters, but he'd rather be out at play. Paul will have the task of telling him his father's dead, and himself master of a manor. It may trouble Paul more than it does the boy. He hardly knows his sire. I suppose there's no question about his tenure?"

"None in the world! I'm all for letting well alone, and Ludel earned his immunity. It's good property, too, fat land, and much of it under the plough. Good grazing, water-meadow and woodland, and it's been well tended, seemingly, for it's valued higher now than ten years since. But I must get to know the steward, and make sure he'll do the boy right."

"John of Longwood," said Cadfael promptly. "He's a good man and a good husbandman. We know him well, we've had dealings with him, and always found him reasonable and fair."

That land falls between the abbey holdings of Eyton-by-Severn on the one side, and Astor under-Wrekin on the other, and John has always given our forester free access between the two woodlands whenever needed, to save him time and labour. We bring wood out from one part of the Wrekin forest that way. It suits us both very well. Ludel's part of Eyton forest bit into ours there, it would be folly to fall out. Ludel had left everything to John these last two years, you'll have no trouble there."

"The abbot tells me," said Hugh, nodding satisfaction with this good-neighbourliness "that Ludel gave the boy as ward into his hands, four years ago, should he himself not live to see his son grown to manhood. It seems he made all possible provision for the future, as if he saw his own death coming towards him." And he added, somewhat grimly: "As well most of us have no such clear sight, or there'd be some hundreds in Oxford now hurrying to buy Masses for their souls. By this time the king must hold the town. It would fall into his hands of itself once he was over the ford. But the castle could hold out to the year's end, at a pinch, and there's no cheap way in there, it's a matter of starving them out. And if Robert of Gloucester in Normandy has not had word of all this by now, then his intelligencers are less able than I gave them credit for. If he knows how his sister's pressed, he'll be on his way home in haste. I've known the besiegers become the besieged before now, it could as well happen again."

"It will take him some time to get back," Cadfael pointed out comfortably. "And by all accounts no better provided than when he went."

The empress's half-brother and best soldier had been sent overseas, much against his inclination, to ask help for the lady from her less than loving husband, but Count Geoffrey of Anjou was credibly reported to be much more interested in his own ambitions in Normandy than in his wife's in England, and had been astute enough to inveigle Earl Robert into helping him pick off castle after castle in the duchy, instead of rushing to his wife's side to assist her to the crown of England. As early as June Robert had sailed from Wareham, against his own best judgement but at his sister's urgent entreaty, and Geoffrey's insistence, if he was to entertain any ambassador from her at all. And here was September ended, Wareham back in King Stephen's hands, and Robert still detained in Geoffrey's thankless service in Normandy. No, it would not be any quick or easy matter for him to come to his sister's rescue. The iron grip of siege tightened steadily round Oxford castle, and for once Stephen showed no sign of abandoning his purpose. Never yet had he come so close to making his cousin and rival his prisoner, and forcing her acceptance of his sovereignty.

"Does he realise," wondered Cadfael, closing the lid of a stone jar on his selected seeds "how near he's come to getting her into his power at last? How would you feel, Hugh, if you were in his shoes, and truly got your hands on her?"

"Heaven forefend!" said Hugh fervently, and grinned at the very thought. "For I should know what to do with her! And the devil of it is, neither will Stephen, if ever it comes to that. He could have kept her tight shut into Arundel the day she landed, if he'd had the sense. And what did he do? Gave her an escort, and sent her off to Bristol to join her brother! But if the queen ever gets the lady into her power, that will be another story. If he's a grand fighter she's the better general, and knows how to hold on to her advantages."

Hugh rose and stretched, and a rising breeze from the open door ruffled his smooth black

hair, and rustled the dangling bunches of dried herbs hanging from the roof beams. “We’re not hurrying the siege to an end, we must wait and see. I hear they’ve finally given you a lad to help you in the herb garden, is it true? I noticed your hedge has had a second clipping—was that his work?”

“It was.” Cadfael went out with him along the gravel path between the patterned beds of herbs, grown a little wiry at this end of the growing season. The box hedge at one side had indeed been neatly trimmed of the straggling shoots that come late in the summer. “Brother Winfrid—you’ll see him busy in the patch where we’ve cleared the bean vines, digging in the holms. A big, gangling lad all elbows and knees. Not long out of his novitiate. Willing, but slow. But he’ll do. They sent him to me, I fancy, because he turned out fumble-fisted with either pen or brush, but give him a spade, and that’s more his measure. He’ll do!”

Outside the walled herb garden the vegetable plots extended, and beyond the slight rise of their right the harvested pease fields ran down to the Meole Brook, which was the rear border of the abby enclave. And there was Brother Winfrid in full vigorous action, a big, loose-jointed youth with a shock-head of wiry hair hedging in his shaven crown, his habit kilted over his brawny knees, and a broad foot shod in a wooden clog driving the steel-edged spade through the fibrous tangle of bean holms as through blades of grass. He gave them one beaming glance as they passed, and returned to his work without breaking the rhythm. Hugh had only a glimpse of a weather-browned country face and round, guileless blue eyes.

