

Thorne Guy

# The Serf



Guy Thorne

**The Serf**

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# Guy Thorne

## The Serf

### CHAPTER I

#### "When Christ slept"

*This is the history of a man who lived in misery and torture, and was held as the very dirt of the world. In great travail of body and mind, in a state of bitter and sore distress, he lived his life. His death was stern and pitiless, for they would have slain a dog more gently than he.*

*And yet, while his lords and masters survive only in a few old chronicles of evil Latin, or perhaps you may see poor broken effigies of them in a very ancient church, the thoughts that Hyla thought still run down time, and have their way with us now. They seared him with heat and scourged him with whips, and hung him high against the sunset from the battlements of Outfangthef Tower, until his body fell in pieces to the fen dogs in the stable yards below. Yet the little misshapen man is worthy of a place in your hearts.*

*Geoffroi de la Bourne is unthought-of dust; Fulke, his son, claims fame by three lines in an old compte-book as a baron who enjoyed the right of making silver coin. In the anarchy of King Stephen's reign he coined money, using black metal – "moneta nigra" – with no small profit to himself. So he has three lines in a chronicle.*

*Hyla, serf and thrall to him, has had never a word of record until now.*

*And yet Hyla, who inspired the village community – the first Radical one might fancy him to be – was greater than Fulke or Geoffroi; and this is the Story of his life. The human heart that beat in him is even as the heart of a good man now. It will be difficult to see any lovable things in this slave, who was a murderer, and whose life was so remote from ours. But, indeed, in regarding such a man, one must remember always his environment. With a little exercise of thought you will see that he was a lovable man, a small hero and untrumpeted, but worthy of a place in a very noble hierarchy.*

A man sat in a roughly-constructed punt or raft, low down among the rushes, one hot evening in June. The sun was setting in banks of blood-red light, which turned all the innumerable waterways and pools of the fen from black to crimson. In the fierce light the tall reeds and grasses rose high into the air, like spears stained with blood.

Although there was no wind to play among the rushes and give the reeds a voice, the air was full of sound, and an enormous life palpitated and moved all round.

The marsh frogs were barking to each other with small elfin voices, and diving into the pools in play. There was a continual sucking sound, as thousands of great eels drew in the air with their heads just rising from the water. Now and again some heavy fish would leap out of the pools with a great noise, and the bitterns called to each other like copper gongs.

Very high in the air a few birds of the plover species wailed sadly to their mates, grieving that day was over.

These sounds of busy life were occasionally mingled with noises which came from the castle and village on the high grounds which bordered the fen on the south. Now and again the sound of hammers beating upon metal floated over the water, showing that they were working in the armourer's shop. A bell rang frequently, and some one was learning to blow calls upon a horn, for occasionally the clear, sweet notes abruptly changed into a windy lowing, like a bull in pain.

The man in the punt was busy catching eels with a pronged pole, tipped with iron. He drove the pole through the water again and again till a fish was transfixed, and added to the heap in the bottom

of the boat. He was a short, thick-set fellow, with arms which were too long for his body, and huge hands and feet. No hair grew upon his face, which was heavy and without expression, though there was evidence of intelligence in the light green-grey eyes.

Round his neck a thin ring of iron was soldered, and where the two ends had been joined together another and smaller ring had been fixed. He was dressed in a coat of leather, black with age and dirt, but strong and supple. This descended almost to his knees, and was caught in round the middle by a leather strap, which was fastened with an iron pin.

His arms were bare, and on one of them, just below the fore-arm, was a red circle the size of a penny, burnt into the flesh, and bearing some marks arranged in a regular pattern.

This was Hyla, one of the serfs belonging to Geoffroi de la Bourne, Baron of Hilgay, and the holder of lands near Mortain, in France.

The absolute anarchy of the country in 1136, – the dark age in which this story of Hyla begins – secured to each petty baron an overwhelming power, and Geoffroi de la Bourne was king, in all but name, of the fens, hills, and corn-lands, from Thorney to Thetford, and the undoubted lord of the Southfolk.

For many miles the fens spread under the sky from Ely to King's Lynn, then but a few fisher huts. Hilgay itself rose up on an eminence towards the south of the Great Fen. At the bottom of the hill ran the wide river Ouse, and beyond it stretched the treacherous wastes.

The Castle of Hilgay stood on the hill itself, and was surrounded by a small village, built in the latter years of Henry's reign. It was one of the most modern buildings in East Anglia. Here, surrounded by his men-at-arms, villeins, and serfs, Geoffroi de la Bourne lived secure, and kept the country-side in stern obedience. The Saxon Chronicle, which at the time was being written in the Monastery of Peterborough, says of him: "He took all those he thought had any goods, both by night and day, men and women alike, and put them in prison to get their gold and silver, and tortured them with tortures unspeakable."

Of he and his kind it says: "Never yet was there such misery in the land; never did heathen men worse than they. Christ slept, and all His saints."

Hyla had been spearing his eels in various backwaters and fen-pools which wound in and out from the great river. When his catch was sufficient, he laid down the trident, and, taking up the punt pole, set seriously about the business of return. The red lights of the sky turned opal and grew dim as he sent his punt gliding swiftly in and out among the rushes.

After several minutes of twisting and turning, the ditch widened into a large, still pool, over which the flies were dancing, and beyond it was the black expanse of the river itself. As the boat swung out into the main stream, the castle came plain to the view. A well-beaten road fringed with grass, among which bright golden kingcups were shining, led up to the walls. Clustered round the walls was a little village of sheds, huts, and houses, where the labourers and serfs who were employed on the farm-lands lived.

The castle itself was a massive and imposing place, of great strength and large area. At one corner of the keep stood a great tower, the highest for many miles round, which was covered with a pointed roof of tiles, like that of a French chateau. This was known as the Outfangthef Tower, and Geoffroi and his daughter, Lady Alice, had their private chambers in it.

There was something very stately in the view from the river, all irradiated as it was by the ruddy evening light.

Hyla's punt glided over the still waters till it reached a well-built landing-stage of stone steps descending into the river. Several punts and boats were tied up to mooring stakes. Hard by, the sewage from the castle was carried down by a little brook, and the air all about the landing-place was stagnant and foul.

He moored the punt, and, stringing his eels upon an iron hook, carried them up the hill in the waning light. The very last lights of the day were now expiring, and the scene was full of peace and

rest, as night threw her cloak over the world. A rabbit ran across Hyla's path from side to side of the road, a dusky flash; and, high up in the air, a bird suddenly began to trill the night a welcome.

The man walked slowly, lurching along with his head bent down, and seeing nothing of the evening time. About half-way up the hill he heard someone whistling a comic song, with which a wandering minstrel had convulsed the inmates of the castle a night or two before.

Sitting by the roadside in the dusk, he could distinguish the figure of Pierce, one of the men-at-arms. He was oiling the trigger and barrel of a cross-bow, and polishing the steel parts with a soft skin. The man-at-arms lived in the village with his wife, and was practically in the position of a villein, holding some fields from Lord Geoffroi in return for military service. He was from Boulogne, and had been in the garrison of one of Robert de Bellême's castles in Normandy.

The lessons learnt at Tenchebrai had sunk deep into the mind of this fellow; and when any dirty work was afoot or any foul deed to be done, to Pierce was given the doing of it. As Hyla approached, he stopped his whistling, and broke out into the words of the song, which, filthy and obscene as it was, had enormous popularity all over the country-side.

Then he noticed the serf's approach. "Who are you?" he called out in a *patois* of Norman-French and English, with the curious see-saw of French accentuation in his voice.

"Hyla!" came the answer, and there was strength and music in it.

Something seemed to tickle the soldier to immediate merriment when he heard the identity of the man with the eels.

Hyla knew him well. When he was free from his duties in the castle, Hyla and his wife worked in this man's fields for a loaf of wastel bread or a chance rabbit, and he was in a sense their immediate employer and patron.

It was at the order of Pierce that Hyla had been fishing that evening. The soldier chuckled on, regarding the serf with obvious amusement, though for what reason *he* could not imagine.

"Show your catch," he said at last.

He was shown the hook of great eels, some of which still writhed slowly in torture.

"Take them to my wife," said the soldier, "and take what you want of them for yourself and your people."

"Very gladly," said Hyla, "for there are many mouths to fill."

"Oh! that can be altered," said the soldier, with a grin; "your family can be used in other ways, and live in other houses than under your roof-tree."

