

# *The* LAST HOURS

# MINETTE WALTERS

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*For Madeleine and Martha*

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In Dorsetshire the plague made the country quite void of inhabitants so that there were almost none left alive. From there it passed into Devonshire and Somersetshire, even unto Bristol, and raged in such sort that the Gloucestershire men would not suffer the Bristol men to have access to them by any means. But at length it came to Gloucester; yea even to Oxford and to London, and finally it spread over all England and so wasted the people that scarce the tenth person of any sort was left alive.

Geoffrey the Baker,  
*Chronicon Angliae temporibus Edwardi II et Edwardi III*

We see death coming into our midst like black smoke; a plague which cuts off the young, a rootless phantom which has no mercy or fair countenance. It is seething, terrible; wherever it may come; a head that gives pain and causes a loud cry, a burden carried under the arms, a painful angry knob, a lump. It is an ugly eruption that comes with unseemly haste. The early ornament of a Black Death.

Juan Gethin (d. 1349)

And there were those who were so sparsely covered with earth that the dogs dragged them forth and devoured many bodies throughout the city.

Agnolo di Tura, *Cronica Senese*

Men and women [of Florence] abandoned their dwellings, their relatives, their property . . . as if they thought nobody in the city would remain alive and that its last hour had come.

Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*

THIRD DAY OF JULY, 1348



# One

## *Develish, Dorsetshire*

THE SUMMER HEAT WAS SUCKING the life from Develish. Leaves wilted on trees, ponies stood heads down, too tired to crop the grass, chickens settled in the dust with their eyes closed and serfs leant heavily on their scythes in the fields. Only blowflies prospered, swarming around the mounds of dung-soiled straw outside the cattle sheds and buzzing annoyingly through every room in the manor house.

It was not a day for travelling, which explained Sir Richard of Develish's ill-humour. His voice rose in anger each time his steward or servants failed to react fast enough to his demands, and since the journey wasn't one he wanted to make, there was a good deal to rage about. Only the calming influence of his wife, Lady Anne, allowed the preparations to go ahead. Quietly, she overruled every decision Sir Richard made and ordered the servants to pack his bags according to her instructions.

Eleanor, their fourteen-year-old daughter, listened to it all from Lady Anne's chamber upstairs. She was as resentful about her father's trip as he was, and wished her mother in Hell for forcing him to take it. The girl should have been working on an

embroidered pillow for her trousseau but, instead, she stood at the window, watching a covered wagon being loaded with wooden chests of food and clothes, and money for her dowry.

Eleanor was spoilt and petulant at the best of times, but the heat made her worse. Her eyes were drawn to a serf who was weaving new sapling whips into the wattle fence that surrounded the orchard. He worked deftly, flexing the green wood with strong, sun-browned arms before threading it between the weathered wood of previous years. Only a foolish slave would labour so hard in those temperatures, and a satisfied smile lit Eleanor's face when she recognised him. Nothing pleased her more than to find reasons to belittle Thaddeus Thurkell.

Like all bondsmen, he was dirty and ragged, but he was half a head taller than most Dorset men, and his swarthy skin, long black hair and almond-shaped eyes bore no resemblance to the man he called father—short-limbed, weaselly-faced Will Thurkell. One rumour had it that Eva Thurkell had run away to Melcombe to sleep with a sailor, another that Thaddeus was the result of a snatched coupling with a passing gypsy.

Whatever the truth, the father hated the son and the son hated the father. The boy had been subjected to daily beatings while he was growing up, but these days Will was too afraid of him to lift the stick, for it was said that Thaddeus could bend an iron bar over his knee and fell a grown man with a single punch to the head. He paid lip service to his lowly place in Develish, ducking his head when he had to, but there was no respect in the way he did it. He looked past people as if they weren't there, particularly the man who acknowledged him as a son.

Will Thurkell was lazy and resented the *ad opus* work he was expected to do for the manor in return for his strips of land. Even as a young boy, Thaddeus had had to sweat in his father's place

on the threat that his mother would be given the rod if he didn't. A sad and sorry woman without an ounce of spirit, Eva had had more than her share of punishment down the years. Only the dwarfish, pale-skinned children who came after Thaddeus had been spared her husband's wrath.

This wasn't to say that Eleanor had any sympathy for Eva. The harlot had known the rules when she lay in sin with another, and it was her own fault if she couldn't pass her bastard off as Will's. Gossip said she'd tried to claim Thaddeus was the product of rape, but few believed her since she hadn't mentioned violation until the swarthy baby, so different from her husband, arrived. The stain of illegitimacy made Thaddeus as sinful as his mother, though you wouldn't think it to watch him. He carried his head high instead of hanging it in shame.

Eleanor liked the idea of bringing Thaddeus Thurkell to his knees. He was six years older than she was, and she dreamt of humbling him. As the temperature rose, he shed his tunic and laboured on in short hose and a loose-fitting shirt with rolled-up sleeves. It pleased the girl to spy on him; it pleased her even more to think he knew she was doing it. When he tied a piece of cloth around his forehead to keep the sweat from his eyes, he stared directly at her window and her cheeks flushed rosy red from guilty desire.