“Yes, I should think he might do very well,” he said, impressed and amused, “whether with a spade or a battle-axe. I could do with a dozen such at the castle whenever they care to offer their services.”

“He’d be no use to you,” said Cadfael with certainty. “Like most big men, the gentlest sort of breathing. He’d throw his sword away to pick up the man he’d flattened. It’s the little, shrill-voiced terriers that bare their teeth.”

They emerged into the band of flowerbeds beyond the kitchen garden, where the rose bushes had grown leggy and begun to shed their leaves. Rounding the corner of the box hedge, they came out into the great court, at this working hour of the morning almost deserted but for one or two travellers coming and going about the guest hall, and a stir of movement down in the stables. Just as they rounded the tall hedge to step into the court, a small figure shot out of the gate of the grange court, where the barns and storage lofts lined three sides of a compact yard, and made off at a run across the narrows of the court into the cloister, to emerge a minute later at the other end at a decorous walk, with eyes lowered in a seemingly fashion, and plump, childish hands devoutly linked at his belt, the image of innocence. Cadfael halted considerately, with a hand on Hugh’s arm, to avoid confronting the boy too obviously.

The child reached the corner of the infirmary, rounded it, and vanished. There was a distinct impression that as he quit the sight of any watchers in the great court he broke into a run again, for a bare heel flashed suddenly and was gone. Hugh was grinning. Cadfael caught his friend’s eye, and said nothing.

“Let me hazard!” said Hugh, twinkling. “You picked your apples yesterday, and they’re not yet laid up in the trays in the loft. Lucky it was not Prior Robert who saw him at it, and he’d have had the breast of his cotte bulging like a portly dame!”

“Oh, there are some of us have a sort of silent understanding. He’ll have taken the biggest but only four. He thievers in moderation. Partly from decent obligation, partly because ha the sport is to tempt providence again and again.”

Hugh’s agile black eyebrow signalled amused enquiry. “Why four?”

“Because we have but four boys still in school, and if he thievers at all, he thievers *for* a There are several novices not very much older, but to them he has no obligation. They mu do their own thieving, or go without. And do you know,” asked Cadfael complacently, “wh that young limb is?”

“I do not, but you are about to astonish me.”

“I doubt if I am. That is Master Richard Ludel, the new lord of Eaton. Though plainly said Cadfael, wryly contemplating shadowed innocence, “he does not yet know it.”

*

Richard was sitting cross-legged on the grassy bank above the mill-pond, thoughtful nibbling out the last shreds of white flesh from round his apple core, when one of the novices came looking for him.

“Brother Paul wants you,” announced the messenger, with the austere complacent fa of one aware of his own virtue, and delivering a probably ominous summons to anothe “He’s in the parlour. You’d best hurry.”

“Me?” said Richard, round-eyed, looking up from his enjoyment of the stolen apple. N one had any great cause to be afraid of Brother Paul, the master of the novices and th children, who was the gentlest and most patient of men, but even a reproof from him was be evaded if possible. “What does he want me for?”

“You should best know that,” said the novice, with mildly malicious intent. “It was n likely he’d tell me. Go and find out for yourself, if you truly have no notion.”

Richard committed his denuded core to the pond, and rose slowly from the grass. “In th parlour, you say?” The use of so private and ceremonial a place argued something grave, an though he was unaware of any but the most venial of misdeeds that could be laid to h account during the past weeks, it behoved him to be wary. He went off slowly an thoughtfully, trailing his bare feet in the coolness of the grass, deliberately scuffing hard litt soles along the cobbles of the court, and duly presented himself in the small, dim parlou where visitors from the outside world might occasionally talk in private with their cloistere sons.

Brother Paul was standing with his back to the single window, rendering the small roo even dimmer than it need have been. The straight, close-shorn ring of hair round his polishe crown was still black and thick at fifty, and he habitually stood, as indeed he also sat, stoope a little forward, from so many years of dealing with creatures half his size, and desiring reassure them rather than awe them with his stature and bearing. A kindly, scholarl indulgent man, but a good teacher for all that, and one who could keep his chicks in ord without having to keep them in terror. The oldest remaining oblat, given to God when h was five years old, and now approaching fifteen and his novitiate, told awful stories o Brother Paul’s predecessor, who had ruled with the rod, and been possessed of an eye th

could freeze the blood.

Richard made his small obligatory obeisance, and stood squarely before his master, lifting to the light an impenetrable countenance, lit by two blue-green eyes of radiant innocence. thin, active child, small for his years but agile and supple as a cat, with a thick, curly crest of light brown hair, and a band of golden freckles over both cheekbones and the bridge of his neat, straight nose. He stood with feet braced sturdily apart, toes gripping the floorboards and stared up into Brother Paul's face, dutiful and guileless. Paul was well acquainted with that unblinking gaze.

"Richard," he said gently, "come, sit down with me. I have something I must tell you."

