

Wolf Wood

Part One

In 1436 a dispute arose between the people of Sherborne and their abbot over the ownership of a baptismal font. Before it was settled, the abbey was burnt down and a bishop murdered. Some saw the hand of evil at work and blamed a newcomer to the town, accusing her of being a witch. Others saw her as a saint. Wolf Wood is set in the turbulent years of the late middle ages. The old feudal aristocracy is losing control, a new middleclass is flexing its muscles, the authority of the church is being questioned, law and order have broken down and England is facing defeat in France. Wolf Wood is a work of fiction based on actual events.

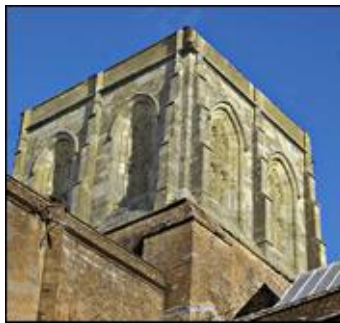
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Chapter 1

Sherborne Abbey

Easter Sunday 1436



Alice walked up the cobbled path towards the abbey. The old building was undergoing renovation and the scaffolding had recently been removed from the south side of the tower. The work was being undertaken at huge expense to the parish and was a major cause of friction between the abbot and the local people. On that chilly April morning, the new stonework shone brightly in the crisp light of a cloudless day.

She wore a warm gown with a badge that identified her as the matron of the parish almshouse. She had recently arrived in Sherborne from the convent in nearby Shaftsbury. Her friends, Elizabeth and John Baret, had arranged for her to take up the appointment.

They had rescued her from a situation that was becoming unbearable. Alice was a free thinker and that was something you kept quiet about if you lived in a convent. She knew Latin and Greek and had taught herself Arabic.

Arabic was strictly forbidden but she was prepared to take the risk. The language of the Moslem unbelievers had opened up a whole new world. The Arabs were skilled at healing. She had trained as a midwife and was intent on using her new knowledge to save the many poor women who died in childbirth.

She was on her way to All Hallows, which was a church-like building attached to the west end of the abbey. A crowd was gathered there. From the sprinkling entering the porch, it was evident that today's congregation was handpicked. Apart from the distinguished guests and their attendants, they were solid, respectable townfolk who could be relied upon to behave.

The Easter Service always aroused passions. The abbey owned most of the town and the abbot interfered in the daily lives of the people. To their immense annoyance, he even extracted a fee for baptisms. They were not allowed to have a font in All Hallows. Instead, they had to pay to use the font in the abbey nave.

Easter was the time when the peasants flocked into town from the surrounding countryside. They brought produce for sale at the Easter Fair and got drunk on the proceeds. They also brought their babies for baptism. The ceremony was always a noisy affair. A band heralded the infants into the bosom of Christ and its members took every opportunity to stir up resentment towards the abbey. Last year, its antics resulted in a near riot.

A crowd of peasants was gathered on the abbey green. It was early in the day and they were relatively sober. Alice saw Elizabeth Baret amongst them. She was with another woman, whom she recognised as Lady Margaret Gough. Dressed in their smart gowns, the two women stood out like brightly coloured birds amongst the dull greys and browns of cottage homespun.

Alice felt a tinge of alarm. Elizabeth had told her that Lady Margaret wanted to be with the women when they took their babies to the font. It looked as if she was determined to carry out her wish. She turned to the vicar, who was standing nearby.

'Can't you do something about it, Vicar?'

'About what, Sister?'

'The band. It's hardly appropriate for a christening.'

'The baptismal band is part of a time-honoured tradition.'

'But the drums and trumpets ... they sound like an army on the march. The brothers find it offensive. There have been occasions when they have feared for their safety.'

'I'm sure there is no reason for that.'

'We are worried about what Lady Margaret might think.'

'Lady Margaret?'

'You are surely aware that she is here to make a donation for the new almshouse. What will you tell your fellow trustees if she changes her mind?'

Alice turned her attention to a group of men on the abbey green. They had musical instruments but didn't look as if they were about to take part in a religious service. None wore surplices. Some wore military uniforms.

