



HarperCollins e-books



A Moorland
Hanging

Michael Jecks

A Moorland Hanging

A Knights Templar Mystery

MICHAEL JECKS

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*For Nicky, Martin, George,
and especially Keith and Lynn,
who first suggested I should be a writer.*

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Clambering up the long, shallow gradient to the mass of rock at the summit, the last thing on Thomas Smyth's mind was the man who was shortly to die. Smyth was concentrating solely on the dull pain of his strained muscles, and wondering how much farther he must go.

Just before the last slope he had to pause to rest, his hands on his hips as he panted. It was becoming cooler as evening approached, a relief after the day's searing heat. Glowering at the tor above, he gave a brittle smile. After this expedition he knew he must accept he was no longer a young man. Though his mind was the same as when he had first come here, a lad of not yet twenty, that was more than thirty-two years ago now. Thomas was well past middle age.

Gazing around him, he saw thin feathers of smoke rising eastward in the still evening air: the straggle of crofts on the Chagford road were settling for the night. He could hear a dog barking, a man shouting, shutters being slammed over windows, and an occasional low grumble from oxen in the byres. After the misery of 1315 and 1316, when the whole kingdom had been struck with famine, it sounded as if the country had returned to normal. This little vill in the middle of Dartmoor stood as proof of the improvement in the weather, which now, in 1318, promised healthy harvests at last.

But Smyth's anger, never far from him now, would not let him survey the view in peace. He felt his gaze being pulled back. South and east, he knew the gray mists were caused by his new blowing-house, whose charcoal furnace melted the tin which was the primary cause of his wealth. It was the other fires northward which made him set his jaw and glare, the fires from the other men, the miners who had arrived recently and stolen his land.

He himself had not been born here. It was many years ago, while serving as a soldier in the Welsh wars, that he had first heard tell of the huge wealth to be amassed from working the ore that lay so abundantly on the moors. Thus, when the battles were done, he had meandered southward, intending to take his share.

Back then, in 1286, he had been a gangling nineteen year old—a poor man with no future. In those days, a large part of this area around the West Dart River had been uninhabited, and only a few tanners struggled to work the land for profit. Taxes were crippling, raised whenever money was needed for wars—and it was rare for the old King *not* to be at war. Many had already left the land by the time Thomas arrived, allowing him to increase his works for little cost, and though it had taken some years he had steadily built up his interests until now he was the wealthiest tanner for many miles, employing others to keep the furnaces lighted and the molds filled with tin. If he did not own the land, that was merely a technicality—and a financial saving. By all the measures he valued, the land was his: he could farm tin and take the profits; he could bound tracts of land wherever he wanted; he had a seat at the stannary parliament. These were the ancient rights of the stanners of Devon, and he made full use

of them.

But others had come, stealing parcels of land he considered his own, working it to their own advantage, ruining his efforts and making him look foolish in front of his neighbors. It was intolerable.

With a last baleful glare, he set his face to the hill once more and continued climbing.

Behind him, George Harang smiled in satisfaction. He had caught a glimpse of Thomas' expression, and knew what it signalled. At last the old tinner had made up his mind; he was going to defend his land and investments. From George's perspective, the retaliation was long overdue—not that he would ever have said so openly. He respected his master too much.

They were ascending the southern side of Longaford Tor, and soon George could see the yellow glow of a fire up near the conical mound of stone at the top. Nodding toward it, he walked a little ahead, his hand on his knife, but there was no need for caution. The three men were waiting for them in the shelter of the small natural bowl in the grass as agreed. Barely acknowledging them, Thomas Smyth's servant strode past the little band, to stand with arms folded as the discussion began.

Watching his employer, George could see that the inner strength he had admired as a lad had not diminished. Though he was only some five feet six inches tall, Smyth had the build of a wrestler, with massive arms and thighs, and a chest as round and solid as a wine barrel. He had a natural way with the men who worked for him, a commander's ability to put all at ease in his company. As always he squatted with them by their fire, his square chin jutting in aggressive friendliness as he spoke, dark eyes alight, thick eyebrows almost meeting under the thatch of graying hair. In the kindly light of the flames, George felt sure his master could have been mistaken for a man of ten, maybe even twenty, years younger. The fierce glitter in his eyes, the sudden stabbing movements of his hands as he spoke, the quick enthusiasm in his words, all seemed to indicate a man in his prime, not one who was already one of the oldest for miles around.