That in itself was enough to discount one slight childish unease, only to replace it with another and graver, for the tone was so considerate and indulgent as to prophesy the need for comfort. But what Richard's sudden flickering frown expressed was simple bewilderment. He allowed himself to be drawn to the bench and seated there within the circle of Brother Paul's arm, bare toes just touching the floor, and braced there hard. He could be prepared for scolding, but here was surely something for which he was not prepared, and had no idea how to confront.

"You know that your father fought at Lincoln for the king, and was wounded? And that he has since been in poor health." Secure in robust, well-fed and well-tended youth, Richard hardly knew what poor health might be, except that it was something that happened to the old. But he said: "Yes, Brother Paul!" in a small, accommodating voice, since it was expected of him.

"Your grandmother sent a groom to the lord sheriff this morning. He has brought a sad message, Richard. Your father has made his last confession and received his Saviour. He is dead, my child. You are his heir, and you must be worthy of him. In life and in death," said Brother Paul, "he is in the hand of God. So are we all."

The look of thoughtful bewilderment had not changed. Richard's toes shoved hard against the floor, and his hands gripped the edge of the bench on which he was perched.

"My father is dead?" he repeated carefully.

"Yes, Richard. Soon or late, it touches us all. Every son must one day step into his father's place and take up his father's duties."

"Then I shall be the lord of Eaton now?"

Brother Paul did not make the mistake of taking this for a simple expression of self-congratulation on a personal gain, rather as an intelligent acceptance of what he himself had just said. The heir must take up the burden and the privilege his sire had laid down.

"Yes, you are the lord of Eaton, or you will be as soon as you are of fit age. You must study to get wisdom, and manage your lands and people well. Your father would expect that of you."

Still struggling with the practicalities of his new situation, Richard probed back into his memory for a clear vision of this father who was now challenging him to be worthy. In his rare recent visits home at Christmas and Easter he had been admitted on arrival and departure to a sick-room that smelled of herbs and premature aging, and allowed to kiss the grey, austere face and listen to a deep voice, indifferent with weakness, calling him son and exhorting him to study and be virtuous. But there was little more, and even the face had grown dim in his memory. Of what he did remember he went in awe. They had never been

close enough for anything more intimate.

“You loved your father, and did your best to please him, did you not, Richard?” Brother Paul prompted gently. “You must still do what is pleasing to him. And you may say prayer for his soul, which will be a comfort also to you.”

“Shall I have to go home now?” asked Richard, whose mind was on the need for information rather than comfort.

“To your father’s burial, certainly. But not to remain there, not yet. It was your father’s wish that you should learn to read and write, and be properly instructed in figures. And you’re young yet, your steward will take good care of your manor until you come to manhood.”

“My grandmother,” said Richard by way of explanation, “sees no sense in my learning many letters. She was angry when my father sent me here. She says a lettered clerk is all any man needs, and books are no fit employment for a nobleman.”

“Surely she will comply with your father’s wishes. All the more is that a sacred trust, not that he is dead.”

Richard jutted a doubtful lip. “But my grandmother has other plans for me. She wants to marry me to our neighbour’s daughter, because Hiltrude has no brother, and will be the heiress to both Leighton and Wroxeter. Grandmother will want that more than ever now,” said Richard simply, and looked up ingenuously into Brother Paul’s slightly startled face.

It took a few moments to assimilate this news, and relate it to the boy’s entry into the abbey school when he was barely five years old. The manors of Leighton and Wroxeter lay one on either side of Eaton, and might well be a tempting prospect, but plainly Richard Ludlow had not concurred in his mother’s ambitious plans for her grandson, since he had taken steps to place the boy out of the lady’s reach, and a year later had made Abbot Radulfus Richard’s guardian, should he himself have to relinquish the charge too soon. Father Abbot had better know what’s in the wind, thought Brother Paul. For of such a misuse of his ward, thus almost in infancy, he would certainly not approve.

Very warily he said, fronting the boy’s unwavering stare with a grave face: “Your father said nothing of what his plans for you might be, some day when you are fully grown. Such matters must wait their proper time, and that is not yet. You need not trouble your head about any such match for years yet. You are in Father Abbot’s charge, and he will do what is best for you.” And he added cautiously, giving way to natural human curiosity: “Do you know this child—this neighbour’s daughter?”

“She isn’t a child,” Richard stated scornfully. “She’s quite old. She was betrothed once, but her bridegroom died. My grandmother was pleased, because after waiting some years for him Hiltrude wouldn’t have many suitors, not being even pretty, so she would be left for me.”

Brother Paul’s blood chilled at the implications. “Quite old” probably meant no more than a few years past twenty, but even that was an unacceptable difference. Such marriages, of course, were a commonplace, where there was property and land to be won, but they were certainly not to be encouraged. Abbot Radulfus had long had qualms of conscience about accepting infants committed by their fathers to the cloister, and had resolved to admit no more boys until they were of an age to make the choice for themselves. He would certainly look no more favourably on committing a child to the equally grave and binding discipline of matrimony.

“Well, you may put all such matters out of your mind,” he said very firmly. “Your one concern now and for some years to come must be with your lessons and the pastimes proper to your years. Now you may go back to your fellows, if you wish, or stay here quietly for a while, as you prefer.”