It was her father's fault for promising her to the ugly, pock-marked son of a neighbouring lord whose demesne, larger than Develish's, was two days' ride away. She faced a joyless future married to Peter of Bradmayne, who was so puny he could barely sit astride a horse. Eleanor's own pony, a pretty little bay jennet with white stockings, was cropping grass in the part of her father's demesne that lay beyond the moat. She was tempted to go outside and demand Thaddeus saddle it and assist her to mount. If he

dared to look at her while he was doing it, she would slice his face with her crop.

This amusing fantasy was cut short by the sound of her mother's footsteps on the stairs. Eleanor scurried back to her stool and her embroidery, and pretended industry where there was none. Her feelings for Lady Anne bordered on hatred, because Eleanor knew perfectly well that she had her mother to thank for choosing Peter of Bradmayne as a husband. Lady Anne preferred duty and discipline to love. She had been brought up by nuns and should have taken vows, since her favourite pastime was nagging and lecturing her daughter about her failings.

Eleanor could tell from the silence that Lady Anne was counting how many stitches had been added to the design since last she looked. 'It's too warm,' she declared mutinously. 'My fingers keep slipping on the needle.'

'You don't sew it for me, daughter, you sew it for yourself. If you see no merit in the task, then choose something more rewarding to do.'

'There is nothing.'

Through the open window Lady Anne could hear the shuffle of horses' hooves on the baked mud of the forecourt below as Sir Richard's retinue mustered for the journey. In the fields beyond the moat, she could see the serfs at the back-breaking task of making hay; closer in, Thaddeus Thurkell sweated over the wattle fence. It wasn't difficult to guess what Eleanor had been doing with her time. 'Your father summons you to say goodbye,' she said. 'He will be gone a fortnight.'

The girl rose. 'I shall tell him I don't want him to go.'

'As you please.'

Eleanor stamped her foot. 'It's you who makes him go. You make everyone do things they don't like.'

Lady Anne's eyes creased with amusement. 'Not your father, Eleanor. He may throw tantrums to remind us of the efforts he makes on our behalf, but he wouldn't be going to Bradmayne if it wasn't in his interests to do so.'

'What interests?'

'He's heard rumours that Peter of Bradmayne's childhood sickness has returned. He wants to see the truth for himself before he puts his seal to the marriage contract.' She shook her head at the sudden hope in her daughter's expression. 'Be careful what you wish for, Eleanor. If Peter dies, you may end up with no husband at all.'

'I won't shed tears because of it.'

'You will when your cousin inherits this house. Better by far to be mistress of Bradmayne than a lonely old maid relying on a relative's charity for bed and board.'

'The world is full of men,' the girl said defiantly. 'There are many more pleasing husbands than Peter of Bradmayne.'

'But none that your father can afford,' Lady Anne reminded her. 'Develish is Sir Richard's only demesne, and he has never been granted another. Do you not think he would offer a larger dowry if he could? He spoils you in everything else. Be grateful for Bradmayne and pray that Peter is strong enough to give you sons so that one may become Lord of Develish.'

Eleanor loathed these conversations in which her mother preached and she was forced to listen. 'Perhaps I'll be cursed like you,' she muttered spitefully. 'Father says it's your fault he has no heir.'

'Then you have a sad future ahead of you,' the woman answered. 'I mourn the lack of a son every day, and so should you.'

'I don't see why,' the girl said with a flounce of her long skirts. 'It's not my fault you never had one.'

Lady Anne despaired of her daughter's stupidity. Eleanor was an undoubted beauty, with her pale skin, blonde hair and startling blue eyes—a miniature of her father—but despite years of patient teaching, she was incapable of keeping a thought in her head. 'If you had brothers, My Lord of Blandeforde would have granted your father's applications for more lands on their behalf and he could have used the levies from the other estates to ensure your future,' she said quietly. 'As it is, he has been unable to persuade a man of wealth to overlook the paucity of your dowry. We have had many visitors here but none has made an offer for you.'

Eleanor's eyes narrowed. 'They're afraid I'll grow scrawny and ugly like you, Mother. Even Father can't bear to touch you any more.'

'No,' Lady Anne agreed. 'I count it as one of my few blessings, although I dislike the way you encourage him to put his hands on you.'

'You mustn't be so jealous. I'm not to blame if Sir Richard loves me more than he loves you. You should have taken care not to disappoint him.'

Humour glimmered briefly in Lady Anne's eyes. 'Your father loves many women,' she said, 'but you are his only child. If you didn't have his likeness he'd doubt your parentage.'

'You lie.'

The woman eyed her curiously. 'What offends you, Eleanor? That your father can't make sons or that he pretends I'm the only competition you have for his affections? Where do you think he goes when he rides from home of an afternoon? Who do you think he sees? He has as strong a taste for serfs as you do.'

The girl stamped her foot again. 'I *hate* you,' she hissed.

Her mother turned away. 'Then pray that Lord Peter is free of sickness and agrees with Sir Richard that you should be married

before summer is out. If your husband can overlook the selfishness of your nature, you should find him easier to tolerate than you do me.'