"Duke Christ forbid!" said Hyla, giving the Saviour the highest name he knew; "had I not my children and my wife, I should be poor indeed."

"God's teeth!" cried the soldier, with a nasty snarl and complete change of tone, "*your* wife, *your* girls! Man, man! we have been too good to the serfs of late. See to this now, when I was in the train of my Lord de Bellême, both in France and here, we killed serfs like rabbits.

"Well I remember, in the Welsh March, how we hanged men like you up by the feet, and smoked them with foul smoke. Some were hanged up by their thumbs, others by the head, and burning things were hung on to their feet. We put knotted strings about their heads, and writhed them till they went into the brain. We put men into prisons where adders, snakes, and toads were crawling, and so we tormented them. And the whiles we took their wives and daughters for our own pleasure. Hear you that, Hyla, my friend? Get you off to my wife with the eels, you old dog."

He blazed his bold eyes at the serf, and his swarthy face and coal-black hair seemed bristling with anger and disdain. His face was deeply pitted with marks which one of the numerous varieties of the plague had left upon it, and as his white, strong teeth flashed in anger through the gloom, he looked, so Hyla thought, like the grinning devil-face of stone carved over the servants' wicket at Icombe Abbey.

He slunk away from the man-at-arms without a word, and toiled on up the hill. He fancied he could hear Pierce laughing down below him, and he spat upon the ground in impotent rage.

He soon came to a few pasture fields on the outskirts of the village, some parts of them all silver-white with "lady-smocks." Hardy little cows, goats, and sheep roamed in the meadows, which were enclosed with rough stone walls. A herd of pigs were wallowing in the mud which lined the banks of the sewage stream, for, with their usual ignorance, the castle architects allowed this to run right through the pastures on the hill slope.

The cows were lowing uneasily to each other, for they were tormented by hosts of knats and marsh-begotten flies which rose up from the fen below.

Past the fields the road widened out into a square of yellow, dust-powdered grass – the village green – and round this were set some of the principal houses.

There was no room for comfortable dwelling-places inside the castle itself for the crowd of inferior officers and men-at-arms. Accordingly they made their home in the village at its walls, and could retreat into safety in times of war.

Eustace, the head armourer, had a house here, the best in the village, roofed with shingle and built of solid timber. The men-at-arms, Pierce among them, who were married, or lived with women taken in battle, had their dwellings there; and one thatched Saxon house belonged to Lewin, the worker in metal, and chief of Baron Geoffroi's mint.

Hyla was a labourer in the mint, and under the orders of Lewin the Jew.

In 1133 it was established as a general truth and legal adage, by the Justiciar of England himself, that no subject might coin silver money. The adulteration practised in the baronial mints had reduced coins, which pretended to be of silver, into an alloy which was principally composed of a bastard copper. A few exceptions were made to the law, but all private mints were supposed to be under the direct superintendence of crown officials. In the anarchy of Stephen's reign this rule became inoperative, and many barons and bishops coined money for themselves.

Few did this so completely and well as Geoffroi de la Bourne.

When Bishop Roger of Salisbury made his son Chancellor of the Exchequer, in King Henry's reign, the chancellor had in his train a clever Jew boy, baptised by force, very skilful in the manual arts.

It was the youth Lewin who invented the cloth, chequered like a chess-board, which covered the table of the "Exchequer," and on which money was counted out; and he also claimed that the "tallies" which were given in receipt for taxes to the county sheriffs were a product of his fertile brain.

This man, was always looked upon with suspicion by the many churchmen with whom he came in contact. Finance was almost entirely in the hands of the great clergymen, and the servant Lewin was distrusted for his cleverness and anti-Christian blood. At dinner many a worthy bishop would urge the chancellor to dismiss him.

The Jew was too shrewd not to feel their hostility and know their dislike; and when he came across Geoffroi de la Bourne in the Tower Royal, where Cheapside now stands, he was easily persuaded to enter his service.

At Hilgay Castle he was at the head of a fine organisation of metal-workers, and under the direct protection of a powerful chief. So lawless was the time that he could gratify the coarse passions of his Eastern blood to the full, and he counted few men, and certainly no other Jew in East England, more fortunately circumstanced than he was.

A few villeins of the farmer class, who were also skilled men at arms, had rough houses in the village, and tilled the corn-fields and looked after the cattle. Beyond their dwellings, on the verge of the woods of oak and beech which purpled the southern distance, were the huts of the serfs.

Hyla passed slowly through the village. On the green, by a well which stood in the centre, a group of light-haired Saxon women were chattering over their household affairs. At the doors of some of the houses of the Norman men-at-arms sat French women on stools, rinsing pot herbs and scouring iron cooking bowls. Their black hair, prominent noses, and alert eyes contrasted favourably with the somewhat stupid faces of the Saxons, and there could be seen in them more than one sign of a conquering race.

They were also more neatly dressed, and a coarse flax linen bound their temples in its whiteness, or lay about their throats.

Stepping over a gutter full of evil-smelling refuse, Hyla came to the house of Pierce, and beat upon the wooden door, which hung upon hinges of leather made from bullock's hide.

It swung open, and Adelais, the soldier's wife, named after the Duke of Brabant's daughter, stood upon the threshold obedient to the summons.

She took the eels from him without a word, and began to unhook them.

"Pierce said that I might have some fish to take home," Hyla told her humbly.

"You may take your belly full," she answered; "it's little enough I like the river worms, for that is all they are. My man likes them as little as I."

"It was he that sent me a-fishing," said Hyla in surprise.

"Then he had a due reason," said the woman; "but get you home, the evening is spent, and the night comes."

Just then, from the castle above their heads, which towered up into the still warm air, came the mellow sound of a horn, and following upon it the deep tolling of a bell ringing the curfew.

Although the evening bell did not ring at that time with any legal significance as it did in towns, its sound was generally a signal for sleep; and as the brazen notes floated above them, the groups at the doors and on the green broke up and dispersed.

"Sleep well, Hyla!" Adelais said kindly, and, retiring into the house, she shut her door.

Hyla went on till he came opposite the great gate of the castle, and could hear the guards being changed on the other side of the drawbridge.

He was now on the very brow of the hill, and, stopping for a moment, looked right down over the road he had traversed. The moon was just rising, and the road was all white in its light. Far beyond, the vast fens were a sea of white mist, and the blue will-o'-the-wisp was beginning to bob and pirouette among it. The air of the village was full of the sweet pungent smell of the blue wood smoke.

The night was full of peace and sweetness, and, as the last throbbing note of the curfew bell died away, it would have been difficult to find a gentler, mellow place.

Thin lines of lights, like jewels in velvet, began to twinkle out in the black walls of the castle as he turned towards the place of the serfs. He went down a lane fringed with beeches, and emerged upon the open glade. A fire was burning in the centre, and dark forms were flitting round it cooking the evening meals. Dogs were barking, and there was a continual hum and clatter of life.

Picture for yourself an oblong space surrounded by heavy trees, the outer boles being striped clear of bark, and many of them remaining but dead stumps.

Round the arena stood forty or fifty huts of wood, wattled with ozers and thatched with fern and dried rushes.

Many of the huts were built round a tree trunk, and the pole in the middle served to hang skins and implements upon by means of wooden pegs driven into it.

A hole in the roof let out smoke, and in the walls let in the light. The floors of these huts were of hard-beaten earth, as durable as stone; but they were littered with old bones, dust, and dried rushes for several inches deep, and swarming with animal life.

They were the merest shelters, and served only for sleep. Most of the household business was conducted in the open before the huts, and in fine weather the fires were nearly all outside. In winter time the serf women and girls generally suffered from an irritating soreness of the eyes, which was produced by living in the acrid smoke which filled the shelters and escaped but slowly through the roofs.

The household utensils were few and simple. A large wooden bucket, which was carried on a pole between two women, served to fetch water from the well upon the village green, for the serfs had no watering-place in their own enclosure. An earthenware pot or so – very liable to break and crack,

as it was baked from the black and porous fen clay – and an iron cooking pot, often the common property of two or more families, comprised the household goods.

They slept in the back part of the huts, men, women, and children together, on dried fern, or with, perhaps, an old and filthy sheep's skin for cover. The sleeping-room was called the "bower."

This enclosure where the theows lived was known as the "fold," as it was fenced in from the forest, on which it abutted, by felled trees. This was done for protection against wild beasts. Herds of wild and savage white cattle, such as may now only be seen at Chillingham, roamed through the wood. Savage boars lived on the forest acorns, and would attack an unarmed man at sight. Wolves abounded in the depths of the forest. It often happened that some little serf child wandered away, and was never seen again, and it was useless for a thrall to attempt escape into its mysterious depths.