Richard slid out of the supporting arm readily and stood up sturdily from the bench, willing to face the world and his curious fellow pupils at once, and seeing no reason why he should shun the meeting even for a moment. He had yet to comprehend the thing that had happened to him. The fact he could grasp, the implications were slow to reach beyond his intelligence into his heart.

“If there is anything more you wish to ask,” said Brother Paul, eyeing him anxiously, “or if you feel the need for comfort or counsel, come back to me, and we’ll go to Father Abbot. He is wiser than I, and abler to help you through this time.”

So he might be, but a boy in school was hardly likely to submit himself voluntarily to an interview with so awesome a personage. Richard’s solemn face had settled into the brooding frown of one making his way through unfamiliar and thorny paths. He made his parting reverence and went out briskly enough, and Brother Paul, having watched him out of sight from the window, and seen no signs of imminent distress, went to report to the abbot what Dame Dionisia Ludel was said to be planning for her grandson.

Radulfus heard him out with alert attention and a thoughtful frown. To unite Eaton with both its neighbouring manors was an understandable ambition. The resulting property would be a power in the shire, and no doubt the formidable lady considered herself more than capable of ruling it, over the heads of bride, bride’s father and infant bridegroom. Land greed was a strong driving force, and children were possessions expendable for so desirable a profit.

“But we trouble needlessly,” said Radulfus, shaking the matter resolutely from his shoulders. “The boy is in my care, and here he stays. Whatever she may intend, she will not be able to touch him. We can forget the matter. She is no threat to Richard or to us.”

Wise as he might be, this was one occasion when Abbot Radulfus was to find his predictions going far astray.

They were all at chapter, on the twentieth morning of October, when the steward of the manor of Eaton presented himself, requesting a hearing with a message from his mistress.

John of Longwood was a burly, bearded man of fifty, with a balding crown and near-deliberate movements. He made a respectful obeisance to the abbot, and delivered his errand bluntly and practically, as one performing a duty but without committing himself to approval or disapproval.

“My lord, Dame Dionisia Ludel sends me to you with her devout greetings, and asks that you will send back to her, in my charge, her grandson Richard, to take up his rightful place as lord of the manor of Eaton in his father’s room.”

Abbot Radulfus leaned back in his stall and regarded the messenger with an impassive face. “Certainly Richard shall attend his father’s funeral. When is that to be?”

“Tomorrow, my lord, before High Mass. But that is not my mistress’s meaning. She wants the young lord to leave his studies here and come to take his proper place as lord of Eaton. I’m to say that Dame Dionisia feels herself to be the proper person to have charge of him now that he’s come into his inheritance, as she’s assured he shall do, without delay or hindrance. I have orders to bring him back with me.”

“I fear, master steward,” said the abbot with deliberation, “that you may not be able to carry out your orders. Richard Ludel committed the care of his son to me, should he himself die before the boy came to manhood. It was his wish that his son should be properly educated, the better to manage his estate when he came to inherit. I intend to fulfil what he undertook. Richard remains in my care until he comes of age and takes control of his own affairs. Until which time, I am sure, you will serve him as well as you have served his father and keep his lands in good heart.”

“Very surely I will, my lord,” said John of Longwood, with more warmth than he had shown in delivering his mistress’s message. “My lord Richard has left all to me since Lincoln and he never had cause to find fault, and neither shall his son ever be the loser by me. Count on that you may rely.”

“So I do. And therefore we may continue here with easy minds, and take as good care of Richard’s schooling and wellbeing as you do of his estates.”

“And what reply am I to take back to Dame Dionisia?” asked John, without any apparent disappointment or reluctance.

“Say to your lady that I greet her reverently in Christ, and that Richard shall come tomorrow, as is due, properly escorted,” said the abbot with a slightly admonitory emphasis, “but that I have his father’s sacred charge to hold him in wardship myself until he is a man, and by his father’s wishes I shall abide.”

“I will say so, my lord,” said John with a straight, wide stare and a deep reverence, and he walked jauntily out of the chapterhouse.

Brother Cadfael and Brother Edmund the infirmarer emerged into the great court just in time to see the messenger from Eaton mount his stocky Welsh cob at the gatehouse and ride

unhurriedly out into the Foregate.

“There goes a man, unless I’m much mistaken,” remarked Brother Cadfael sagely, “no was seriously displeased at taking back a flat refusal. Nor at all afraid of delivering it. A man might almost think he’ll savour the moment.”

“He is not dependent on the dame’s good will,” said Brother Edmund. “Only the sheriff and overlord can threaten his tenure, until the boy is his own master, and John knows his worth. And so does she, for that matter, having a shrewd head and proper appreciation of good management. For the sake of peace he’ll do her bidding, he does not have to relish the taste only to keep his mouth shut.”

And John of Longwood was a man of few words at the best of times, it would probably be no hardship to him to contain his dissent and keep a wooden face.

“But this will not be the end of it,” Cadfael warned. “If she has a greedy eye on Wroxeter and Leighton she’ll not give up so easily, and the boy’s her only means of getting her hands on them. We shall yet hear more from Dame Dionisia Ludel.”