Thaddeus Thurkell was careful to keep his contempt well hidden as he observed the daughter's farewell to her father out of the corner of his eye. Nothing about it was honest. Sir Richard and Lady Eleanor were too alike—self-satisfied and demanding of attention, each arrayed in brightly embroidered apparel—and the only purpose of their noisy parting was to make everyone aware of it. As always, their behaviour and dress eclipsed the quieter people around them and, as always, Lady Anne stood apart, unloved and unnoticed. She had none of the flamboyance of her husband and daughter, and Thaddeus liked her better for it. He knew that she'd spent time in a nunnery as a child, being educated by the sisters, and he assumed her quiet wisdom and knowledge of medicine came from that experience.

It wasn't Thaddeus's place to feel sorry for Milady—he had no business thinking about her at all—but he couldn't see her in the presence of her husband and daughter without being offended on her behalf. They paid her as little respect as his stepfather paid his mother but, unlike Eva, Lady Anne had too much pride to show she cared. She made it appear that she was standing apart by choice, and looked the other way when Sir Richard ran his ham-like fists over his daughter, pulling her close and planting juicy kisses on her lips before heaving his burly body onto his black charger and calling to his retinue to fall in behind him.

As the convoy set off, Thaddeus kept his head down and continued to weave the green hazel into the wattle fence. The sound of the cart wheels creaking over the rough track wasn't loud

enough to mask the swish of Lady Eleanor's embroidered gown as she walked across the forecourt towards him, but Thaddeus refused to give her the satisfaction of turning around and dropping to one knee. His penance would be a kick and a torrent of abuse for impudence, but he preferred that to paying homage to someone he despised. If there was any charity in Lady Eleanor, he had yet to see it.

To prove the point, the girl picked up one of his sapling whips and struck him with it. 'How dare you turn your back on me!' she snapped.

Thaddeus straightened and this time the whip, swung in an upward arc, caught him under the chin.

'Know your station,' Eleanor ordered. 'Lower your head and bend your knee. It's not for you to look at me.'

Thaddeus didn't answer, simply stooped to retrieve another sapling from the ground and began to feed it into the fence, ignoring the blow that landed across his shoulders. He was sure Sir Richard's new steward was watching from the house, and his penalty for breaking off from his work to humour Lady Eleanor would be severe. Gossip said the man had been brought in to raise extra revenue for Sir Richard's extravagances, and Thaddeus was disinclined to oblige him by paying a fine. He held Lady Eleanor and the steward in equal contempt, but he could take a thrashing more easily from a fourteen-year-old girl than his family could afford a pound of grain.

He was spared further punishment by Lady Anne. She caught her daughter's wrist and forced it down, removing the whip while congratulating the serf on the excellence of his work. 'You must excuse my daughter, Thaddeus. She doesn't know the difference between a job done well and a job done badly. You deserve much praise for what you do.'



He turned and bowed to her. ‘Thank you, milady. I trust this day finds you well.’

‘It does indeed.’ She put her hand on Eleanor’s arm. ‘Come, child. We have things to attend to inside.’

Thaddeus watched them walk away, wondering why so little of the mother was in the daughter. The girl took after her father in everything—even cruelty—with only the neatness of her build resembling Lady Anne’s. The woman was dark, the girl blonde like her father. Thaddeus’s own situation made him peculiarly sensitive to family likenesses. He looked for differences between generations in the way a hunchback looked for telltale twists in the spines of others. It soothed a man’s brain to believe he wasn’t alone in his affliction.

As a child, Thaddeus had prayed his hair would change colour or his bones stop growing so that Will would look at him one morning and see something he recognised. But as he grew older and the beatings became worse, he learnt to glory in the fact that he had no relationship with the man. It wasn’t by accident that Will’s progeny were small and slow-witted, and Thaddeus was not. He couldn’t remember the number of times his mother had begged him to play the idiot in front of Will. It was the cleverness of Thaddeus’s mind that drove her vicious husband mad, not the darkness of his looks or his tallness. *Cover your gaze, keep silent*, Eva had urged. *Do not provoke him with the slickness of your tongue or the scorn that blazes from your eyes. He has none of your ability, and he knows it. Do it for me if not for yourself.*

Thaddeus had mixed feelings about his mother. She rarely showed him love for fear of Will’s jealousy, but her need of him shouted from her pleading eyes and her desperate clutching at his tunic whenever she heard Will approach. She made Thaddeus promise each day that he would not abandon her, but it irked

him that she had never found the courage to defend him against Will's physical and verbal assaults.

He had heard his mother being called a whore all his life, and it was hard to think of her as anything else. When he was ten, he'd asked her who his true father was, but she'd refused to tell him. Will would beat it out of him and their situation would become worse. Her husband's rage would be uncontrollable if he had a name to brood on instead of believing that Thaddeus was the result of rape by a stranger.

Her answer had led Thaddeus to think his father must be known to Will. He studied his own face in the beaten metal plate that passed for a mirror in Will's hut and then searched the features of every man in Develish—rich and poor alike—looking for eyes, complexions and noses that resembled his. He didn't find them, and as time passed he came to accept the rumours that his father was a foreign sailor. He even liked the idea. There was more to respect about a man who travelled the seas than one who was bonded to a feudal lord.

Precisely what Thaddeus's status was in Sir Richard's manor had never been defined. As Eva's bastard, he had no right to inherit Will's holdings—several strips of land and the dwelling that went with them—but when Thaddeus asked the priest what would happen to him after Will was dead, the old man had shrugged and told him to work hard and keep improving his skills. As long as Sir Richard valued the quality of his labour, there was no reason for Thaddeus to concern himself with his future. Even slaves were well looked after when they had their master's approval.