Sherborne was an important base in the war with France and many of its men had served in the companies that crossed the channel to fight in the king's name. The men in the band looked capable of anything. Alice wasn't surprised the monks were afraid of them.

For the moment, they seemed more interested in the abbey tower than the monks. Alice followed their gaze to a pair of boys on a narrow walkway. One was the son of Master Mason Robert Hulle. The other was not known to her. From the way he clung to a guard rail, she guessed he was unaccustomed to heights.

Baptism



William Gascoigne knew he shouldn't be there and was beginning to understand why. With an awful suddenness the solid stonework of the abbey tower ended in a sea of scaffolding. A maze of ladders stretched before him, filling the void beneath the bells and reaching down into the main body of the church. He looked up and saw patches of sky through holes in the roof. When he looked down he felt dizzy.

'Come on! You won't fall.'

He heard Geoffrey Hulle's voice and saw him on a ladder.

'My dad's checked it out ... it's safe.'

Geoffrey disappeared onto a walkway and William followed. He'd climbed ladders before and got to the top without difficulty. Then his fears flooded back. He expected to see planks but found hurdles. They were woven from hazel and looked like those used for sheep pens on his father's estate. Geoffrey was in the middle, forty feet above the ground.

'Come on. It's fun!'

He grabbed the side rails and jumped up and down.

The hurdles flexed and William shut his eyes.

'I want to go back.'

'You're not scared ... are you?'

The jibe struck William to the core. Being scared was something peasants did. Boys of his class were never scared. They rode horses and went to war as soon as they were old enough. He opened his eyes and climbed onto the walkway, determined to stride fearlessly across. Then he remembered something his father said about prudence being the better part of valour and sank to his knees and crawled across.

Geoffrey was waiting on the other side. It was his idea they should go up the tower and see the work his father was doing. The boy danced around and pointed to a rounded arch with dogtooth carving.

'This is some of the old stuff. We'll be leaving it because it can't be seen from the ground and it's still in good nick.'

The boys' clothes were tailor-made and smart: little different from those of a well-dressed adult. Felt hat with a narrow brim that turned up stylishly at the front. Short-

sleeved jacket, tight about the chest and worn with a shirt of contrasting colour. Brightly coloured stockings fastened to linen underwear. Snug leather shoes. It was the dress of boys from prosperous families ... not that Geoffrey and William belonged to the same social class.

Geoffrey's father was a master mason. As such, he combined the roles of architect, engineer and building contractor. Master Mason Hulle was renowned for his work on Winchester Cathedral and Sherborne Abbey. His strength lay in his business competence and membership of the powerful Master Masons' Guild. Geoffrey was a sensitive lad with light brown hair and freckles.

William belonged to the landholding, military gentry. His family owned property in England and France. The Gascoignes campaigned under the banner of the Earl of Huntingdon and their strength lay in their ability to make a profit out of the war in France. William was a powerfully built lad of twelve with blue eyes, blond hair and a pugnacious nature.

Geoffrey was keen to show him the changes his father was making to the abbey. William was more interested in climbing the abbey tower.

'Have you ever been to Salisbury?' Geoffrey asked.

'My father took me once,' William said.

'Well. You'd have seen the pointed arches in the cathedral. They were done in the old style. They're better than the rounded stuff the Normans did but not up to much. We're going for a total remake.'

William didn't care how buildings were put up. He wanted to know how to knock them down and get to the valuables inside.

Geoffrey opened a small door.

'Take a look at that!'

William leant forward and found himself staring into space. It was as if a slice had been cut from the end of the nave. The roof was missing and so were the beams that had once supported the wooden ceiling.

'We took it off so we could put up the scaffolding,' Geoffrey explained. 'We'll be putting on a temporary roof when it's finished. There's no point in making it permanent because the nave is in for a total remake. Just look at those ugly pillars the Normans put up.'

William wasn't interested in what the Normans did hundreds of years ago. He wanted to know what was going on right now. A door at the end of the nave had opened and a man with a baldhead had appeared.

'That's Thomas Draper,' Geoffrey whispered. 'My dad says he's a troublemaker.'

William watched the baldhead proceed down the aisle and stop before a wooden platform.