When Thomas had finished speaking, his eyes held those of the other men for a moment as if to confirm that he had selected the right group. Then, satisfied, he clapped the two nearest on their back, rose and started off back down the hill, moving more quickly now, George following behind him.

"They'll do it," Thomas said meditatively, gazing eastward with his hands hooked into his thick leather belt as they walked south to their horses.

"Yes, sir," George agreed, and was surprised when his master spun round to stare at him, frowning in concentration.

"You think they're right for this, don't you?"

George nodded with conviction. "Harold Magge, he'd do anything you'd ask," he said firmly while the almost black eyes held his. "And Stephen the Crocker and Thomas Horsho'll do what Harold tells them."

Thomas turned back to the view. "Good," he said softly. "I've had enough. I want my land back."

South and east of them as the two men descended, Adam Coyt was putting the last of his cattle in through the gate, and setting off with his dogs to stroll round the old moorstone enclosure while he checked for weaknesses in the wall.

He had spent all his life on the moors. As a boy he had played out on the open lands, the huge rolling plains between Lydford and Chagford, watching the creatures through the seasons. Rabbits, deer and hart, wolves and foxes, he knew them all as well as he knew the animals on his own farmstead. A moorman, he had known no other life. His father had lived here and his father before him, all the generations working in the cruel climate which so often broke those who did not respect

Like a tinner, Adam felt a close affinity for the land, but in his case it was bred of experience and fear. Though he had prospered, Dartmoor had exacted its toll, taking his wife and son. He could not blame the moors; it was the way of the forest, that was all. She should not have gone out when it had begun to snow, and was mad to try to return later. Crockern, Dartmoor's spirit, deserved respect from people. There was no use in praying to God for help, not when Crockern had sent the bitter winds to scour the land. When Adam had found her body, slumped and curled into a small ball of agony, the flesh frozen blue-white, he had wept, but not for long. There was no sense in tears—he had work to do. A year later his son too had succumbed, unable to survive the bitter winter of 1316 when the food spoiled under the sheeting rains. Then Adam had not even been able to cry. It had been hard, he had tried to give the lad enough, taking from his own meager portion to feed him, but it was insufficient and the crying had increased in volume daily until Adam was almost relieved when it faded and at last was stilled. A month later when the thaw had come he had made the cruel journey to Widecombe Church—the small pathetic body could no longer be kept in its barrel, protected in salt like a haunch of pork, and he wanted the boy to be buried with his mother.

For all that, the moors had given him a good life. His cattle thrived, his life was unaffected by the miseries of warfare or disease which all spoke of in the towns when he went to buy goods, and he lived in peace, far from others. Only the miners occasionally disrupted his life, digging holes on the land he needed for pasture, and stirring up the streams where he watered his animals.

To a moorman like Adam Coyt, the world was formed of two groups of men: those, like him, who were of Dartmoor, and others—foreigners—who came from other parts of Devon or the world. Now, as night fell, their fires could be seen as glittering points of light, some far off, others closer. These were the places where the tin miners lived. He sighed at the sight, but patted his dog's head and continued up to his house. There was nothing he could do about the invading metal hunters.

Henry Smalhobbe yawned and sat back in front of his fire, keen to see what the dark ore would yield up to him. Last week he had dug a new leat from the River Dart to his little plot so that he could have running water to help him sort the valuable tinstone from the lighter soil around it; this was his first fire since finishing the leat, and his first attempt at tinning in this area.

It was hard work compared to what he was used to, and his hands still blistered too easily. Many days of labor were needed to generate enough ore to make a fire worthwhile, but at least this parcel of scrubby ground appeared to have more potential than the last area he had tried. For the best part of a year he had covered a few hundred yards of the little river bed, separating the good ore from the useless spoil, and piling up the waste at the edge until he noticed tinstone in a hole dug for a fire.

Interested, he had begun to investigate the ground nearby. At first there had been little, but then he located a rich-looking deposit. Parallel to the old river bed there seemed to be a thick layer of tinstone only a foot or so under the ground, and now he had given up the search in the stream and was concentrating on the store lying just under the ancient banks.