It was Will's favourite taunt to call Eva's bastard a slave. He claimed he owned Thaddeus body and soul; that without his patronage the boy would have been left to die in one of the ditches outside Develish. He seemed unaware that serfdom itself was

a form of slavery, and that the oath of fealty he'd sworn to Sir Richard—*'I will not marry or leave this land without my lord's permission and I bind my children and my children's children to this promise . . .'*—tied him and his legitimate offspring to Develish in a way that it didn't tie Thaddeus.

The person who had explained this to Thaddeus had been Lady Anne. She had drawn him aside on Lady Day in his thirteenth year when he was cleaning out the poultry pens and told him the bailiff was coming for him. 'You must take care he doesn't find you,' she warned. 'This is the day when Sir Richard hears the oaths of bondage. Since you cannot be governed by the pledges Will has made, I urge you to be wary of making any of your own. Without land or dwelling, you will be dependent on my husband's goodwill for your food and board, and that is not a fate I would wish on you, Thaddeus.'

He didn't understand why Lady Anne took an interest in him but he owed her more than he owed anyone else, and she had never once asked for anything in return. 'If I escape the bailiff this year, milady, he will find me the next.'

'My husband's steward is unwell and not likely to live another twelve months,' she told him, 'and it's he who questions your position. Sir Richard will have forgotten the matter inside a week, and a new steward will know nothing of your circumstances. Every year that passes is a year of freedom gained. Remember that.'

Thaddeus thought of the punishment he would receive for leaving his work. When the bailiff had finished with him, Will would take over. Was it worth so much pain just to avoid mouthing a few words of servitude? 'Do freemen endure starvation more easily than slaves, milady?'

Lady Anne smiled. 'You know they do not, Thaddeus, but a slave will always die before his master does. If you value your life,

show care not to swear it away too easily, and take even more care to stay silent on the subject. If my husband is warned in advance that you have the right to declare yourself free of him, he will consult the bishop and use Church law to rule against you.'

The thrashings had been as bad as any Thaddeus had received but, as Lady Anne had predicted, the old steward died and his query about whether a bastard was bound by the oath of a man who refused to adopt him as his own was forgotten. It made little difference to Thaddeus's life except that he began to imagine a future outside Develish. His dreams were necessarily limited by his ignorance of what lay beyond the village, but they sparked a hope he'd never had before. He paid more attention to the stories told by the peddlars and merchants who passed through Develish, and listened to what the leading bondsmen said when they drove sheep to other demesnes or nearby markets.

He was most interested in descriptions of the sea which he knew lay to the south. His ambition was to reach it one day and take a ship to a foreign port where he would be known as something other than Eva Thurkell's bastard or Will Thurkell's slave. In winter, when the trees shed their leaves and he climbed the wooded slopes at the end of the valley to collect fallen branches to feed the manor house fires, he could see hills all the way to the horizon. They seemed to rise in height to shimmering purple in the far distance, and he convinced himself that his gateway to another world lay on the other side. But how far away it was, and how long it would take him to walk there, he had no idea.



Eleanor wrested her arm from her mother's grasp as they entered the house. 'Don't ever speak to me like that in front of a slave

again,' she stormed. 'Thaddeus was insolent. He deserved to be whipped.'

Lady Anne walked away from her. 'You behaved badly, daughter. Be grateful I spared you further shame.'

The girl pursued her. 'It's you who has a taste for serfs not I or Father. Do you think I don't see the way Thaddeus behaves towards you? When he makes a bow to Sir Richard, he does it to avoid a beating, but the ones he makes to you are genuine. Why is that?'

Lady Anne was surprised that her daughter was so perceptive. 'I gave him liniment once or twice for his bruises when he was a child. I expect he remembers.'

'He feels sorry for you. That's why he does it. I can see it in his eyes.'

Lady Anne paused before they reached the kitchen. The room was uncharacteristically silent, as if every servant inside was listening to the conversation. 'Then you see wrongly, Eleanor. Only God knows what is going on inside a person's head.'

The girl smiled. 'Thaddeus makes himself your equal if he dares feel pity for you. What is that if not insolence? Will Father say I behaved badly if I tell him Eva Thurkell's bastard assumes the rights of a freeman?'

Lady Anne studied her for a moment. 'I suggest you worry more about Sir Richard's displeasure when he learns how interested *you* are in Thaddeus Thurkell, Eleanor. There is as much to read in your eyes as there is in anyone else's.'