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Abbot Radulfus had taken the warning seriously. Young Richard was accompanied to Eaton by Brother Paul, Brother Anselm and Brother Cadfael, a bodyguard stout enough to fend off even an attempt at abduction by force, which was unlikely in the extreme. Far more probable that the lady would try using the fond persuasions of affection and the ties of blood to work upon the boy with tears and blandishments, and turn him into a homesick ally in the enemy camp. If she had any such ideas, Cadfael reflected, studying Richard’s face along the way, she was under-estimating the innocent shrewdness of children. The boy was quite capable of weighing up his own interests and making the most of what advantages he had. He was happy enough at school, he had companions of his own age, he would not lightly abandon a known and pleasant life for one as yet strange, devoid of brothers, and threatened with a bride already old in his eyes. No doubt he valued and longed for his inheritance, but his it was, and safe, and whether he stayed at school or came home, he would not yet be allowed to rule it as he wished. No, it would take more than grandmotherly tears and embraces to secure Richard’s alliance, especially tears and embraces from a source never before known to be demonstratively fond.

It was a matter of seven miles or more from the abbey to the manor of Eaton, and for the honour and dignity of the monastery of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, in attendance on so solemn an occasion, they were sent forth mounted. Dame Dionisia had sent a groom with a stout Welsh pony for her grandson, perhaps as a first move in a campaign to enlist him as her ally, and the gift had been received with greedy pleasure, but it would not therefore necessarily produce a return in kind. A gift is a gift, and children are shrewd enough, and have a sharp enough perception of the motives of their elders, to take what is offered unsolicited without the least intention of paying for it in the fashion expected of them. Richard sat on his new pony proudly and happily, and in the fine, dewy autumn morning and the pleasure of being loosed from school for the day, almost forgot the sombre reason for the ride. The groom, a long-legged boy of sixteen, loped cheerfully beside him, and led the pony as the

splashed through the ford at Wroxeter, where centuries back the Romans had crossed the Severn before them. Nothing remained of their sojourn now but a gaunt, broken wall standing russet against the green fields, and a scattering of stones long ago plundered by the villagers for their own building purposes. In the place of what some said had been a city and fortress there was now a flourishing manor blessed with fat, productive land, and a prosperous church that maintained four canons.

Cadfael viewed it with some interest as they passed, for this was one of the two manors which Dame Dionisia hoped to secure to the Ludel estate by marrying off Richard to the girl Hiltrude Astley. So fine a property was certainly tempting. All this stretch of country on the northern side of the river extended before them in rich water meadows and undulating fields rising here and there into a gentle hill, and starred with clusters of trees just melting into the first gold of their autumn foliage. The land rose on the skyline into the forested ridge of the Wrekin, a great heaving fleece of woodland that spread downhill to the Severn, and cast a great tress of its dark mane across Ludel land and into the abbey's woods of Eyton-by-Severn. There was barely a mile between the grange of Eyton, close beside the river, and Richard Ludel's manor house at Eaton. The very names sprang from the same root, though time had prised them apart, and the Norman passion for order and formulation had fixed and ratified the differences.

As they rode nearer, their view of the long hog-back of forest changed and foreshortened. By the time they reached the manor they were viewing it from its end, and the hill had grown into an abrupt mountain, with a few sheer faces of rock just breaking the dark fell of the trees near the summit. The village sat serenely in the meadows, just short of the foothills, the manor within its long stockade raised over an undercroft, and the small church close beside it. Originally it had been a dependent chapel of the church at its neighbour Leighton-downriver by a couple of miles.

They dismounted within the stockade, and Brother Paul took Richard firmly by the hand as soon as the boy's foot touched ground, as Dame Dionisia came sweeping down the steps from the hall to meet them, advanced with authority upon her grandson, and stooped to kiss him. Richard lifted his face somewhat warily, and submitted to the salute, but he kept fast hold of Paul's hand. With one power bidding for his custody he knew where he stood, with the other he could not be sure of his standing.

Cadfael eyed the lady with interest, for though her reputation was known to him, he had never before been in her presence. Dionisia was tall and erect, certainly no more than fifty-five years old, and in vigorous health. She was, moreover, a handsome woman, if in a somewhat daunting fashion, with sharp, clear features and cool grey eyes. But their coolness showed one warning flash of fire as they swept over Richard's escort, recording the strength of the enemy. The household had come out at her back, the parish priest was at her side. There would be no engagement here. Later, perhaps, when Richard Ludel was safely entombed, and she could open the house in funeral hospitality, she might make a first move. The heir could hardly be kept from his grandmother's society on this day of all days.