'We put it up yesterday,' Geoffrey said.

'What's it for?'

'The baptismal. It's where they take the money. When the babies have been put in the holy water they go up there so their names can be written in a book. They can't go to heaven if that's not done.'

William wasn't interested in books or babies. His eyes were on the man. He watched carefully. His uncle Guy had taught him to do that. Guy said lawyers and priests buried their heads in books. Soldiers watched and listened. It wasn't what people said that mattered ... it was what they did.

The man knelt beside the platform.

William's eyes narrowed.

'He's got a rope.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yeah. He's tying it on.'

As they watched, a figure emerged from the shadows. He was wearing a surplice and the top of his head was shaved like a priest. A lot of parish priests wore surplices. Usually you saw black stockings and buckled shoes. This one was wearing green stockings and flared boots. He went over to the baldheaded man who was now hiding behind a pillar.

'Have you tied it properly?'

William recognised the voice and grinned.

'Yeah ... don't worry about that, Master Vowell. It has been properly secured as you instructed. I shall now sit here where I cannot be seen and await your signal.'

'And what will that be, Master Draper?'

'A long and melodious fart ...'

'That's right, Tom,' the priest laughed. 'It will be music to our ears, even if some folks find it offensive.'

He glanced back along the nave to All Hallows.

'I'd better get back. Our betters have arrived. Lady Margaret Gough, Sir Humphrey bleeding Stafford and half the sodding shire are here. They're going to celebrate Easter Mass in our humble presence. Then they're off to Jonnie Baret's house for a meeting.'

William found a wall at the end of the abbey nave and decided it was a good place to watch the proceedings. Geoffrey called it a pulpitum. William didn't care what it was called. He felt safe there. The wall was over four foot thick. There wasn't much risk of falling off.

Mass in All Hallows ended and the country folk came into the nave from the abbey green. William sensed an air of tension. The men had taken up positions along the central aisle and were exchanging glances. The women were gathered about the font chattering excitedly. It was like being at a tournament before the jousting got started.

The monks were already there. Two overweight men in black gowns stood on the platform and stared directly ahead, trying to ignore the hostile stares of the congregation. One carried a large book and the other had a steel-bound collecting box, fastened to his wrist by a chain. The baldheaded man was crouched behind a pillar, munching on a loaf of bread.

A trumpet sounded and the processional door swung open. Men with pipes stormed out, followed by men with drums and cymbals. They marched down the nave, four abreast, to the applause of the crowd. William was reminded of his grandfather's men, drilling in the manor yard before leaving to fight in France.

Richard Vowell was amongst them. He had fought with his grandfather and William knew him well. The old campaigner strode in front. He was wearing his priest's surplice but looked more like a soldier than a priest. He held a Bible in one hand and a trumpet in the other. Reaching the end of the nave, he hurled the trumpet in the air like it was a marshal's baton.

The band turned and made for the monks. Building materials blocked their way. They clambered over them and started to circle the platform. Richard opened his Bible and set up a chant. It was about the army of the Israelites and how they marched round the walls of Jericho blowing trumpets.

William had heard it before. It was one of the few Bible stories he liked. It was about warriors; not about wimps who fed the poor and did stupid things like that. He looked down at the baldhead below. The man had stopped munching and had the

rope in his hands.

Six times the band circled the platform. The crowd counted and the monks looked apprehensive. William wasn't surprised. The fat sods knew what the number seven would bring.

When it came, it was almost an anticlimax. Richard Vowell blew a long fart on his trumpet and the baldheaded man yanked on his rope. The peasants cheered. The platform tilted and the monks collapsed onto their big bums. William couldn't stop laughing.

'That'll teach 'em!'

He gave Geoffrey a jab in the ribs and stepped back. A moment later, he was falling into space. Hurdles broke around him and he landed on a pile of canvas. Blood poured from his head and his arm lay twisted below his body.

Chapter 3

Easter Fair



Richard Vowell strode up Cheap Street towards the noise and bustle of the Easter Fair. A man of many colours, he had served with the English forces in France before returning to his native Sherborne where his quick wit enabled him to earn a respectable living.