Stretching, he relaxed and leaned back on his elbows, a slight man in his late twenties with roughly cut, mousy hair. He looked overtired, with strained features and bright brown eyes which held a feverish glitter. No matter how many hours he spent in the sun and rain, his skin never tanned, just went an unhealthy red.

On hearing a noise he glanced over his shoulder. Sarah, his wife, was approaching carrying a bowl of beans and soup on a platter with bread and a pot of ale. A dark, plump woman in her early twenties, she watched while he ate. Seeing him look up, she smiled, her cheeks dimpling. It made her look fifteen again, the same as when they had first met. She chatted, and he was pleased that she did not mention her fears. They had talked about the threats and dangers often enough. It was pointless going over the same sterile ground day after day. She nodded toward the fire as he gulped his ale. "Is there much tin in that lot, do you think?"

Placing the pot carefully on the ground, he glanced at the smoking charcoal. This was the easiest way to obtain the metal from the ore. You dug a hole and started a fire with layers of charcoal and ore over it. Once the fire had died, the tin could be pulled free from the ashes in jagged, black chunks. He broke off a crust of bread and chewed. "I don't know. It was dark, and felt heavy, but it's hard to tell. Sometimes the best metal comes from the worst-looking scraps, and the best-looking tinstone sometimes yields little..."

He could see her thoughts were not on his words. Her gaze had risen to the flickering glow to the north, where their neighbor had his hut. "There's no point in worrying, Sarah," he said gently.

"No," she agreed, but went on staring. "Still, I wish he would come here and stay with us at night. It would be safer, for us as well as him. While we stay apart..."

"Sarah, he won't come. Anyway," he shot a quick glance at the distant fire, "he'll be all right."

"Smyth's men have threatened us too often. If he wants us gone, he can attack us easily, and Peter's too far from everyone else, out there on the moors. There's no one to help him."

Her husband stood and shrugged. "I know. But he's convinced he's safe. Anyway, I see no reason for us to fear. We're tanners no less than Smyth, and we have the same rights as him. He can't make us leave."

Sarah nodded, but her eyes avoided his. She knew he was right under the law, but that did not dispel her fear. Three times now the men had come—twice when Henry was away at his works. The first time they had only made lewd comments, surrounding her and barring her escape while they amused themselves by insulting her, speculating why she had no children yet: was it her or her husband? Was he not good enough? Maybe another man, a real miner, would be better? And all she could do was stand silently, her face reddening in shy embarrassment at their talk. That time they had soon gone.

The second time Henry had been with her. One moment they had been alone, the next they were encircled by four men who stood with cudgels ready and told them to go, to leave this land. She recalled her husband's courage with a flush of pride. He had shoved her to safety behind him, facing the men and cursing them, stubbornly stating his right to the tin within his bounds, ignoring their threats and hissed warnings. The men had left as suddenly as they had appeared, but their menacing words seemed to hang on the still evening air for hours afterward.

But it was the third visit which had scared her the most. While she was inside their hut, a man had entered without knocking. She recognized him immediately: it was Thomas Smyth. Uninvited, he crossed to a stool and seated himself, and in a calm, soft voice he had begun to talk, resting his elbow on his knees and staring at her with his unsettling dark eyes. At first she had thought he was rambling; he had spoken of his life, of his marriage, then of his love for his daughter—and it was only then that she realized he was trying to intimidate her. “I wouldn't like to think of my daughter being so far from anyone. I wouldn't want to think she could be widowed so easily, could be left to fend for herself, as you could be if your husband was to die out here on the moors.”

This time her fury had been sparked. That this man should dare to enter her house and threaten her, in defiance of all laws of hospitality, was obscene. It was so shocking that she had forgotten her fear, and, raising her wooden spoon, she had shrieked at him to go. He did, with a cynical, half-amused glance at her weapon, as though measuring it against the swords, knives and arrows of his men. But at the door he had paused, looking back at her and saying slowly and deliberately, “Think about what I have said, Mrs. Smalhobbe. After all, even now your husband might be dead. You might already be a widow. Think on that!”

The terror of that visit was still heavy on her soul. That strange, dark little man with the gentle voice, comparing her to his own daughter, had given her an impression of cruelty which had not fade with time. She knew that her husband had been anxious for her when he returned home that night. Her terror was all too plain, and as soon as he arrived she had launched herself into the protection of his arms. It was some time before he could persuade her that he was perfectly safe—indeed, he had seen no one all day.