For the most part only married serfs lived in the fold or "stoke," as it was sometimes called. Many of the younger men were employed as grooms and water-carriers in the castle, or slept and lived in sheds and cattle houses belonging to the men-at-arms and farmers in the village.

It was thus that the serfs lived, and Hyla skirted the fold till he came to his own house. He was very tired and hungry, and eager for a meal before sleeping.

All the morning he had laboured, sweating by the glowing fires of the mint, pouring molten metal into the moulds. At mid-day the steward had given him a vessel of spoilt black barley for his wife to bake bread, and he had taken it home to her and his two daughters against his return.

In the afternoon Hyla and his two daughters, Frija and Elgifu, girls of twenty and nineteen, had been at work dunging the fields of Pierce the man-at-arms, and the evening had been spent, as we have seen, in spearing eels.

Hyla was very weary and hungry. When he came up to his hut he saw angrily that the fire in front of it was nothing but dead embers, and, indeed, was long since cold. His two little sons, who were generally tumbling about naked by the hut, were not there, nor could he see Gruach his wife.

He flung down the eels in a temper, and called aloud, in his strong voice, "Frija! Elgifu! Gruach!"

His cries brought no response, and he turned towards the fire in the centre of the stoke which was now but a red glow, and round which various people were sitting eating their evening meal.

He burst into the circle. "Where is Gruach?" he said to a young man who was dipping his hand into an earthen pot held between his knees.

This was Harl, an armourer's rivetter, who generally lived within the castle walls.

"Gruach is at the hut of Cerdic," he said, with some embarrassment, and, so it seemed to Hyla, with pity in his voice.

The men and women sitting by the fire turned their faces towards him without exception, and their faces bore the same expression as Harl's.

Hyla stared stupidly from one to the other. His eyes fell upon Cerdic himself, a kennel serf, and something of a veterinary surgeon. It was he who cut off two toes from each dog used for droving, so that they should not hunt the deer.

Fastened to his girdle was the ring through which the feet of the "lawed" dogs were passed, and he carried his operating knife in a sheath at his side.

"My woman is in your hut, Cerdic," said Hyla, "and why is she with?"

"She is with," said Cerdic, "because she is in sore trouble, and walks in fear of worse. Go you to her, Hyla, and hear her words, and then come you here again to me."

A deep sigh burst from all of them as Cerdic spoke, and one woman fell crying.

Hyla turned, and strode hastily to Cerdic's hut. He heard a low moaning coming from it, which rose and fell unceasingly, and was broken in upon by a woman's voice cooing kind words of comfort.

He pushed into the hut. It was quite dark and full of foetid smoke and a most evil odour.

"Gruach," he said, "Gruach! why are you not home? What hurts you?"

The moaning stopped, and there was a sound of some one rising.

Then a voice, which Hyla recognised as belonging to Cerdic's wife, said, "Here is your man, Gruach! Rise and tell him what bitter things have been afoot."

Gruach rose, a tall woman of middle age, and came out of the hut into the twilight.

"Hyla!" she said, "Saints help you and me, for they have taken Elgifu and Frija to the castle."

The man quivered all over as if he would have fallen on the ground. Then he gripped his wife's arm. "Tell me," he said hoarsely, "To the castle? to the castle? Frija and Elgifu?"

"Aye, your maids and mine, and maids no longer. I had gone to Adelais to seek food for this night, and found you sent a-fishing. Frija and Elgifu were carrying the dung to the fields. Pierce was in the field speaking to our girls. Then came Huber and John from the castle with their pikes, and they took away our daughters, saying Lord Geoffroi and Lord Fulke had sent for them. Huber struck me in the face at my crying. 'Take care!' cwaeth he, 'old women are easily flogged; there is little value in you.' And I saw them holding my girls, and they took them in the great gate of the castle laughing, and I did not see them again."

Hyla said nothing for a minute, but remained still and motionless. The blow struck him too hard for speech.

"Get you home," he said at length, "if perchance you may fall asleep. I am going to talk with Cerdic. Take her home, wife, and God rest you for your comfort!"

He walked quickly across the open space back to the fire. The circle was broken up, and only Cerdic and Harl sat there waiting Hyla's return.

Stuck into the ground was a cow's horn full of ale, and as Hyla came into the circle of dim red light, Harl handed it to him.

He drank deep, and drank again till the comfort of the liquor filled his craving stomach, and his brain grew clearer.

"Sit here, friend," said Cerdic. "This is a foul thing that has been done."

## CHAPTER II

### **"Coelum coeli Domino terram autem dedit filiis hominum."**

In the fifth volume of an instructive work by Le Grand d'Aussy, who was, in his way, a kind of inferior Dean Swift, there is an interesting story, one of a collection of "Fabliaux."

There was once a genial ruffian who lived by highway robbery, but who, on setting about his occupation, was careful to address a prayer to the Virgin. He was taken at the end, and sentenced with doom of hanging. While the executioner was fitting him with the cord, he made his usual little prayer. It proved effectual. The Virgin supported his feet "with her white hands," and thus kept him alive two days to the no small surprise of the executioner, who attempted to complete his work with a hatchet. But this was turned aside by the same invisible hand, and the executioner bowed to the miracle, and unstrung the robber. With that – very naturally – the rogue entered a monastery.

In another tale the Virgin takes the shape of a nun, who had eloped from the convent where she was professed, and performs her duties for ten years. At last, tired of a libertine life, the nun returned unsuspected. This signal service was performed in consideration of the nun's having never omitted to say an *Ave* as she passed the Virgin's image.<sup>1</sup>

It may be therefore said, without exciting any undue surprise, that Geoffroi de la Bourne had a resident chaplain in the castle, one Dom Anselm, and that religious ceremonies were more or less regularly observed.

In the outer courtyard of the castle a doorway led into the chapel. This was a long room, with a roof of vaulted stone lit by windows on the courtyard side, full of some very presentable stained glass. The glass, which had far more lead in it than ours, was in fact a kind of mosaic, and the continual lattice work of metal much obscured the pattern.

What could be seen of it, however, represented Saint Peter armed, and riding out to go hawking, with a falcon on his wrist.

Strips of cloth bandaged cross-wise from the ankle to the knee, and fastened over red stockings, were part of the saint's costume, and he wore black-pointed shoes split along the instep almost to the toes, fastened with two thongs.

In fact, the artists of that day were under the influence of a realistic movement, in much the same way as the exhibitors in the modern French salon, and what superficial students of Twelfth-Century manners put down as unimaginative ignorance was really the outcome of a widely understood artistic pose.

On a shrine by the chapel door stood an image of the Blessed Virgin, a trifle gaudy. The head was bound round with a linen veil, and a loose gown of the same material was laced over a tight-fitting bodice. Round the arms were wound gold snake bracelets, imitations, made by Lewin in the forge, of some old Danish ornaments in the possession of the Lady Alice de la Bourne. The foldings of the robe were looped up here and there with jewelled butterflies, differing not at all from a Palais Royal toy of to-day.

In front of the shrine hung two lamps, or "light vats" as they were called, of distinctly Roman type – luxuries which were rare then, and of which Dom Anselm was exceedingly proud. They dated from the time of King Alfred, that inventive monarch, who had adapted the idea of lamps from old Roman relics found in excavations.

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<sup>1</sup> *These stories are perfectly fair examples of monastic teachings in the Twelfth Century. Roughly speaking, any one might do anything if he or she said an occasional Ave. Indeed, Dom Mathew Paris, the most pious and trustworthy monkish historian, and in his way a scourge to the laxity of his own order, has more than one story of this kind in which he evidently believes.*

Except that the altar furniture was in exceedingly good taste, it differed hardly at all from anything that may be seen in twenty London churches to-day.

There were no pews or seats in the chapel, save some heavy oak chairs by the altar side, where a wooden perch, clamped to the table itself and white with guano, indicated that Geoffroi de la Bourne would sit with his hawks.

The sun rose in full June majesty the next morning, and soon shone upon the picturesque activity of a mediæval fortress in prosperous being.

The serfs and workmen, who slept in lightly constructed huts of thin elm planks under a raised wooden gallery which went round the courtyard, rose from the straw in which they lay with the dogs, and, shaking themselves, set about work.