(EXTRACT FROM A PRIVATE JOURNAL KEPT BY LADY ANNE)

*The third day of July, 1348*

*Sir Richard has left for Bradmayne, accompanied by 10 fighting men and the bailiff, Master Foucault. They take with them the gold I have preserved so carefully for Eleanor's dowry. I wonder if the effort was worth it when she curses me in one breath for not saving enough to purchase a better husband, and blames me in the next for preventing Sir Richard from gambling it away on games of chance. With no dowry, she would be unable to wed at all, and she assures me she would prefer that to being married to Lord Peter.*

*In my heart, I hope the rumours that the boy is ailing are true, for I see no happiness for Eleanor in Bradmayne. Her father has told her so many lies that she's ill-prepared for what she'll find there. It amuses him to belittle Lord Peter in her eyes for he's jealous of her affections, but he doesn't hesitate to paint Bradmayne as a place of beauty, wealth and wonder.*

*Such descriptions are quite different from the reports Gyles Startout brings me. If I thought Eleanor would believe me, I would try to advise her, but Sir Richard has made fine work of persuading her that I'm responsible for this match. Everything I say falls on deaf ears, in particular my attempts to portray Lord*

*Peter in a kinder light. If she succeeds in giving him a son, I fear the baby will be conceived and born in hatred.*

*I spoke with Gyles in private before Sir Richard left. He is more loyal than I and Develish deserve, tolerating insult from both my husband and the men he rides with in order to bring us news from the world outside. I have asked him to enquire of the Bradmayne servants how Eleanor might best make a friend of My Lady of Bradmayne—even the knowledge that My Lady has a fondness for ribbons would be of use. I fear Eleanor will suffer great loneliness without a confidante.*

FOURTEENTH DAY OF JULY, 1348



## Two

### *Bradmayne, Dorsetshire*

GYLES STARTOUT QUICKLY LOST INTEREST in whether or not Lady Eleanor's future mother-in-law could be wooed with ribbons. A more pressing concern was how accurately he was interpreting what he was seeing. He knew from previous visits to Bradmayne that the enmity between My Lord and his people was powerful—floggings were frequent, taxes high and distrust a common emotion—but the divide seemed peculiarly wide now.

Since Sir Richard's arrival nine days ago, Gyles had been watching serfs gather in groups about their doors in the village, debating heatedly with each other and looking towards the heavily barred gate in the manor's boundary wall. They appeared restless and angry, though at three hundred paces they were too far away for Gyles to make out their expressions or hear what they said. None attempted to approach the gate.

Only the steward, the bailiff and the priest were permitted to come and go at will. The priest went on foot, giving blessings and receiving courtesy in return; the steward and bailiff rode on horseback, the one shouting orders and the other enforcing them with a bull whip. Once or twice, Gyles saw women gesture

towards the church which stood inside the manor enclosure, as if asking the priest why they couldn't visit him there, but the man invariably shook his head. It seemed everything inside the wall was out of bounds to peasants.

Gyles observed all this during the long, tedious hours he was confined with other fighting men in an open-sided barn on the forecourt. Each of My Lord of Bradmayne's guests had brought his own entourage and space was limited. There were some fifty soldiers occupying the barrack and all but Gyles were French. He spoke and understood their language but had little in common with them. They were hired mercenaries who talked of home and showed no interest in Dorsetshire or her people, complaining the soft, unintelligible burr of their dialect deterred conversation.

The intense summer heat—made worse by Sir Richard's injunction that his men wear their heavy woollen livery at all times—sapped energy. To move was to cause a river of sweat to pour down the soldiers' backs. Yet with only two wells inside the manor enclosure, and a crowd of invited lords and their guards camped on the available land, water was becoming a scarce commodity. Gyles was aware of it because he heard and understood what the house servants said, but the French, whose drinks of choice were ale and sour wine, remained ignorant.

They sat in the shade of the barn, tossing dice and mocking Gyles for choosing to stand apart in the lee of the manor house. They called him 'Grandpere' because of his forty-five years and grizzled hair, and jeered at him for playing soldier when he didn't have to. They believed him slow-witted because he was born into bondage, and Gyles did nothing to change their opinion. He'd suffered the jibes of fighting men for as long as he'd been in Sir Richard's retinue.

He was there because Lady Anne had persuaded her husband to elevate a Develish serf to fighting man, and Gyles gained no respect by his low-born status or having a woman plead for him. Even soldiers who were recent additions to Sir Richard's retinue looked down on him, and the tasks he was given were menial. He made no complaint. His loyalty to Lady Anne far outweighed the frustration of acting as stable hand to his colleagues or slop-emptier to his Norman master.

He was Milady's eyes and ears on every journey her husband took, and the information he brought home benefited Develish. Lady Anne was interested in how other demesnes were managed—well or badly—and secretly recorded Gyles's detailed accounts on vellum. In private she used what she learnt to influence Sir Richard's stewards; in public she pretended interest in trifling descriptions of banquets and cockfights, which were all her husband saw fit to bring back from his visits.

In truth, Gyles doubted Sir Richard was capable of describing anything else. His intellect was poor, his appetites carnal and he had so little interest in the management of his own demesne that he was unlikely to see progress in another. He could make his mark on the letters and writs his steward placed in front of him, but his inability to read meant he had no idea what he was signing.

Most of the knowledge Gyles gained came from talking to serfs. Develish born and bred, he was easily recognised by Dorsetshire men as one of their own. They knew of his family and gave him their trust despite his role as soldier to a Norman lord. But Gyles had yet to find a single person in Bradmayne—even those he'd befriended on previous visits—who was willing to speak with him. The house servants shook their heads nervously when he tried to engage them, and the barricaded gate put the field serfs beyond his reach.