“Do you want to leave the moors?”

His words, unexpected, and so soft she was not at first sure she had heard him correctly, made her spin, eyes wide in astonishment. “What?”

Her obvious amazement made his mouth curl into a dry grin. “I said, ‘Do you want to leave here?’ I don't, but if you're not going to be able to find peace here, maybe we should move on to another place.”

“But...” She stopped and considered. This land was all they had in the world. They had come here—was it only a year ago?—to try to make a new life after losing their old home, and had, by the grace of God, been able to earn a meager living. Were they to leave now, would they ever be able to settle elsewhere? For the first time since the first visit from Smyth's men, she contemplated the options left to them: stay and run the risk of violence from their rich and powerful neighbor, or leave and try to find a new living somewhere else. They had tried that for a year before coming here to the moors, and the very thought of it made her shudder. She could not face it again.

Turning to her husband, she held his gaze for a minute. "We will stay," she said at last.

He gave her a tender smile. "At least we have each other," he said.

"Yes," she whispered, but glanced fearfully one last time at Peter Bruther's small fire, so tiny and sad in its distant solitude.

The decision to remain had left a hollow pit of fear in Sarah's belly. The haven they had thought so safe only a few weeks before had proved as insecure as any of the other places in which they had attempted to hide. At least she had her husband with her, she thought. Poor Peter Bruther had no one. How could he defend himself, all alone out there, if Thomas Smyth's tinnors chose to attack him?

Leaping from his horse and tossing the reins to the waiting ostler, Sir Robert Beauscyr strode quickly to the steps leading to the old hall, his narrow face pale, lips compressed into a thin line. He took the steps two at a time, threw open the great door and passed through the curtain into the hall itself.

"Father!" he began imperiously. "That damned cretin, your man who—"

"Be quiet!" The angry bellow from his normally calm and composed father made Robert pause, and it was only then that he noticed the other two men in the room. His fury dissipated as he studied them warily. One—young, broad-shouldered and with the powerful right arm that spoke of a life spent in training for war—he recognized immediately.

Sir Robert could see that his younger brother had grown to maturity. The slim, lithe boy of fourteen who had left home six years before had developed into a swarthy warrior. Blue eyes held his calmly, but the face had changed: the nose had been broken, and a thick scar marred the flat of his right cheek which would, Robert was sure, attract all the women in Exeter.

For his part, John Beauscyr was unimpressed by the sight of his brother and had to conceal a grimace of disgust. Always more interested in study than in fighting, Robert had the ascetic thinness of a priest; his skin was waxy from spending too many hours indoors. Even his handshake felt limp and pathetic. John was sure that his older brother would have made a better merchant than knight, and it was a constant source of aggravation that in the lottery of life he should have come second: it would be Robert, not he, who would inherit the old Manor of Beauscyr in Dartmoor.

The second visitor was a tall man, standing a little away from the fire as though keeping back until sure that Sir Robert was no danger. Having seen the welcome given by John, he stepped forward and Sir Robert was struck by the sense of power emanating from him, not strength of muscle alone, but of purpose and of will. John introduced them.

"Robert, this is my master, Sir Ralph of Warton. I have been his squire for over two years now. Sir Ralph, this is my brother."

Sir Robert glanced quickly at his father, then gestured to the waiting servant. "Sir Ralph, I am pleased that you have come to visit our house, you are most welcome. Are you to be here for some time?"

Sir Ralph graciously inclined his head. “Not for long, I fear, sir. This is simply the last stage of our journey to the coast. I confess I find the current state of the kingdom depressing, and will be glad to leave when I may.”

“Who would not?” said Sir William shortly, instructing the servant to fetch more wine and some cold meats. “Since the famine there are hardly enough villeins to work the fields.”

“But it is peaceful here.”

“I suppose so. At least down here we are safe from the raids of those murderers from Scotland.”

“They are the devil’s own brood,” Sir Ralph agreed.

“Of course, sir. Mad! They must be mad. One victory and they seem to think they can raid with impunity as far into the kingdom as they choose. Don’t they realize that they will suffer the Pope’s extreme displeasure? Their leader is already excommunicated, I believe—do they want their whole country to suffer anathema?”