The windlass of the well creaked and groaned as the water for the horses was drawn. The carpenters began their labour of cutting boards for some new mead-benches which were wanted in the hall, and men began to stoke afresh the furnaces of the armoury and mint.

Paved ways ran from door to door of the various buildings, but all the rest of the bailey was carpeted with grass, which had been sown there to feed the cattle who would be herded within the walls in dangerous times.

About half-past eight Dom Anselm let himself out of a little gate in the corner of Outfangthef Tower, and came grumbling down the steps. He crossed the courtyard, taking no notice of the salutations of the labourers, but looking as if he were half asleep, as indeed he was. His long beard was matted and thick with wine-stains from the night before, and his thin face was an unhealthy yellow colour.

He unlocked the chapel door, and mechanically pushed a dirty thumb into a holy water stoup. Then he bowed low to the monstrance on the altar, and lower still to the figure of the Virgin. After the hot sunshine of the outside world, the chapel was chill and damp, and the air struck unpleasantly upon him.

He went up to the altar to find his missal. Sleeping always in a filthy little cell with no ventilation, and generally seeking his bed in a state of intoxication, had afflicted the priest with a chronic catarrh of the nose and throat – as common a complaint among the priesthood then as it is now in the country districts of Italy and southern France. Quite regardless of his environment, he expectorated horribly even as he bowed to the presence of Christ upon the altar.

It is necessary for an understanding of those times to make a point of things, which, in a tale of contemporary events, would be unseemly and inartistic. Dom Anselm saw nothing amiss with his manners, and the fact helps to explain Dom Anselm and his brethren to the reader.

With a small key the priest opened a strong box banded with bronze, and drew from it the vessels.

Among the contents of the box were some delicate napkins which Lady Alice had worked – some of those beautiful pieces of embroidery which were known all over Europe as "English work."

When the silver vessels were placed upon the altar, and everything was ready for the service, the thirst of the morning got firm hold upon Dom Anselm's throat.

He left the chapel, and summoned a theow who was passing the door with a great bundle of cabbages in his arm.

"Set those down," he said, "and ring the bell for Mass;" and while the man obeyed, and the bell beat out its summons to prayer – very musical in the morning air – he strode across the courtyard to the mint.

By this time, in the long, low buildings, the fires were banked up, the tools lay ready upon the benches, and the men were greasing the moulds with bacon fat.

The priest went through the room with two raised fingers, turning quickly and mechanically towards the toil-worn figures who knelt or bowed low for his blessing. He walked towards an inner room, the door of which was hung with a curtain of moth-eaten cat-skin – the cheapest drapery of

the time. Pushing this curtain aside, he entered with a cheery "Good-day!" to find, as he expected, Lewin, the mint-master.

The Jew was a slim man of middle size, clean-shaven, and with dark-red hair. His face was handsome and commanding, and yet animal. The wolf and pig struggled for mastery in it. He was engaged in opening the brass-bound door of a recess or cupboard in the wall, where the dies for stamping coin were kept in strict ward.

The mint-master straightway called to one of the men in the outer room, who thereon brought in a great horn of ale in the manner of use. Every morning the priest would call upon the Jew, so that they might take their drink together. Each day the two friends conveniently forgot – or at any rate disregarded – the rule which bids men fast before the Mass. Lewin attended Church with great devotion, and, like many modern Israelites, was most anxious that the fact of his ancient and honourable descent should be forgotten.

Though he himself was a professing Christian, and secure in his position, yet his brethren, who nearly always remained staunch to their ancient faith, were in very sad case in the Twelfth Century. Vaissette, in his history of Languedoc, dwells upon a pleasing custom which obtained at Toulouse, to give a blow on the face to a Jew every Easter. In some districts of England, from Palm Sunday to Easter was regarded as a licensed time for the baiting of Jews, and the populace was regularly instigated by the priests to attack Jewish houses with stones. Yet, at the same time, it was possible for a Jew to obtain a respectable position if he avoided the practice of usury, and Lewin the minter was an example of the fact.

"This is the best beer of the day," said the priest, "eke the beer at noon meat. My belly is so hot in the morning, and all the pipes of my body burn."

Lewin poured out some ale from the horn into a Saxon drinking-glass with a rounded bottom like a modern soda-water bottle – the invariable pattern – and handed the horn back to Dom Anselm. They drank simultaneously with certain words of pledge, and clinked the vessels together.

"It's time for service," said the clergyman, when the horn was empty. "Lady Alice will be upon arriving and in a devilish temper, keep I her waiting."

"Lord Geoffroi," said Lewin, "will he be at Mass?"

The priest grinned with an evil smile. "What do you think, minter?" he chuckled. "Geoffroi never comes to Mass when he sins a mortal sin o'er night; no, nor young Fulke either."

Lewin looked enquiringly at him.

"Two of the men-at-arms brought the daughters of one Hyla into the castle last night before curfew."

"He works for me here," said the minter.

"I am sorry for him," said the priest, "and I do not like this force, for the girls were screaming as they took them to Outfangthef. Lord Christ forbid that I should ever take from a maiden what she would not give. It will mean candles of real wax for me from Geoffroi, this will."

"The master is a stern man," said Lewin as they entered the chapel door.

Lady Alice was already in the chapel, kneeling on the altar steps, and behind her were two or three maids also kneeling.

On the eyelids of one of these girls the tears still stood glistening, and a red mark upon her cheek showed that Lady Alice had not risen in the best of tempers. The chatelaine frowned at Anselm when she heard his footsteps, and, turning, saw him robing by the door.

Many of the workmen and men-at-arms crowded into the chapel, all degrees mingling together. Some of the villein farmers had come in from the village, sturdy, open-featured men, prosperously dressed in woollen tunics reaching to the knees, fastened with a brooch of bone. The serfs knelt at the back, and as the deep pattering Latin rolled down the church every head was bent low in reverence.

Although among nearly all of them there was such a contrast between conduct and belief, yet, at the daily mystery and miracle of the Mass, every evil brain was filled with reverence and awe.

When the Host was raised – the very body of Christ – to them all, you may judge how it moved every human heart.

The system which held them all was a very easy and pleasant system. Unconditional submission to the Church, and belief in her mysteries, ensured the redemption of sins and the joys of heaven hereafter. To the popular mind, my Lords the Saints and the Blessed Virgin were great, good-humoured people, always approachable by an *Ave* and a little private understanding with the priest. It was, indeed, the pleasantest and easiest of all religious systems.

This, then, was the ordinary attitude of men and women towards the unseen, and it helps to explain the wickedness of the time. Yet it must not be thought that in this dark tapestry there were no lighter threads. The saints of God were still to be found on earth. Bright lines of gold and white and silver ran through the warp and woof, and we shall meet with more than one fine and Christian character in this story of Hyla.

The stately monotone went on. Huber and John, the two men-at-arms who had hurried the poor serf girls into the castle the night before, knelt in reverence, and beat their breasts.

"The Lord is debonair," Huber muttered to himself. Alice de la Bourne forgot her ill temper and petty dislike of pretty Gundruda, her maid, and fervently made the sign of the cross. Lewin alone, of all that kneeling throng, was uninfluenced by the ceremony and full of earthly thoughts.

After Mass was over, Anselm remained kneeling, repeating prayers, while the congregation filed out into the sunlight. A little significant incident happened on the very threshold. A poor serf had become possessed of a rosary made from the shells of a pretty little pink and green snail which was found – not too frequently – in the marshes below. This possession of his he valued, and, as he said his prayers day by day, it became invested with a mystical importance. He looked on it as a very holy thing.

Coming out of church, among the last of the crowd, he let it fall upon the step of the door. He was stooping to pick it up, when he came in the way of Huber, the soldier, who sent him flying into the courtyard with a hearty kick.

The soldier stepped upon the rosary, breaking most of the shells, and then picked it up in some curiosity. He had it in his hand, and was showing it to his companions, when the serf, who had risen from the ground, leapt upon him in anger.

There was an instant scuffle, and a loud explosion of oaths. In a second or two three or four men held the unhappy serf by the arms, and had fastened him up to the post of the well in the centre of the yard. They tied him up with two or three turns of the well rope, which they unhooked from the bucket.