The solemn rites for Richard Ludel took their appointed course. Brother Cadfael made good use of the time to survey the dead man's household, from John of Longwood to the youngest villein herdsman. There was every indication that the place had thrived well under

John's stewardship, and his men were well content with their lot. Hugh would have good reason to let well alone. There were neighbours present, too, Fulke Astley among them, keeping a weather eye on what he himself might have to gain if the proposed match ever took place. Cadfael had seen him once or twice in Shrewsbury, a gross, self-important man in his late forties, running to fat, ponderous of movement, and surely no match for that restless, active, high-tempered woman standing grim-faced over her son's bier. She had Richard beside her, a hand possessively rather than protectively on his shoulder. The boy's eyes had dilated to engulf half his face, solemn as the grave that had been opened for his father, and was now about to be sealed. Distant death is one thing, its actual presence quite another. Not until this minute had Richard fully realised the finality of this deprivation and severance.

The grandmotherly hand did not leave his shoulder as the cortege of mourners wound its way back to the manor, and the funeral meats spread for them in the hall. The long, leathery aging fingers had a firm grip on the cloth of the boy's best coat, and she guided him with her hand among guests and neighbours, properly but with notable emphasis making him the man of the house, and presiding figure at his father's obsequies. That did no harm at all. Richard was fully aware of his position, and well able to resent any infringement of his privilege. Brother Paul watched with some anxiety, and whispered to Cadfael that they had best get the boy away before all the guests departed, or they might fail to get him away at all, for want of witnesses. While the priest was still present, and those few others not of the household, he could hardly be retained by force.

Cadfael had been observing those of the company not well known to him. There were two grey-habited monks from the Savigniac house of Buildwas, a few miles away down-river, to which Ludel had been a generous patron on occasion, and with them, though withdrawn modestly throughout into the background, was a personage less easily identifiable. He wore a simple monastic gown, rusty black and well worn at the hems, but a head of unshorn dark hair showed within his cowl, and a gleam of reflected light picked out two or three metallic gleams from his shoulder that looked like the medals of more than one pilgrimage. Perhaps a wandering religious about to settle for the cloister. Savigny had been at Buildwas now for some forty years, a foundation of Roger de Clinton, bishop of Lichfield. Good, detached observers surely, these three. Before such reverend guests no violence could be attempted.

Brother Paul approached Dionisia courteously to take a discreet leave and reclaim his charge, but the lady took the wind from his sails with a brief, steely flash of her eyes and a voice deceptively sweet: "Brother, let me plead with you to let me keep Richard overnight. He has had a tiring day and begins to be weary now. He should not leave until tomorrow." But she did not say that she would send him back on the morrow, and her hand retained its grip on his shoulder. She had spoken loudly enough to be heard by all, a solicitous matron anxious for her young.

"Madam," said Brother Paul, making the best of a disadvantaged position, "I was about to tell you, sadly, that we must be going. I have no authority to let Richard stay here with you, for we are expected back for Vespers. I pray you pardon us."

The lady's smile was honey, but her eyes were sharp and cold as knives. She made no more assay, perhaps to establish her own case with those who overheard, rather than with any hope of achieving anything immediately, for she knew the occasion rendered her

helpless.

“Surely Abbot Radulfus would understand my desire to have the child to myself one more day. My own flesh and blood, the only one left to me, and I have seen so little of him these last years. You leave me uncomforted if you take him from me so soon.”

“Madam,” said Brother Paul, firm but uneasy, “I grieve to withstand your wish, but I have no choice. I am bound in obedience to my abbot to bring Richard back with me before evening. Come, Richard, we must be going.”

There was an instant while she kept and tightened her hold, tempted to act even thus publicly, but she thought better of it. This was no time to put herself in the wrong, rather to recruit sympathy. She opened her hand, and Richard crept doubtfully away from her to Paul’s side.

“Tell the lord abbot,” said Dionisia, her eyes daggers, but her voice still mellow and sweet, “that I shall seek a meeting with him very soon.”

“Madam, I will tell him so,” said Brother Paul.

*

She was as good as her word. She rode into the abbey enclave the next day, well attended and bravely mounted, and in her impressive best, to ask audience of the abbot. She was closeted with him for almost an hour, but came forth in a cold blaze of resentment and rage, stormed across the great court like a sudden gale, scattering unoffending novices like blown leaves, and rode away again for home at a pace her staid jennet did not relish, with her groom trailing mute and awed well in the rear.

“There goes a lady who is used to getting her own way,” remarked Brother Anselm, “but for once, I fancy, she’s met her match.”

“We have not heard the last of it, however,” said Brother Cadfael drily, watching the dust settle after her going.

“I don’t doubt her will,” agreed Anselm, “but what can she do?”

“That,” said Cadfael, not without quickening interest, “no doubt we shall see, all in good time.”

They had but two days to wait. Dame Dionisia’s man of law announced himself ceremoniously at chapter, requesting a hearing. An elderly clerk, meagre of person but brisk of bearing and irascible of feature, bustled into the chapterhouse with a bundle of parchments under his arm, and addressed the assembly with chill, reproachful dignity, in sorrow rather than in anger. He marvelled that a cleric and scholar of the abbot’s known uprightness and benevolence should deny the ties of blood, and refuse to return Richard Ludel to the custody and loving care of his only surviving close kinswoman, now left quite bereft of all her other menfolk, and anxious to help, guide and advise her grandson in his new lordship. A great wrong was being done to both grandmother and child, in the denial of the natural need and the frustration of their mutual affection. And yet once more the clerk put forth the solemn request that the wrong should be set right, and Richard Ludel sent back with him to his manor of Eaton.