“They already do.” It was John who spoke, and Robert was interested to see that he reddened and looked down as his knight shot a keen glance at him. It was as if he suddenly realized he had said something wrong. Sir Ralph spoke then as he took a mug of wine from the servant.

“Yes, the Scottish are all under an interdict. The Pope decided to punish them for refusing to seal their dispute with King Edward, who is, after all, their liege lord.”

“Good,” said Sir William, rubbing his hands together with a smile of satisfaction. “Let us hope they will realize the error of their ways, then. Perhaps this will make them see that they cannot live by simply stealing what they want all the time. Those Scottish are no more than a tribe of outlaws.”

“More to the point, it also stops any chance of a new crusade to the Holy Land, and that is what the Pope wishes for,” Sir Ralph continued, staring into his mug.

“While the Scottish continue raiding in the north, and with the French King threatening the south, King Edward can hardly be expected to agree to travel to Palestine. The Pope’s desire for a new attempt on the Holy Land must stay just that: a desire, with no chance of being satisfied.”

“At least the Pope’s trying to cow the Scots into submission.”

“Yes, sir. And the news from Ireland sounds better. The King’s justiciar over there has apparently forced the Scottish invaders back. Thanks to God for a wise man who can command his troops.”

“If, er...if there was to be a new crusade, Sir Ralph—would you join it?” asked Sir Robert, and was fixed with an intense stare from the knight’s gray eyes.

“Yes, sir. I am like your brother here. I have no property; my brother inherited it all from our father. What I crave—what I *need*—is an opportunity to win glory and favors. Where else should a knight be, but in battle? If there was a new crusade I could win fame and wealth. But be that as it may, there will be no crusade. Not while the French and English kings bicker among themselves at every opportunity. No, I will not be going to Palestine. But I want to cross the sea, to see new lands and

fight. There are wars in Italy where a knight can earn good sums. I may go there.”

Motioning for more wine, Sir William burped and agreed. “Yes, the Italian cities offer good opportunities.”

Sir Ralph nodded, but his eyes remained on Sir Robert. After a moment John cleared his throat.

“So how is the demesne? The Manor looks as though it’s hardly suffered, compared with the rest of the kingdom.”

“We’ve been lucky,” Sir William agreed. “The estates have not been so badly affected as others. And not many villeins have died.”

“But some have run away.”

Sir Robert’s sharp tone made his brother and the knight look up. His father opened his mouth to speak but Sir Robert carried on, his anger rising again swiftly as he remembered the incident. “Oh, yes, some have run. Like Peter Bruther...”

John frowned. “Who, old Martha’s son?”

“Yes. She died, and he ran away some nine months ago. We thought he must have gone east, to try to win his freedom, but I saw him today on the road to Exeter. The cretin did not run far, apparently, he just went to the moors. He saw me, too, and went to the trouble of stopping me to show he does not fear us any more, the cur!”

“Did you beat him?” his brother asked, curious.

“He was surrounded by miners, like guards round a king. I could do nothing. If I had, they would have attacked me.” Sir Robert glared at the fire, while John could not hide his sneer at this weakness.

Shrugging, Sir Ralph said, “Well, if you want him, go after him. If a villein runs away he must remain free for a year and a day to gain his freedom. If he has not been gone for a year yet, you have every right to bring him back.”

“Not here, Sir Ralph. The moors are different. And others will see him get away with it, without punishment! He will see to that: the rogue promised it, and laughed at me. Him—a villein—laughing at *me!*”

Sir William wore a worried frown. “This could be bad for the demesne. What can we do? If we do nothing, the other villeins will see that they can go when they want, and the Manor will fail for lack of workers, but if we try to pull him back, the miners could fight us.”

John was unconcerned. “Demand that the warden at Lydford comes and sorts it out. He has responsibility for the tinnars in Devon under the law. Peter Bruther must come back, and the warden can make him.”

“Maybe you’re right,” muttered Robert. Looking up suddenly, John was surprised by the fury on his brother’s face as he ground out: “One thing I do know: if I catch that bastard alone, out on the

moors, he'll regret his laughter at my expense.”

“You mustn't harm a miner,” his father remonstrated mildly.

“Me? I mustn't let villeins run away, Father, and neither should *you!*”

“For the love of God, Simon!”

“What?” Simon Puttock turned in his saddle, and peered at his friend.