Huber took his leather belt and flogged him lustily, after his tunic of cat-skin had been pulled down to the waist. The wretch screamed for mercy, and attracted all the workmen round, who stood watching – the serfs in timid silence, and the men-at-arms with mirth and laughter. It may sound incredible, but Lady Alice herself, standing on the top step of the stairway leading to the tower door, watched with every sign of amusement. It was, in fact, no uncommon thing in those cruel times for great Norman and Saxon ladies to order their slaves to be horribly tortured on the slightest provocation. Cruelty seemed an integral part of their characters. There is, for example, a well-attested story of Ethelred's mother, who struck him so heavily with a bunch of candles which lay to her hand, that he fell senseless for near an hour.

Dom Anselm came out of chapel after a while, and sought the cause of the uproar.

"There, my men," he said, "let the theow go. Whatever he has done, he has paid toll now. And look to it, Henry, that you say an *Ave* to our Blessed Lady that you harbour no wrath towards your just lords."

With that they let him go, and, bleeding and sobbing, the poor fellow slunk away into the stables. Sitting in the straw, he cried as if his heart would break, until he felt hot breath on his cheek, and looking up saw large mild eyes, like still woodland pools, regarding him with love. Above him

towered the vast form of "Duke Robert," Geoffroi's great war charger, as large and ponderous as a small elephant, his one dear friend. So he forgot his troubles a little while.

It was now about nine o'clock, and breakfast was served. The Baron and his son, and also the Lady Alice, never appeared in the great hall until the "noon meat" at three. They ate the first meal of the day in the "bowers" or sleeping chambers.

While the Lady Alice and her women superintended the more important household business, or sat in the orchard outside the south wall of the castle with their needlework, the Baron was throned in the gateway of the castle conducting the business of his estate, and presiding over a kind of local court.

The Justices in Eyre were hardly yet sufficiently established on circuit, and, moreover, the country was in so disturbed a state that the administration of law was merely in most cases, certainly at Hilgay, a question of local tyranny.

The whole business of the day was well afoot with all its multifarious activity when Hyla rested from his work, and sitting under the shadow of a stone wall, ate a hunk of bread which he had brought with him. He had sat late with Cerdic the night before, and, as he had half expected, had been bidden in the morning to work in Pierce's fields, and not to go to the castle. All the morning, since early dawn, he had been manuring fields with marl, in the old British fashion. The work was very hard, as the fields were only in the first stage of being reclaimed from wild common land, and required infinite preparation.

The supply of dung had given out, and the marl was hard to carry and bad to breathe.

The awful blow dealt to his whole life had dazed his brain for hours, but the long talk with Cerdic and Harl had condensed his pain within him, and turned it to strong purpose.

He thought over his life as he remembered it, his dull life of slavery, and saw with bitter clearness how the clouds were gathering round him and his kind. The present and the future alike were black as night, and the years pressed more and more heavily as they dragged onwards.

During the last years the serfs at Hilgay had been more ill-used and down-trodden than ever before. The Saxon gentlemen, who had held the forefathers of Hyla in thrall, were stern and hard, but life had been possible with them. Life was more light-hearted. Githa would sometimes dance upon the green when the day's work was done, and spend a few long-hoarded triens in an ivory comb or a string of coloured beads.

The Gesith or Thaness, the lesser nobility, had not been unkind to their slaves, and there was sometimes a draught of "pigment" for them – a sweet liquor, made of honey, wine, and spice – at times of festival.

Now everything was changed, and among the serfs a passionate spirit of hatred and revolt was springing up. The less intelligent of them sank into the condition of mere beasts of burden, without soul or brain. On the other hand, adversity had sharpened the powers of others, and in many of them was being born the first glimmerings of a consciousness that even they had rights.

Hyla himself was one of the most advanced among his brethren. He felt his manhood and "individuality" more than most of them. "I am I" his brain sometimes whispered to him. The cruel oppressions to which he was subject roused him more poignantly day by day.

Some nine months before a peculiarly atrocious deed had consolidated the nebulous and unexpressed sense of revolt among the serfs of Hilgay into a regular and definite subject of conversation.

The Forest Laws, which Knut had fenced round with a number of ferocious edicts, placing the deer and swine far above the serfs themselves, were made even more vigorous and harsh by the Normans. A theow named Gurth, who had been seen by a forester picking wood for fires, was suspected of killing a young boar, which had been found not long after with its belly ripped open by a sharp stake. Parts of the animal had been cut away, obviously by a knife, and were missing. Although the serf was absolutely innocent of the beast's slaughter, which was purely accidental – he had come upon it dead in the forest, and taken a forequarter to his home – Geoffroi de la Bourne burnt him

in the centre of the village, and flogged mercilessly all the serfs, women included, who were thought to have partaken of the dish.

Since that time the men-at-arms and inferior followers of the castle had taken license to ill-use the serfs in every possible way. The virtue of no comely girl or married woman was safe, floggings were of daily occurrence, and, as there were plenty of theows to work, nothing was said if one or two were occasionally killed or maimed for life in a drunken brawl.

The serfs in the castle itself had no thoughts but of submission; but those who lived in the stoke, mingling freely with each other, and with the poor freedom of their own huts and wives, began to meet night by night round the central fire to discuss their wrongs.

The Normans never went into the stoke, or at least very rarely. The theows could not escape, and so that they did the tasks set them, their proceedings at night mattered not at all.

Hyla sat munching his manchet, and drinking from a horn of sour Welsh ale, a thin brew staple to the common people. The thought of Frija and Elgifu was almost more than he could bear.

It is interesting to note that Hyla's passionate anger was directed entirely against his masters. He had never known a spiritual revolt. It never entered his head to imagine that the God to whom he prayed had much to do with the state of the world. He never supplicated for bodily relief in his prayers, but only for pardon for his sins and for hope of heaven. The principalities and powers of the other world were too awful and mysterious, he thought, to have any actual bearing upon life.

The dominant idea of his brain was a lust for revenge, and yet it was by no means a *personal* revenge. He was full of pity for his friends, for all the serfs, and his own miseries were only as a drop in the cup of his wrath.

Night by night the serfs had begun to sit in the stoke holding conclave. It was an ominous gathering for those in high places! Hyla was generally the speaker of these poor parliaments. "HE went after the herons this noon, with Lady Alice and the squires," one man would say, provoking discussion.

"Yes," Hyla might answer, "and his falcon had t' head in a broidered hood eke a peal of silver bells. Never a bonnet of fine cloth for you, Harl; you are no bird."

"He rode over Oswald's field of ripening corn, and had noon meat with all his train at the farm."

"That is the law for a lord. Or – "

"I was at the hall door, supper time, among the lecheurs. Lord Fulke he did call me, and bade me fetch the board for chess and the images, having in his mind to game with Brian de Burgh. He broke the board on my head when I knelt with it, for he said I had the ugliest face he ever saw."

"Lord Christ made your face," would come from Cerdic or Hyla, and the ill-favoured one would finger his scars with more resentment than ever.

This man Cerdic was a born agitator. Without the dogged sincerity of Hyla, he had a readier tongue and a more commanding presence. His own injuries were the mainspring of his actions, for he had once been a full ceorl, with bocland of his own. From yeoman to serf was a terrible drop in the social scale. As a ceorl, Cerdic had a freeman's right of bearing arms, and could have reasonably hoped to climb up, by years of industry and fortunate speculation, into the ranks of the Gesith or Thanen. Speculation, indeed, proved his ruin, and debt was the last occasion of his downfall. He was nearly sixty now, and a slave who could own no property, take no oath, complete no document.

As Hyla sat in the sun he saw Cerdic coming towards him, followed by a little frisking crowd of puppies. The lawer of dogs sat him down beside his friend, and, taking out his knife, began to whet it upon a hone.

"It's a sure thing, then?" he said to Hyla. "You are certain in purpose, Hyla? You will do it indeed? Remember, eftsoons you said that it was in you to strike a blow for us all; but it's a fool's part to fumble with Satan his tail. Are you firm?"

He took one of the little dogs between his knees, a pretty, frisking little creature, thinking nothing of its imminent pain, and, holding one of its fore-paws in his hand, picked up the knife.

The puppy whined piteously as the swift scalpel divided the living gristle of its foot, but its brethren frisked about all unheeding.

Hyla saw nothing for a time. He seemed thinking. His intelligent eyes were glazed and far away, only the impassive, hairless face remained, with little or no soul to brighten it. And yet a great struggle was surging over this poor man's heart, and such as he had never known before. To his rough and animal life an emotional crisis was new and startling. Something seemed to have suddenly given way in his brain – some membrane which hitherto had separated him from real things.

While the little dog struggled and yelped as its bleeding paw was thrust in measurement through the metal ring, a new man was being born. Hyla's sub-conscious brain told him that nothing that had happened before mattered a shred of straw. He had never understood what life might mean for a man till now.