Abbot Radulfus sat with a patient and unmoved face and listened to the end of the

studied speech very courteously. "I thank you for your errand," he said then mildly, "it was well done. I cannot well change the answer I gave to your lady. Richard Ludel who is dead committed the care of his son to me, by letter properly drawn and witnessed. I accepted the charge, and I cannot renounce it now. It was the father's wish that the son should be educated here until he comes to manhood, and takes command of his own life and affairs. That I promised, and that I shall fulfil. The death of the father only makes my obligation the more sacred and binding. Tell your mistress so."

"My lord," said the clerk, plainly having expected no other answer, and ready with the next step in his embassy, "in changed circumstances such a private legal document need not be the only argument valid in a court of law. The king's justices would listen no less to the plea of a matron of rank, widowed and now bereaved of her son, and fully able to provide all her grandson's needs, besides the natural need she has of the comfort of his presence. My mistress desires to inform you that if you do not give up the boy, she intends to bring suit to law to regain him."

"Then I can but approve her intention," said the abbot serenely. "A judicial decision in the king's court must be satisfying to us both, since it lifts the burden of choice from us. Tell her so, and say that I await the hearing with due submission. But until such a judgement is made I must hold to my own sworn undertaking. I am glad," he said with a dry and private smile, "that we are thus agreed."

There was nothing left for the clerk to do but accept this unexpectedly pliant response at its face value, and bow himself out as gracefully as he could. A slight rustle and stir of curiosity and wonder had rippled round the chapterhouse stalls, but Abbot Radulf had suppressed it with a look, and it was not until the brothers emerged into the great court and dispersed to their work that comment and speculation could break out openly.

"Was he wise to encourage her?" marvelled Brother Edmund, crossing towards the infirmary with Cadfael at his side. "How if she does indeed take us to law? A judge might very well take the part of a lone lady who wants her grandchild home."

"Be easy," said Cadfael placidly. "It's but an empty threat. She knows as well as any that the law is slow and costs dear, at the best of times, and this is none of the best, with the king far away and busy with more urgent matters, and half his kingdom cut off from any manner of justice at all. No, she hoped to make the lord abbot think again and yield ground for fear of long vexation. She had the wrong man. He knows she has no intention of going to law. Far more likely to take law into her own hands and try to steal the boy away. It would take slow law or swift action to snatch him back again, once she had him, and force is further out of the abbot's reach than it is out of hers."

"It is to be hoped," said Brother Edmund, aghast at the suggestion, "that she has not yet used up all her persuasions, if the last resort is to be violence."

No one could quite determine exactly how young Richard came to know every twist and turn of the contention over his future. He could not have overheard anything of what went on at chapter, nor were the novices present at the daily gatherings, and there was none among the brothers likely to gossip about the matter to the child at the centre of the conflict. Yet it was clear that Richard did know all that went on, and took perverse pleasure in it. Mischance made life more interesting, and here within the enclave he felt quite safe from any re-

danger, while he could enjoy being fought over.

“He watches the comings and goings from Eaton,” said Brother Paul, confiding his mind in his anxiety to Cadfael in the peace of the herb garden, “and is sharp enough to be very well aware of what they mean. And he understood all too well what went on at his father’s funeral. I could wish him less acute, for his own sake.”

“As well he should have his wits about him,” said Cadfael comfortably. “It’s the knowing innocents that avoid the snares. And the lady’s made no move now for ten days. Maybe she’s grown resigned, and given up the struggle.” But he was by no means convinced of that. Dame Dionisia was not used to being thwarted.

“It may be so,” agreed Paul hopefully, “for I hear she’s taken in some reverend pilgrim and refurbished the old hermitage in her woodland for his use. She wants his prayers daily for her son’s soul. Edmund was telling us about it when he brought our allowance of venison. We saw the man, Cadfael, at the funeral. He was there with the two brothers from Buildwas. He’d been lodged with them a week, they give him a very saintly report.”

Cadfael straightened up with a grunt from his bed of mint, grown wiry and thin of leaf now in late October. “The fellow who wore the scallop shell? And the medal of Saint James? Yes, I remember noticing him. So he’s settling among us, is he? And chooses a cell and a little square of garden in the woods rather than a grey habit at Buildwas! I never was drawn to the solitary life myself, but I’ve known those who can think and pray the better that way. It’s a long time since that cell was lived in.”

He knew the place, though he seldom passed that way, the abbey’s forester having excellent health, and very little need of herbal remedies. The hermitage, disused now for many years, lay in a thickly wooded dell, a stone-built hut with a square of ground once fenced and cultivated, now overgrown and wild. Here the belt of forest embraced both Eaton ground and the abbey’s woodland of Eyton, and the hermitage occupied a spot where the Ludel border jutted into neighbour territory, close to the forester’s cherished coppice. “He’ll be quiet enough there,” said Cadfael, “if he means to stay. By what name are we to know him?”