On the third day, he approached the guards who manned it. He told them truthfully that he had a cousin who was married to a Bradmayne man and asked permission to walk to the village to spend an hour in her company. They refused, citing orders from My Lord of Bradmayne that guests and their retainers must remain inside the enclosure. When Gyles asked the reason, he was advised that an unexpected levy had caused unrest amongst the bondsmen.

It was a persuasive answer. My Lord's revelries to celebrate the contract of alliance between Bradmayne and Develish were showy and lavish, designed to secure the dowry of gold that Sir Richard had brought with him. If Bradmayne was feeding his guests at the expense of his people, the sense of injustice would be considerable.

Gyles was careful never to show his disapproval of the excesses he witnessed on trips such as these. To watch Sir Richard toss a half-eaten haunch of venison to a pack of hunting dogs or slump to the floor through inebriation offended him when serfs were hungry, but to reveal it in his expression would be to forfeit his position. He knew well that his French colleagues would betray him if they guessed at his contempt for the man he served. Or, indeed, for the whole ruling class.

Lords lived off the labour of peasants, spurring them to greater effort through punishment. No hired French mercenary knew this as well as Gyles, who had toiled many years in Develish's fields. The work of a serf was arduous and unrelenting, and starvation came perilously close when crops failed or taxes were raised without warning. Gyles remembered his own anger when his family's small reserves of grain and beans were seized by Sir Richard's stewards to be wasted on days of indulgence such as these. Yet he began to doubt that an unscheduled tax was the root

of the villagers' anger when he absented himself to walk around the boundary wall and saw that the peasant strips to the west still had crops to be harvested. Levies were easier to bear in summer when food was plentiful, and My Lord's own virgates to the south were full of ripening wheat and beans. Gyles questioned why he would stir unrest amongst his people when he had abundant grain of his own.

By the sixth day, he noticed that the restlessness in the village had given way to fear. When the women looked towards the house, it was to search for the priest. At the sight of his robed figure passing through the gate, they dropped to their knees, holding out their hands in supplication as he made his way towards them. Their manner suggested they were seeking absolution as a group, and the priest's all-embracing signs of the cross implied that he was giving it.

He carried a leather bag which Gyles guessed contained vials of holy water, unction and medicine. When he entered a dwelling, which he did frequently, he remained inside for a long time, and even the dullest mind could guess he was bringing succour to the sick. Gyles assumed the priest's potions and prayers were effective because no bodies were brought out, and it led him to wonder why the serfs were so afraid. Whatever malady had entered Bradmayne was clearly survivable.

He changed his mind on this morning, the ninth, when his sharp eyes picked out a mound of freshly turned earth on common land to the east. It had the appearance of a grave, yet it was overly large for a single corpse. He had no recollection of its being there the previous day and questioned when it had been dug. Overnight? If so, why the secrecy? And by what right did My Lord of Bradmayne deny his people a Christian burial in consecrated ground?

Sickness had been at the forefront of Sir Richard's mind on the journey here. He'd talked of rumours that Lady Eleanor's future husband was ailing and ordered his men to watch and listen for anything that might confirm the stories. He was convinced Lord Peter would be paraded before him with his face painted with rouge to give the semblance of health. There were advantages to forming an alliance between Bradmayne and Develish, but not if it meant paying a dowry for a doomed marriage that failed to produce heirs.

Predictably, Sir Richard's ability to assess Peter of Bradmayne's health was gone within a few hours of their arrival—in drink, he would have thought a one-legged serf a suitable mate for his daughter—but Gyles could see nothing wrong with the young man. He looked as well as he had on previous visits. He lacked stature and carried the marks of childhood pox on his face, which Sir Richard had been overly keen to convey to his daughter, but his skin was bare of rouge and he feasted and drank as heartily as his father's guests.

It was no secret in Develish that Lady Eleanor wanted out of this marriage, and Gyles felt some pity for Lord Peter. He might come to regret his father's choice of a bride when he experienced Eleanor's mercurial tantrums. There would be little to please her in Bradmayne if even her husband disappointed her. In his more cynical moments, Gyles thought the girl would appreciate serfs being stung by the whip for every little misdemeanour, but he didn't doubt she'd be shocked by the squalor.

Men urinated where they stood, women emptied slops outside their doors, and dogs and vermin scavenged on the excrement. It was no better inside the enclosure, where an open sewer ran beside the house, creating such a stench that even Sir Richard noticed it. On the rare occasions when he was sober enough to

stumble from the house, he clutched a clove-scented orange to his nose. Gyles found the evidence of rat infestation more disturbing. Their droppings were in the kitchen and in the grain stores, yet nothing was done to deter them. My Lord of Bradmayne seemed ignorant or careless that human filth was being transferred on fur and feet to his food.

Out of the corner of his eye, Gyles saw the priest present himself at the gate as he did every morning, and he turned from his inspection of the mound of earth to watch what happened. The exchange was different from previous days. The priest, his cowl pulled over his head to hide his face, seemed bowed with fatigue, and the guards drew away from him in alarm. With trembling hands, he blessed them with the sign of the cross then raised the bar himself and walked with unsteady steps towards the village.

There was no sign of the steward and bailiff whose habit was to leave the enclosure at the same time with saddles and bridles on their arms. Their horses, hobbled on pastureland outside the boundary wall along with those of My Lord of Bradmayne's guests, continued to graze peacefully in the sun. Were they still abed after a night spent overseeing the digging and filling of a mass grave? Gyles wondered. Or, worse, weak with sickness like the priest?