An Ideal was suddenly revealed to him. But to accept that ideal? that was hard indeed. It meant almost certain death and torture for himself.

The promptings of self-interest, which spring from our lower nature, and which are pictorially personified into a grim personality, began to flutter and whisper.

"Supposing," they said, "that you did this, that you killed Geoffroi for his sins, and to show that the down-trodden and the poor are yet men, and can exact a penalty. How much better would your companions be? Fulke would be lord then, and he is even as his father. Let it go, hold Gruach in your arms – you have that joy, you know. And work is not so bad. They have not beaten you yet; there are sometimes good things to eat and drink, are there not? Mind when you took home a whole mess of goose and garlic from the hall door? Often you snare a rabbit, and the minter is not ill-disposed to you. You are the best of his men; to you it is given to drive the die and hammer the coin, to beat the die into the silver and to burnish it. It is possible – stranger things have happened – that you might even gain freedom, and become a villein. Lewin might speak for you – who knows? These things have happened before. Is it indeed worth while to do this thing?"

While these thoughts were racing through Hyla's brain, and he was considering them, a strange thing happened. To the struggling brain of the serf, all unused to any subtle emotion, Nature made a direct æsthetic appeal.

In the middle sky a lark began to trill a song so loud and tuneful, so instinct with Freedom, that it seemed a direct message to him. He stared up at the tiny speck from which these heavenly notes were falling down to earth, and his doubts rolled up like a curtain.

He saw that it was his duty to kill Geoffroi for the sake of the others, and, come what might, he said to himself that he would do this thing.

The clumsy medium of the printed page has allowed us to follow Hyla's thoughts very slowly. Even as his resolve was taken, he heard Cerdic muttering that it was "ill to fumble with Satan's tail."

"I'll do it," he said, "and it's not the Divell that will be glad, Cerdic. No, it's not the Divell," he repeated, a little at a loss what further to say.

Cerdic pulled from his tunic a little cross of wood, and held it out to him. The passer-by would have seen two serfs, ill-clothed, unwashed, uncouth, eating bread and cheese under a wall. He would never have put a thought to them. Yet the conference of the two was fraught with tremendous meaning to those times. For a hundred years Hyla was remembered, and a star in the darkness to the weary; and after his name was forgotten, the influence of his deeds made life sweeter for many generations of the poor.

Hyla took the little cross, so that he might swear faith. With a lingering memory of the form in which men swore oath of fealty to their lords, he said, "I become true man to this deed from this day forward, of life and limb and earthly service, and unto it shall be true and faithful, and bear to you faith, Cerdic, for the aid I claim to hold of you."

He did this in seriousness, beyond all opinion; but the importance of the occasion, and the drama of it, pleased him not a little. The new toy of words was pleasant.

Cerdic kissed him, entering into the spirit of the oath, for it was the custom to kiss a man sworn to service.

"And I also am with you to the end," said Cerdic, "and may all false ribalds die who use poor men so."

In a high voice which shook with hate he quavered out a verse of the "Song of the Husbandman," a popular political song of those days; a ballad which the common people sang under their breath:

"Ne mai us nyse no rest rycheis ne ro.  
Thus me pileth the pore that is of lute pris:  
Nede in swot and in swynk swynde mot swo."

It was the poor fellow's Marseillaise!

*"There may not arise to us, or remain with us, riches or rest. Thus they rob the poor man, who is of little value: he must waste away in sweat and labour."*

Doggerel, but how bitter! A sign of the times which Geoffroi could not hear – ominous, threatening.

"A right good song, Cerdic," said Hyla. "But it will not be ever so. I know not if we shall see it, but all things change and change shall come from us. A tree stands not for ever."

The two men gazed steadfastly into each other's eyes, and then went about their work in silence.

The drama of this history may now be said to have begun. The lamps are trimmed, the scene set, and you shall hear the stirring story of Hyla the Serf.

## CHAPTER III

### The last night of Geoffroi de la Bourne

While Cerdic and Hyla sat in the field weaving their design to completion, Lord Geoffroi, Lord Fulke, Lady Alice, and Brian de Burgh, the squire, set out after forest game. They were attended by a great hunting train. Very few people of any importance were left in the castle, save Lewin and Dom Anselm.

The sun, though still very hot, had begun to decline towards his western bower, and the quiet of the afternoon already seemed to foreshadow the ultimate peace of evening.

Very little was doing in the castle. Some of the grooms lay about sleeping in the sun, waiting the long return of the hunters in idleness. From the armoury now and again the musical tinkering of a chisel upon steel sounded intermittent. Soon this also stopped, and a weapon-smith, who had been engraving foliates upon a blade, came out of his forge yawning. The Pantler, a little stomachy man, descended from the great hall, and, passing through the court, went out of the great gate into the village. Time seemed all standing still, in the silence and the heat.

Dom Anselm came into the courtyard, and sat him down upon a bench by the draw-well, just in the fringe of the long violet shadow thrown over the yard by Outfangthef. There was a bucket of water, full of cool green lights, standing by the well. After a little consideration, the priest kicked off his sandals and thrust his feet into its translucence. Then, comfortably propped up against the post, he fell to reading his Latin-book. In half-an-hour the book had slipped from his hand, and he was fast asleep.

While he slept, a door opened in the tower. From it came Pierce, and after him two girls, tall, comely Saxon lasses, bronzed by sun and wind. One of them, the eldest of the two, held her hands clenched, and her face was set in sullen silence. Her eyes alone blazed, and were dilated with anger. The younger girl seemed more at ease. Her eyes were timid, but a half smile lingered on her pretty, rather foolish lips. She fingered a massive bracelet of silver which encircled her arm. Pierce was giving Frija and Elgifu their freedom.

They came down the steps, and he pointed across the courtyard towards the gateway passage. "There! girls," said he, "there lies your way, to take or leave, just as suits your mind. For me, were I you, I'd never go back to the stoke. Hard fare, and dogs lying beyond all opinion! My Lords bid me say that you can take your choice."

Frija swung round at him, shaking with passion.

"Vitaille and bower," she shrilled at him, "and the prys shame! A lord for a leafman, indeed! Before I would fill my belly with lemman's food to your lord's pleasure, I would throw myself from Outfangthef."

Pierce smiled calmly at her.

"You talk of shame! – it is my lord's, if shame there is! Off with you to the fold, little serf lamb!"

She flushed a deep crimson, and seemed to cower at his words. "Come, Elgifu," she said, "mother will be glad to see us come, even coming as we do."

"Pretty Elgifu!" said the man. "No, you are not going! My Lord Fulke's a fine young man. Did he not give you that bracelet? Stay here with us all, good comrades, and you shall be our little friend. We will treat you well. Is it not so?"

The girl hesitated. She was a pretty, brainless little thing, and had not protested. They had been kind enough to her. The stoke seemed very horrible and noisome after the glories of the castle. Her sister's burning flow of Saxon seemed unnecessary. Frija looked at her in surprise at her hesitation.

"Say nothing to the divell," she cried impatiently; "come you home to mother."

Her imperious elder sister's tone irritated the little fool. "No, then," she said. "I will stay here. I will not go with you. You may talk of 'shame,' but if shame it is to live in this tower, then I have shame for my choys. Life is short; it is better here."

With that frank confession, she turned to the man-at-arms for approval.

He stepped in front of her, and, scowling at Frija, bid her be off. With a great cry of sorrow, the elder girl bowed her head and swiftly walked away. They saw her disappear through the gateway, and heard the challenge and laughter of the guards, pursuing her with jests as she went by.

"Oh, you are wise, pretty one!" said Pierce, putting his arm round her waist. "See, now, I will take you to the topmost part of the tower, to that balcony. We shall see all the country-side from there!"

They turned and entered Outfangthef, and the clanging of the door as it closed behind them roused Anselm from his slumber.

He sat up, stupidly gazing round him. His book was fallen, and a dog was nosing in its pages. He kicked the cur away, and picked up the breviary. By the shadow of the tower, which stood at the corner of the keep, he saw the afternoon was getting on. He looked round him impatiently, and, even as he did so, saw the man he was expectant of approaching.

"I am late," said Lewin, as he came up; "but I have been hearing news, and have much to tell you. We had better go at once."

"Whiles I fetch my staff," said the other, and soon they were walking through the village, down the road which led to the fen. They came to the fields, where a herd of swine was feeding among the sewage.