“They call him Cuthred. A neighbour saint is a fine thing to have, and it seems they’re already beginning to bring their troubles to him to sort. It may be,” ventured Brother Paul optimistically, “that it’s he who has tamed the lady. He must have a strong influence over her or she’d never have entreated him to stay. And there’s been no move from her these ten days. It may be we’re all in his debt.”

And indeed, as the soft October days slid away tranquilly one after another, in dim, misty dawns, noondays bright but veiled, and moist green twilights magically still, it seemed that there was to be no further combat over young Richard, that Dame Dionisia had thought better of the threat of law, and resigned herself to submission. She even sent, by her parish priest, a gift of money to pay for Masses in the Lady Chapel for her son’s soul, a gesture which could only be interpreted as a move towards reconciliation. So, at least, Brother Francis, the new custodian of Saint Mary’s altar, considered it.

“Father Andrew tells me,” he reported after the visitor had departed, “that since the Savigniac brothers from Buildwas brought this Cuthred into her house she sets great store by his counsel, and rules herself by his advice and example. The man has won a great report for

holiness already. They say he's taken strict vows in the old way, and never leaves his cell and garden now. But he never refuses help or prayers to any who ask. Father Andrew thinks very highly of him. The anchorite way is not our way," said Brother Francis with great earnestness "but it's no bad thing to have such a holy man living so close, on a neighbouring manor. I cannot but bring a blessing."

So thought all the countryside, for the possession of so devout a hermit brought great lustre to the manor of Eaton, and the one criticism that ever came to Cadfael's ears concerning Cuthred was that he was too modest, and at first deprecated, and later forbade the too lavish sounding of his praises abroad. No matter what minor prodigy he brought about, averting by his prayers a threatened cattle murrain, after one of Dionisia's herds sickened, sending out his boy to give warning of a coming storm, which by favour of his intercessions passed off without damage, whatever the act of grace, he would not allow any of the merit for it to be ascribed to him, and grew stern and awesomely angry if the attempt was made, threatening the wrath of God on any who disobeyed his ban. Within a month of his coming his discipline counted for more in the manor of Eaton than did either Dionisia's or Father Andrew's, and his fame, banned from being spread openly, went about by neighbourly whispers, like a prized secret to be exulted in privately but hidden from the world.

Eilmund, the forester of Eyton, came now and then to chapter at the abbey to report on work done, or on any difficulties he might have encountered, and extra help he might need. It was not often he had anything but placid progress to report, but in the second week of November he came one morning with a puzzled frown fixed on his brow, and a glum face. It seemed that a curious blight of misfortune had settled upon his woodland.

Eilmund was a thickset, dark, shaggy man past forty, very powerful of body, and sharp enough of mind. He stood squarely in the midst at chapter, solidly braced on his sturdy legs like a wrestler confronting his opponent, and made few words of what he had to tell.

“My lord abbot, there are things happening in my charge that I cannot fathom. A week ago, in that great rainstorm we had, the brook that runs between our coppice and the open forest washed down some loose bushes, and built up such a dam that it overflowed and changed its course, and flooded my newest planting. And no sooner had I cleared the block than I found the flood-water had undercut part of the bank of my ditch, a small way upstream, and the fall of soil had bridged the ditch. By the time I found it the deer had gone into the coppice. They’ve eaten off all the young growth from the plot we cropped two years ago. I doubt some of the trees may die, and all will be held back a couple more years at least before they get their growth. It spoils my planning,” complained Eilmund, outraged for the ruin of his cycle of culling, “besides the present loss.”

Cadfael knew the place, Eilmund’s pride, the farmed part of Eyton forest, as neat and well ditched a coppice as any in the shire, where the regular cutting of six- or seven-year-old wood let in the light at every cropping, so that the wealth of ground cover and wild flowers was always rich and varied. Some trees, like ash, spring anew from the stool of the original trunk just below the cut. Some, like elm or aspen, from below the ground all round the stump. Some of the stools in Eilmund’s care, several times cropped afresh, had grown into groves of their own, their open centres two good paces across. No grave natural disaster had ever before upset his pride in his skills. No wonder he was so deeply aggrieved. And the loss to the abbey was itself serious, for coppice wood for fuel, charcoal, hafts of tools, carpentry and all manner of uses brought in good income.

“Nor is that the end of it,” went on Eilmund grimly, “for yesterday when I made my rounds on the other side of the copse, where the ditch is dry but deep enough and the bank steep, what should have happened but the sheep from Eaton had broke out of their field by a loose pale, just where Eaton ground touches ours, and sheep, as you know, my lord, make nothing of a bank that will keep out deer, and there’s nothing they like better for grazing than the first tender seedlings of ash. They’ve made short work of much of the new growth before I could get them out. And neither I nor John of Longwood can tell how they got through so narrow a gap, but you know if the matron ewe takes a notion into her head there’s no stopping her, and the others will follow. It seems to me my forest is bewitched.”

“Far more like,” suggested Prior Robert, looking severely down his long nose, “that there has been plain human negligence, either on your part or your neighbour’s.”

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