He watched and waited until midday, then sought out Pierre de Boulet, Sir Richard's captain of arms. Had he not believed it necessary to speak with the Frenchman, Gyles would have kept his suspicions to himself, for he could guess the response he would receive for daring to voice an opinion. De Boulet, yet to reach thirty and only two years a captain, never hid his annoyance that an English serf was one of Sir Richard's fighting men.

'What do you want?' he demanded in French after Gyles had stood for several minutes in silence, watching him roll dice in the dust of the barn floor with three of his fellow captains.

Gyles answered in the same language. 'A moment of your time, sir.'

'I'm busy.'

'It's important, sir.'

'Speak.'

'In private, if you please, sir. The matter concerns Sir Richard.'

De Boulet, losing money steadily, glared at him. 'You overreach yourself. My Lord's affairs are no concern of yours.'

Gyles made a small bow. 'Would you rather I spoke with Master Foucault, sir? As bailiff to Develish, it is he who has charge of Sir Richard's gold.'

With a sour look, the Frenchman excused himself from the game and stood up. Foucault was another who challenged de Boulet's right to choose who rode in Sir Richard's retinue. The bailiff's place was at home, assisting the steward in enforcing his master's authority; instead he was here, entrusted with the treasure chest until Sir Richard saw fit to pass it to My Lord of Bradmayne. And for what reason? So that Sir Richard's fighting men, absolved of responsibility, could form a guard whenever it pleased him to step outside.

Gyles understood de Boulet's frustrations better than the Frenchman knew. To be captain of arms to Sir Richard was to suffer indignity. There was no ignoring the smirks of amusement that rippled through the open-sided barn each time he and his men were obliged to form a line when their inebriated master emerged onto the forecourt to piss into the sewer. De Boulet's predecessors had never lasted long, preferring to seek employment elsewhere rather than enforce Sir Richard's humbling orders.

'You have no business speaking of My Lord's gold in front of others,' de Boulet snapped, following Gyles outside. 'I'll have you flogged if you do it again. What do you know?'



‘I know Sir Richard wants the dowry guarded until he’s assured Lord Peter is well, sir.’

De Boulet’s eyes narrowed. ‘Do you have reason to think he isn’t?’

‘No, but I believe there’s a killing sickness in the village, sir. The priest has been tending the afflicted for days and, overnight, a grave has been dug in one of the fields.’

The Frenchman’s scowl deepened. ‘You call me from my game to tell me peasants are dying? How is that news? Ten died of fever and running stools in Pedle Hinton last year.’

‘But none was refused a Christian burial, sir. If you look east to the common land, you’ll see a mound big enough to cover a number of bodies. It was excavated in secret while the rest of us slept. It seems My Lord of Bradmayne wants to close the church to the dead as well as the living.’

De Boulet looked where Gyles had indicated. ‘To what end?’

‘I don’t know, sir. Either he’s afraid of the sickness spreading to the enclosure or he wants his guests to remain ignorant that his serfs are dying. Perhaps both. It will not serve his interests if Sir Richard falls ill before the dowry is paid . . . or questions whether to pay it at all.’

‘Sir Richard worries for Lord Peter’s health, not a handful of peasants.’

Gyles gave a small bow as if in respectful agreement. ‘Indeed, sir, but the mound looks some thirty paces in length and two wide—large enough for forty bodies laid side by side. More if the dead are children. That’s well above a handful.’

‘You can’t judge size from such a distance. Who’s been filling your head with this nonsense? Who have you been talking to?’

‘No one, sir. The field serfs are banished from the enclosure and the house servants won’t speak with me. The length of the

mound can be estimated by the oaks to the right of it. Felled, such trees stretch to more than sixty paces and the grave is easily half that . . . if not more.'

The Frenchman looked towards the common land again and saw that Gyles was right. 'It matters not. Illness in the village is no threat to us. Our stay will be over in three days.'

Gyles ducked his head again, more to hide his irritation at de Boulet's complacency than to feign respect. 'The priest looks far from well, sir, and the bailiff and steward have not appeared this morning. If all three have the sickness, it is inside the enclosure already. I cannot say what manner of affliction it is, but it seems to spread quickly. The number labouring in the fields today is much reduced from last week. My Lord of Bradmayne has four hundred people bonded to him, yet this morning I have counted a bare ten dozen at work on the strips. The women, children and greybeards remain in the village but their numbers too seem diminished.'

'For a serf, you seem very able with figures.'

Gyles raised his head. 'You will see I am right if you make the count yourself, sir.'

'What if you are? It's a problem for My Lord of Bradmayne, not Sir Richard.'

'Sir Richard would think it a problem if he knew about it, sir. Without workers, a demesne loses value very quickly. Dead men can't bring in the harvest or plant for next year, and My Lord of Bradmayne will struggle to raise taxes if his people are dying. To form an alliance with him in those circumstances would be risky.'

De Boulet was unimpressed. 'You pretend a knowledge you don't have.'

'My worries are as much for Develish as for Bradmayne, sir. We will do our own people no service if we take a sickness home

with us. We should leave now while Sir Richard and the eleven who form his entourage are well.'