"They are unclean things," said Lewin, regarding them with dislike. "Though I am no Jew in practice, yet I confess that I do not like them. Pig! the very name is an outrage to one's ear."

"So not I," said Dom Anselm. "When the brute lives in the charge of a Saxon slave, she goes by her Saxon name; but she becomes a Norman, and is called 'pork,' when she is carried to castle-hall to feast among us. I want no better dish."

"Each to his taste. But here we are. By the Mass, but the place stinks!"

They had come to the landing-stage in the river, and, indeed, the odour was almost unbearable. For twenty yards round, the water was thick with foulness. They got into a flat-bottomed boat and pushed off across the stream. The water was too deep to pole in the centre, but one or two vigorous strokes sent them gliding towards the further rushes. Lewin punted skilfully, skirting the reeds, which rose far above his head, until he came to a narrow opening.

"This will do as well as another," he said, and turned the boat down it.

The water-way was little more than two yards wide, and the reeds grew thick and high, so that they could only see a little way in front. At last, after many turns and twists, they came to a still, green pool, a hundred yards across. In this stagnant evil-looking place they rested, floating motionless in the centre.

"Geoffroi himself, were he in the reeds, could not hear us now," said the priest.

"True, but drop a line to give a reason for being here."

The priest took from his girdle a line, wound upon a wooden spool. Baiting the hook with a piece of meat, he dropped it overboard, and settled himself comfortably in the bottom of the boat.

"Now, Lewin," said he, "you may go into the matter."

"I will tell you all I have heard," said the minter, "and we will settle all we purpose to do. You have heard that Roger Bigot has taken Norwich, and assumed the earldom of the county in rebellion to the king. Hamo de Copton, the moneyer, is a correspondent of mine, from London, and we have been interested together in more than one mercantile venture. From him letters are to hand upon the disposal of four chests of silver triens in London. You know our money is but token money, and not worth the face value of the stamp. We are making trial to circulate our money through Hamo, and in

return he sends Lord Geoffroi bars of silver uncoined. Now, the letter bears a post scriptum to this end. 'The king is sick, and indeed was taken so before Whitsuntide.' The talk is all that his cause is losing, and that wise men will be nimble to seize opportunity. Hamo urges me to consider well if I should seek some other master than Geoffroi, who is the king's friend."

He stopped suddenly, alarmed by a great disturbance in the water. A pike had swallowed Anselm's bait and was beating about the pool five or six yards away, leaping out of the water in its agony. They hauled the line in slowly, until the great, evil-looking creature was snapping and writhing at the boatside. Then, with a joint heave, it lay at the bottom of the boat, and was soon despatched by the minter's dagger.

"Go on," said Dom Anselm.

"Yestreen," resumed Lewin, "John Heyrown was privy with me for near two hours. He comes peddling spice from Dentown, hard by Norwich town. I have known him privily these six months. From him I hear that Roger Bigot is in the article of setting forth to come upon us here to take the castle. Geoffroi has great store of fine armour of war, eke fine metals and jewels of silver and gold. Hilgay would extend Roger's arm far south, and make a fort for him on the eastern road to London. He is pressing to London with a great force and inventions of war. Now, listen, John Heyrown is neither more nor less than in his pay, and he comes here to see if he can find friends within our walls. Roger knows of me and my value, and offereth me a high place, and also for my friends, do I but help him. What do you say?"

Dom Anselm's thin face wrinkled up in thought, weighing the chances.

"I think," he said at last, very slowly, "I think, that we must throw our lot in with Roger Bigot, and be his men."

"I also," said Lewin. "And I have already been preparing a token of our choice."

He pulled a piece of vellum from his tunic.

"Here is a map of the castle, clear drawn. There you see marked the weak spot by the orchard wall; Geoffroi has been long a-mending of it since we noticed the sinking, but nothing has been done. To enter the castle need not be difficult. The donjon will be harder; but I have marked a plan for that also. At the foot of Outfangthef lie *les oubliettes*, and many deep cellars, raised on arches. It is there keep we our coined silver and the silver in bars. With his engines, knowing the spot, Roger could mine deep, and Outfangthef would fall, leaving a great breach."

Anselm took the plan with admiration.

"It's finely writ," he said; "should'st have been in a scriptorium."

"My two hands are good thralls to me," said Lewin, pleased at the compliment to his work. "Then you and I stand committed to this thing?"

"Since it seems the wisest course, for Lord Roger is a great lord and strong, I give you my hand."

"Let it be so, friend Anselm. I will give John the plan this night."

"Then it is a thing done. But what is your immediate end? – for I conceive you have some near purpose in view."

"Some time I will tell you, but not yet."

"It's a woman, you dog!" said the priest with a grin.

"We must homewards," answered the other. "Hark! I hear the horns, they have returned from the chase."

As he spoke, clear and sweet the tantivy came floating down the hill and over the water.

"We shall be late for supper," said Lewin, "make haste; take the other pole."

"God forbid we should be late for supper," said Anselm, and they began to push back.

"Will Geoffroi know that Roger is about to attack Hilgay?" Anselm asked Lewin.

"Certainly he will, in a day or two. You may be sure that he has friends in Norwich, and an expedition does not start without a clatter and talk all along the country-side. I would wager you a wager, Sir Anselm, that Geoffroi will hear of it by to-morrow morn."

"And then?"

"Why then to making ready, to get provision and vitaille for the siege."

"Well, I wait it in patience: I never moil and fret. He who waiteth, all things reach at the last."

"Beware of too much patience, Sir Anselm. Mind you the fable of Chiche Vache, the monstrous cow, who fed entirely on patient men and women, and, the tale went, was sorely lean on that fare?"

"Gardez vous de la shicheface,  
El vous mordra s'el vous rencontre."

The Jew gave out the song with a fine trill in his voice, which was as tuneful as a bell.

The priest, as he watched him and marked his handsome, intelligent face, was filled with wonder of him. There was nothing he could not do well, so ran his thoughts, and an air of accomplishment and ease was attendant upon all his movements. As he threw back his head, drinking in the evening air, and humming his catch – "el vous mordra s'el vous rencontre" – Anselm was suddenly filled with fear of him. He seemed not quite to fit into life. He was a Jew, too, and his forefathers had scourged God Incarnate. Strange things were said about the Jews – art magic helped them in their work. The priest clutched the cross by his side, and there was a wonderful comfort in the mere physical contact with it.

"No," said he, "I have never heard of Chiche Vache that I can call to mind. I do not care much for fables and fairy tales. There is merry reading in the lives of Saints, and good for the soul withal."

"The loss is yours, priest. I love the stories and tales of the common folk, eke the songs they sing to the children. I can learn much from them. Chiche Vache is as common to the English as to French folk. 'Lest Chichewache yow swelwe in hir entraille,'" he drawled in a capital imitation of the uncouth Saxon speech.

By that time they had got to the castle and turned in at its gates.

The courtyard was full with a press of people, and busy as a hive. Outside the stable doors the horses were being rubbed down by the serfs. As they splashed the cool water over the quivering fetlocks and hot legs, all scratched by thorns and forest growth, they crooned a little song in unison. The "ballad of my lord going hawking" was a melancholy cadence, which seemed, in its slow minors, instinct with the sadness of a conquered race. The first verse ran —

"Lord his wyfe upstood and kyssed,  
Faucon peregryn on wryst;  
Faucon she of fremde londe,  
With hir beek Sir Heyrown fonde."

Lewin and Anselm passed by them and stood watching a moment.

"Hear you that song of the grooms?" Lewin said.

"I have heard it a hundred times, but never listened till now," said Anselm. "But what say they of Faucon peregryn? what means fremde londe?"

"It stands for foreign land in their speech," said the Jew. "Hast much to learn of thy flock, Anselm?"

"Not I. My belly moves at the crooning. It is like the wind in the forest of a winter's night. Come you to supper."

"That I will, when I have washed my hands; they are all foul with pike's blood."

Dom Anselm gave a superior smile, and turned towards the hall.

The great keep lifted its huge angular block of masonry high into the ruddy evening air, Outfangthef frowned over the bailey below. The door which opened on the hall steps stood wide, and the servants were hurrying in and out with dishes of food, while the men-at-arms stood lingering round it till supper should be ready.

Cookery was an art upon the upward path, and Geoffroi's *chef* was no mean professor of it. The hungry crowd saw bowls of stew made from goose and garlic borne up the stairs. Pork and venison in great quarters followed, and after them came two kitchen serfs carrying wooden trays of pastry, and round cakes piously marked with a cross.