His companion sighed dramatically, but when he caught Simon’s expression he could not help breaking into loud, but not unkind, laughter. “Your misery, that’s what! You’ve been like a bear with leg in a trap all the way, complaining about this visit. Are you going to keep it up until we get there? What are you so troubled about? The journey is not long, there’s a meal at the end of it, and at least the weather is good for a ride over these moors you’ve told me so much about.”

Simon, bailiff of Lydford Castle, gave a surly shrug of his shoulders, but was forced to confess the validity of at least the last part of the statement. From here, up at the far eastern fringe of Lydford the moors did look inviting in the sunshine—a deceptive series of softly molded green hillocks in the distance, rolling and merging one into the other, touched with bright yellow and gold where the sunlight caught the gorse, with occasional licks of purple and mauve where the heather lay. The scene looked as rich in color as the robes of an emperor, the flanks of the hills spattered here and there with white where sheep grazed. Overhead a hawk soared in a cloudless sky, while ahead of them water sparkled in brooks and pools.

But the view gave him no comfort, and the worst of it was, the bailiff wasn’t sure he could fully explain his problems. It had been two years now since he had first met Sir Baldwin Furnshill, the Master of Furnshill Manor near Cadbury, and in that time the two had become firm friends. As Simon knew, after investigating murders with him, Baldwin was shrewd and learned, and had a good grasp of law—especially now that he was a Keeper of the King’s Peace—but the troubles Simon was forced to contend with almost daily would be incomprehensible even to a man trained in legal matters. Though Baldwin had travelled much in his youth, in those days he had been a member of a wealthy and powerful organization. Local issues were a very different kettle of fish.

The bailiff threw him a doubtful glance. In the sunlight, Baldwin was tanned and fit-looking, the thin knife-scar on his cheek shining red in the sun. His brown eyes moved confidently over the countenance ahead, and with his strong, square face he looked the picture of a modern knight. But the neatly trimmed beard which followed the line of his jaw jarred, as did his clothing. The old tunic was stained and worn, his hose faded and dusty, making him look as if he had fallen on hard times. It was not so, Simon knew, for the knight’s estates were prosperous, but Baldwin had simply no interest in his appearance. He was content to appear poor if others wished to believe him so.

“Come along, Simon. How can you be so miserable on a day like this?” Baldwin asked again. It was unlike his friend to be so introspective and oblivious to the world. If anything, it was usually

Baldwin himself who was prey to dark thoughts, and Simon who had to pull him back to the present. But not this time. Baldwin was relaxed and refreshed after staying with the bailiff for three days, and he found it hard to understand why the message from an obscure Manor toward Widecombe should have so unsettled his friend.

Simon rode along in silence for a while, jogging in time with his horse's slow gait. "It's these damned miners, Baldwin," he said at last. "Wherever they go, there's trouble."

"But this man Beauscyr only has a simple complaint, surely?"

"It's not as easy as it seems," Simon grunted. "This is not like your Manor, where you have the right to treat your peasants as you wish. This is a forest."

"A forest?" Baldwin repeated dubiously.

"Yes. It used to be a hunting ground for the King until he made Piers Gaveston Earl of Cornwall and gave it to him. Since Gaveston's killing, it has reverted to the King—and the miners fall under the King's demesne."

"How so?"

The bailiff explained. "There has always been a lot of tin on the moors, and the farming of it has become a profitable occupation for many—not least for the King. Edward taxes all the metal mined here, so he has given rights to the miners to protect them and their interests. More or less anything that helps them find tin, they are allowed to do."

"But the man is a runaway, surely? All of this is irrelevant."

"I wish it was. The trouble is, as soon as he bounded land, he became a miner. It follows that he is a member of the King's demesne. Beauscyr may not like it, but his man is now *de facto* a tin miner working for the King. There's little Beauscyr can do about it."

"Well, then, Beauscyr must accept that he has lost his man, whether he likes the fact or no. He can petition the King if he feels he has a claim."

Simon studied his friend with an embittered eye. The knight stared back with open, cheerful incomprehension, and Simon sighed again. "Sir William Beauscyr won't see it like that, *Sir Baldwin*" he said dryly. The knight chuckled at the sarcastic use of his title as the bailiff scowled at the track ahead. "As far as he's concerned, he's got rights too—the same as you or anyone else. This man was his villein; he has run away, therefore he should be returned."