'Our demesne is in no danger from it. By God's grace and the purity of our air, we're blessed with good health. Sir Richard's piety keeps it so.'

De Boulet was as self-deceiving as Sir Richard if he believed God's grace so easily won, but Gyles saw merit in exploiting his credulity. 'Indeed, sir, and My Lord of Bradmayne must know he cannot match our master's goodness. He wouldn't need to hide what is happening here otherwise. Shouldn't Sir Richard be told this before he hands over his gold? Men of devotion don't willingly tie themselves to those whom God seeks to punish.'

De Boulet turned away, his reluctance to raise such a subject with Sir Richard all too obvious to Gyles. 'I'll make enquiries about the steward and bailiff, though I doubt there's any truth in what you say,' he snapped. 'It's the habit of low-born serfs to scare themselves with fancies.'

Gyles watched him walk towards the door of the manor house and then resumed his place in the lee of the wall. He hoped quite sincerely that de Boulet was right. He would rather be mocked for imagined fears than take a sickness to Develish which could kill upwards of forty in a week. Lady Anne might know of such a malady but not Gyles. Even starvation, the dreaded red pox and the bloody flux took time to create sufferers and weaken them so badly that they succumbed.



As the sun dipped towards the west and the shadows lengthened, a woman made her way up the road from the village. She was wringing her hands and weeping. The guards ordered her to stop when she was still some fifty paces from the gate.

‘Faether Jean ha neod a-help,’ she cried, sinking to her knees in despair. ‘The bweils on en’s droat ha burst and ’e be zweemish. My Lord mus’ sen men to car en to the church.’

One of the archers raised his bow. ‘Cease your prattling and go back,’ he said in French. ‘You have your orders.’

‘But Faether Jean needs en’s hwome an en’s bed. You must ax My Lord to show en ma’cy.’

Gyles stepped away from the wall and called to the archer. ‘She’s asking for help,’ he said, approaching the gate. ‘She’s telling you that Father Jean has collapsed and begs that My Lord of Bradmayne send men to carry him to the church.’

‘What else did she say?’

‘The boils on the Father’s neck have burst. He needs his home and his bed. She wants you to ask My Lord to show him mercy.’

The archer looked as if he were about to gag on bile. ‘There’s no point,’ he muttered. ‘The priest will be dead by nightfall. He knew it this morning. He used his cowl to hide the pustules on his neck but I saw the signs of death in his face. If you can make this woman understand you, tell her to care for him as best she can.’

Gyles pondered for a moment then raised his voice and spoke in broad Dorset brogue, choosing dialect words no Frenchman would understand. ‘Goodhussy, I be Gyles Startout, kin to Aggy Bushrod. Thease Franky gaekies do be too affrighted o’ they lord to ax ma’cy vur the preost. I zee a greave on the zummerleaze. How min ha a-deaded? How min ha the cothe?’

The answers she gave shocked him. Three dozen dead and as many again with fevered heads and pus-filled boils on their necks and in their groins. He asked her if she knew what manner of disease it was but she said she didn’t. None had seen the like of

it before. The blood turned black as the body died, and all who saw it shook with terror.

Gyles asked next how and when the sickness had started, and she told him merchants and pedlars had spoken of it coming to the port of Melcombe on St John the Baptist's day in June. A child had died in Bradmayne twelve days ago—almost certainly of the pox—but My Lord, out of fear for himself and believing it to be the sickness, had ordered his gates barred and the serfs to remain at a distance.

The priest had consoled them by saying they had nothing to fear from a disease in Melcombe, but he was wrong. Within days of the festivities beginning, many were complaining of feverish heads and painful aches in the neck, at the top of the legs and under the arms. The pus-filled boils grew as big as hens' eggs and no one survived beyond three days. The dead had been left to lie amongst the living until the steward persuaded My Lord to allow a grave to be dug. They'd kept their hope while Father Jean stayed well and took their confessions, but now they had none. God had sent this plague to punish them.

The guards grew impatient, warning Gyles that he was endangering the woman's safety by speaking with her so long. My Lord of Bradmayne's instructions were clear: no serf was allowed to approach so close. Gyles called out their words to her, adding a final question of his own. What sins had the villagers committed to deserve such a punishment?

She cried out in anguished tones that she didn't know. They had lived their lives according to the teachings of the Church and had honoured their oaths to their lord however grievously he treated them. He despised them for being English and blamed them for bringing this evil to his demesne. He would condemn them more when he was told that the priest was ill.

Her words became inaudible, muffled by the angry shouts of the guards, and with a look of desperation she rose to her feet and made her way wretchedly down the road.

The archer laid his bow against Gyles's chest, preventing him from leaving. 'You can't speak of what you've learnt here.'

Gyles gave a small shrug. 'The truth will out whether I do or not. The hour of Vespers is close and Father Jean is not in his church. My Lord of Bradmayne's guests will wonder why.'

He observed subsequent events from his chosen post against the manor house wall. It seemed My Lord was ready to adopt any priest, even Father Jean's young acolyte, to keep his visitors from learning that Bradmayne was a place of death. The lad—barely sixteen or seventeen—paraded in his dying teacher's vestments and welcomed My Lord and Lady at the door of the church.

But his boyish face showed a terrible fear.

Perhaps he knew his own end was close.