Soon came the summons to supper. A page boy came down the steps and cried that my lord was seated, and every one pressed up the stairs with much jangling of metal and grinding of feet upon the stones. To our modern ideas the great hall would present an extraordinary sight. This rich nobleman fed with less outward-seeming comfort than a pauper in a clean-scrubbed, whitewashed workhouse of to-day. And yet, though many a lazy casual would grumble at a dinner served as was Geoffroi de la Bourne's, there was something enormously impressive in the scene. We are fortunate in many old chronicles and tales which enable us to reconstruct it in all its picturesqueness.

Imagine, then, that you are standing on the threshold of the hall just as supper has been begun.

The hall was a great room of bare stone, with a roof of oaken beams, in which more than one bird had its nest. There was an enormous stone chimney, now all empty of fire, and the place was lit with narrow chinks, unglazed, pierced in the ten-foot wall. The day of splendid oriels was yet to come in fortress architecture, which was, like the time, grim and stern. It was dusk now in the outside world, and the hall was lit with horn lanterns, and also with tall spiked sticks, into which were fixed rough candles of tallow. The table went right up the hall, and was a heavy board supported on trestles. Benches were the only seats.

On a daïs at the far end of the building was the high table, where Geoffroi and his son and daughter sat. The two squires, Brian de Burgh and Richard Ferville, also sat at the high table, and Dom Anselm had a place on the baron's right hand.

Lewin was seated at the head of the lower table, and the baron could lean over and speak to him if he had a mind to do so.

Geoffroi and his son sat in chairs which were covered with rugs, and at their side stood great goblets of silver. The dim light threw fantastic shadows upon the colours of the dresses and the weapons hung on pegs driven into the wall, blending them into a harmonious whole.

It was a picture of warm reds and browns, of mellow, comfortable colours, with here and there a sudden twinkle of rich, vivid madder or old gold.

When every one was seated, Geoffroi nodded to Dom Anselm, who thereupon pattered out a grace, an act of devotion which was rather marred by the behaviour of Lord Fulke, who was audibly relating some merry tale to his friend, Brian de Burgh.

Then every one fell to with a great appetite. The serfs, kneeling, brought barons of beef and quarters of hot pork on iron dishes. Each man cut what he fancied with his dagger or hunting-knife, and laid it on his trencher. Such as chose stew or ragout, ate it from a wooden bowl, scooping up the mess in their bare hands. Lady Alice held a bone in her white fingers, and gnawed it like any kitchen wench; and so did they all, and were, indeed, none the worse for that.

Geoffroi de la Bourne, the central figure of that company, was a tall, thin man of some five-and-fifty years. His face was lined and seamed with deep furrows. Heavy brows hung over cold green eyes, and a beaked eagle nose dominated a small grey moustache, which did not hide a pair of firm, thin lips. His grey hair fell almost to his shoulders.

Geoffroi, like his son and the squires, was dressed in a tunic, long, tight hose, a short cloak trimmed with expensive fur, and shoes with peaked corkscrew toes.

The Baron sat eating quickly, and joining little in the talk around him. He seemed very conscious of his position as lord of vast lands, and had the exaggerated manner of the overworked business man.

He had many things to trouble him. The mint was not going well. His unblushing adulteration of coined monies was severely commented on, and his silver pennies were looked upon with suspicion in more than one mercantile centre. The king was ill, and the license made possible by the disordered

state of the country was exciting the great churchmen to every intrigue against the barons. Moreover, plunder was become increasingly difficult. Merchants no longer passed with their trains anywhere near the notorious castle of Hilgay, and, except for his immediate retainers, all the country round was up in arms against Geoffroi.

He had imagined that stern, repressive measures would terrify his less powerful neighbours into silence. Two flaming churches in the fens and the summary hanging of the priests had, however, only incensed East Anglia to a passion of hatred.

Even as he sat at supper a certain popular Saxon gentleman, Byrlitelm by name, lay at the bottom of an unmentionable hole beneath Outfangthef, groaning his life away in darkness and silence, while his daughter was the sport and plaything of the two young squires. Disquieting rumours were abroad about the intentions of the powerful Roger Bigot of Norwich, who was known to be hand-in-glove with the Earl of Gloucester, the half-brother of Matilda.

Added to these weighty troubles, Geoffroi, who like all nobles of that day was an expert carver in wood and metal, had cut his thumb almost to the bone by the slip of a graving tool, and it throbbed unbearably. A still further annoyance threatened him. Gertrude of Albermarl, a little girl of fifteen, now acting as an attendant to Lady Alice, was a ward of his whom he had taken quietly, usurping one of the especial privileges of his friend the king.

The Crown managed the estates of minors, and held the right of giving in marriage the heirs and heiresses of its tenants. "The poor child may be tossed and tumbled chopped and changed, bought and sold, like a jade in Smithfield, and, what is more, married to whom it pleaseth his guardian – whereof many evils ensue," says Jocelyn de Brakelond, and the wardship of little Gertrude was a very comfortable thing. Stephen had heard of this act of Geoffroi's, and had sent him a peremptory summons to send the child immediately to town. Geoffroi had that day determined that little Gertrude should be married incontinently, to the young ruffian his son, but the step was a grave one to take, and would probably alienate the king irrevocably.

So he ate his supper gloomily. Every one in the place knew immediately that he was displeased, and it cast a gloom over them also.

As the meal went on, conversation became fitful and constrained, and the crowd of lecheurs, or beggars, who waited round the door, disputing scraps of food with the lean fen dogs, could be distinctly heard growling and gobbling among themselves in obscene chatter.

When at last Lady Alice withdrew and the cups were filled afresh with cool wine from the cellar, Geoffroi signed to Fulke to come up to him. The young man was a debauched creature of twenty-six, clean-shaven. His hair was not long like his father's, but clipped close. The back of his head was also shaven, and gave him a fantastic, elfin appearance. It was a custom to shave the back of the head, which was very generally adopted, especially in hot weather, among the young dandies of the time.<sup>2</sup>

"Letters from the king," said Geoffroi shortly, in a deep, hoarse voice.

"About Gertrude?"

"Yes, that is it. Now there is but one answer to make to that. You must marry her in a day or so, and then nothing more can be said."

"That is the only thing," said Fulke, grinning and wrinkling up his forehead till his stubble of hair seemed squirting out of it. "But I will not give up my pleasures for that."

"Who asked you?" said the father. "She is but a child and a-knoweth nothing – you can make them her maids-in-waiting, that will please her." He laughed a short, snarling laugh. "Sir Anselm shall tie the knot with Holy Church her benediction."

He summoned that scandalous old person from his wine.

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<sup>2</sup> It is quite possible that this fashion of the shavelings accounted for the mistake of Harold's spies at the Conquest, who said that there were more priests in the Norman camp than fighting men in the English army!

"Priest," said he, "my Lord Fulke is about to wed little Lady Gertrude; so make you ready in a day or two. I will give you the gold cross I took from Medhampstede, for a memorial, and we will eke have a feast for every one of my people."

"It is the wisest possible thing, Lord Geoffroi," said Anselm. "I will say a Mass or two and get to praying for the young folk, and Heaven will be kind to them."

"That do," said Fulke and Geoffroi, making the sign of the cross, for, strange as it may seem, both the scoundrels were real believers in the mysterious powers of the chaplain. Though they saw him drunken, lecherous, and foul of tongue, yet they believed entirely in his power to arrange things for them with God. Indeed, paradoxical as it may sound, if Anselm had not been at Hilgay, both of them would have been better men. They would not have dared some of their excesses, had it not been possible to obtain immediate absolution. A rape and a murder were cheap at a pound of wax altar lights and a special Mass.

"Here's good fortune," said Anselm, lifting the cup and bowing to Fulke.

"Thank you for't," said the young man. "Father, the minter shall make us a ring, and his mouth shall give the tidings to the other officers. Lewin, come you here, you have a health to drink." Lewin was summoned to the upper table, and sat drinking with them, pledging many toasts. Once he cast a curious glance at Anselm, and that worthy smiled back at him.

The evening was growing very hot and oppressive as it wore on. It was quite dark outside and there was thunder in the air. Every now and again the sky muttered in wrath, and at such sounds a sudden stillness fell upon the four knaves at the high table, and, putting down their wine vessels, they crossed themselves. Lewin made the "great cross" each time, "from brow to navel, and from arm to arm."

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