"Except that now the man falls under the King's protection," Baldwin said lightly.

"Except that now the man is the King's," Simon agreed. "The trouble is, many villeins run away and *call* themselves miners, just to escape their lords. Some men on the moors have claimed stannary rights and privileges—that is, they've declared they're miners and behave as such—until they have a new tax imposed, when they suddenly change their minds and say they're merchants, or farmers, or foresters...anything! That's what Beauscyr alleges: that this man—who was it? Peter?—this man is claiming to be a tinner out of convenience, and has no intention of mining."

~~“That I cannot understand,”~~ said Baldwin. ~~“What would be the point of it? All it means is, he has~~ gone from one master to another. It’s not as if he is free...”

“Yes, it is!” said Simon emphatically. “As a tin miner, he has most of the rights of a freeman—that’s the whole point. He can farm tin as he wants, for as long as he wants. The miners have ancient rights, since time out of mind, so the King can be sure they’ll bring in the greatest quantity possible. He certainly earns a fortune each year from their efforts. The King imposes few rules on the stanners and they make their own laws. That’s why they can go anywhere on the moors. They have the right, given to them by the King, to wander anywhere, on to anyone’s land, to dig for tin, to cut turves for their peat fires, to redirect water for their workings—almost anything. This Peter ‘Whomsoever’ knew what he was doing when he ran away. To all effects he’s free now. And this bloody fool Beauscyr wants me—*me!*—to sort out problems which have been brewing for centuries...”

Baldwin grinned to himself as his friend muttered on. At thirty-two Simon was some thirteen years younger than he, and still occasionally prone to the kind of angry outbursts which Baldwin more commonly associated with the wild red-haired men of the north. However, the knight knew that these fits of temper never lasted long. Tall, with swarthy skin and brown, nearly-black hair, Simon was normally phlegmatic, accepting what life threw at him, and as he grew older his gray eyes studied the world with a reserved calmness that hid a sharp mind. Having been educated, he was more keen to listen to arguments and strive to find a fair and reasonable line through any dispute, a trait Baldwin found reassuring in a man responsible for the well-being and fortunes of others. The bailiff’s logical mind was able to accommodate most petitioners, and it was only rarely that he lost his temper, when matters appeared to be unfair, or when people were intransigent.

This time it was frustration at being sent to mediate between two parties whose views and wishes were so utterly at odds with each other. From the little Baldwin had heard, there was no likelihood of Simon being able to please both groups. The needs of the miners and the landowners in the moors were too intertwined and yet mutually exclusive to permit of an easy resolution—the King himself would have to rule an agreement. He studied his friend sympathetically for a moment.

“Still, Simon, I was pleased to see that your own Peter has thrived.”

The bailiff threw him a quizzical grin at the mention of his son. “Thanks for changing the subject,” he said. “Yes, Peter is fine, thanks to God! And Hugh is devoted to him.” The boy was a long-awaited blessing. Simon and Margaret, his wife, doted on their daughter Edith, but both had longed for a brother for her. Their wishes had finally been fulfilled the previous year, and Simon’s servant Hugh had taken to the baby immediately, a fact which occasionally led to arguments between him and Simon’s daughter as they bickered over who should look after him.

Some way farther on, Baldwin shifted in his saddle. “Have you heard about affairs on the Scottish marches?” The bailiff threw him a baffled glance as he continued: “It seems that the Pope has been so infuriated by the wars between the Scottish and English that he sent two cardinals to try and negotiate a peace.”

“A peace between the Bruce and Edward? Never!” Simon snorted. “None of the King’s men in England want to see the Bruce keep what he’s stolen, and he’s unlikely to agree to give it all up.”

“It may become easier. Now that the Irish have begun to force his men back, he may accept that ~~over there, his conquests have stretched as far as they are going to. Perhaps he will think about agreeing to peace at last.~~”

“I’m not so sure. A man like that’s got no honor. He swore fealty to the King’s father when he was Earl of Carrick—how could he be trusted again?”

“Easily, old friend. That was a political promise,” said Baldwin cynically. “Since then he has been crowned King. After all, our own blessed monarch Edward is a vassal of France for Gascony, and yet he has not given homage to King Philip, has he?”

“Ah, but that’s different. King Edward’s an honorable man, and he’s gone to France to pay homage over the last few years—but how often should he be expected to go? Each time he returns, the French King dies, and he must turn around and go back to swear to the successor. No, it’s different with the madman of Scotland. He refuses to come and pay homage to his English King.”

“I am not so sure it is quite that straightforward, Simon. Still, we can but hope for peace. The la thing the country needs is more war.”

“Were the cardinals successful?”

“No. Not quite,” Baldwin said slowly, and then he chortled quietly. When he continued, it was in the unhurried manner which showed he was choosing every word with care. “In fact, they were somewhat incomed on their way. They landed on our shores in July of last year, but did not, it would appear, arrive in Scotland until much later. Seemingly they were met by a group of brigands between York and Durham, and were robbed.”

“What happened to them?”

“Oh, they were unharmed. Their pride was more hurt than their persons! Of course, their horses and money were stolen, but they were not hampered apart from that. The additional exercise will probably have done the honorable cardinals some good.”

“I suppose that’ll put paid to any hint of peace. If those damned Scotch rebels dare to attack and rob the Pope’s cardinals on the way to meet their lord—”

“Ah, Simon!” The knight roared with laughter, making his friend stare at him uncomprehendingly.

“You mustn’t jump to conclusions! It wasn’t the Scots who attacked the cardinals, it was a band led by an Englishman.”

“No Englishman would dare!”

“Sir Gilbert Middleton did. He had resorted to outlawry. I hear he thought that if the King was unable to protect people up on the northern marches, he might as well take advantage of the fact. He was caught at the end of last year, and I expect his head is on a lance in London even now, for the embarrassment he has given the King.”

“How do you find out these things?” Simon muttered, torn between resentment at the laughter and an urge to join in.

“Simple,” the older man told him. “I speak to travellers. Most people are happy to tell their news to an interested man. And I still sometimes have...friends come and visit me.”

His words made them both quiet for a minute. It was more than ten years since the arrest in 1307 of the “Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and the Temple of Solomon,” the Knights Templar, and here in England they were all but forgotten, their lands divided and sold off or in the hands of their rivals, the Knights Hospitaller. But neither Baldwin nor Simon could forget the Order, for Baldwin had been a member of the outlawed and disgraced group.

There was a view, commonly held in England and Scotland, that the Knights Templar were innocent of the crimes attributed to them, and were merely the victims of an elaborate plot hatched by the French King to seize their wealth. After the Order had been destroyed, many men who had been members were used by the English King as diplomats, and other warrior monks were welcomed in Scotland, where King Robert I wanted as many trained soldiers as he could find. There were reports that the “Beauséant,” the black and white banner of the Templars, had been seen at Bannockburn where the English forces were routed so disastrously. Thus there were a great number of men all over the country who had been comrades of Sir Baldwin of Furnhill in the past, before he had become Keeper of the King’s Peace in Crediton, and he often entertained guests at his small Manor. Though Simon knew this, he preferred not to enquire too deeply.

“So,” Simon mused after a time, “the Pope wants to see peace as well, does he? That could be helpful. Maybe he can persuade the Bruce to stop his raiding.”

“Do not place too much store on his ability to bring an end to the wars, my friend.” Baldwin smiled wryly.

“The Pope has already excommunicated the Bruce, after all. And if you had been crowned King of the Scots, I doubt you would be pleased to receive a letter from the Pope addressed to ‘You, who *call* yourself King of Scotland!’ If Pope John wants peace, he will need to try harder than that!”

They were still chuckling at this as they rode down a shallow slope from which the sweep of the moors could be seen. For Baldwin, unused to the area, it was an awesome sight. Bright grass gleamed in the sun, some thin and cropped by cattle, some long and spindly like reeds, both sliced apart in places by silvery trails of glistening water trickling to blue pools. Their path was a dark slash meandering between softly molded hillocks surmounted with moorstones, a landscape which would have been bleak in winter, Baldwin felt, but which now seemed full of promise with the high singing of larks in the dear sky and the constant tinkling music of the water.

For several miles the knight and his friend saw no other person. The route was well-trodden, the grass flattened and in places worn away, but there was no sign of habitation. The ground became, if possible, even more profusely covered with the gray boulders. Their path took them into a low valley and soon they were trailing around the fringes of a little wood on the steep hillside, where the trees grew among the litter of stones and boulders.

“God above! Simon, what’s happened here?”

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