His involvement with All Hallows was one of his many ventures. It yielded a small income but that didn't concern him. Anything he earned as a priest was returned to the parish in the form of donations to the poor and incentives to those who could further the cause.

The cause fired Richard with passion. He'd heard endless sermons about Christ's suffering on the cross. Nothing stirred him more than the suffering and indignity inflicted on ordinary people who were condemned to a lowly station because of their humble birth.

When Adam delved and Eve span who was then the gentleman?

He had repeated the words a million times. They were the rallying call of all true believers. Radical preachers had gone to the stake for saying them out loud. Women had been burnt as witches. Richard said them under his breath. He had no time for people who made martyrs of themselves. His hero was the death-watch beetle that invaded huge structures and gnawed away in silence.

He had invented a family coat of arms. It consisted of a shield with bar sinister in blood red. Beetles occupied two quadrants and the heads of monks, barons and

bishops made up the rest of the composition.

On that pleasant Easter afternoon, Richard Vowell, the priest, was transformed into Dick Vowell, the old soldier. He'd discarded his surplice and was attired in a way fitting for a former archer: flared boots of soft leather, green stockings, padded jerkin and red tunic. The shaved, bald pate, on the top of his head was the only sign of his clerical commitments.

Cheap Street was the market street. It was where the shopkeepers had their businesses. Narrow at the bottom, it widened towards the town green where there was ample space for stalls and entertainers. A troop of mummers was performing a passion play outside the Julian Inn when Richard got there and a band of pipers was playing outside the George Inn.

The English marched to the wail of pipes and the familiar sound stirred memories in Richard's soul. For a moment he was transported back to a muddy battlefield in northern France. Then the sound of tapping shook him from his reverie. A tinker was sitting beside a brazier, surrounded by pots and pans. Richard sneaked up behind him.

'Lollard Heretic!'

He grabbed the man by the neck.

'I summon you to appear before the halimote to answer charges of treason and sedition brought against you by our lord bishop.'

The tinker swung round ... then his features relaxed.

'Holy Mother! You had me thinking you was for real.'

Richard released his hold.

'Have you got 'em, Tink?'

'What?'

'The papers!'

'They're in here.' The tinker tapped a wooden box.

'Any trouble?'

'Nah! I found a monk who was down on his luck.'

'Where was that?'

'In York ... so the English is a bit odd. But it's not as odd as what we got from Durham.'

'That wasn't just odd.' Richard pulled a face. 'It was like a foreign language. The holy sod should have left it in Latin. Then I could've borrowed the vicar's lexicon and worked it out for myself.'

'You might need a lexicon for some of this.' The tinker opened the box and removed a sheaf of papers. 'Whenever the reverend brother couldn't understand something he left it in the original.'

Richard took the papers and examined them one by one.

'What did you pay?'

'That's my secret, Master Vowell. What I paid is of no importance. What matters is what you're going to give me for them.'

Richard puckered his lips.

'Nine pence for the lot.'

'Master Vowell!' A pained expression appeared on the tinker's face. 'I cannot accept such a paltry sum.'

Richard continued to shuffle the papers.

'The handwriting's none too good.'

'Master Vowell! You have in your hands the gospels according to the saintly Paul. They are in the English tongue. You can discourse on them with learned friars ...

cause the reverend gentlemen think you understand Latin.'

Richard nodded thoughtfully.

'Ten pence. Not a penny more.'

'Master Vowell! Think of the poor brother whose noble hand graces these fine pages. Imagine his anguish as he works by candlelight in his monastic cell, fearful of the terrible penalties that await those who translate the holy scriptures into the common tongue.'

'Eleven pence ... that's my final offer.'

'Master Vowell! Consider the risk I and my associates ran to bring these priceless treasures to you.'

'I said that was my final offer.'

Richard returned the papers to the box and walked away.

'A shilling!' The tinker ran after him. 'You can have 'em for a shilling.'

'Done!'

Richard pressed a silver coin into the tinker's hand.

'There you are, Tink ... a deal between gentlemen.'

The tinker placed the coin on his tongue and examined the edges. Satisfied that it had not been trimmed and tasted right, he put the coin in his pouch.

'You're an honest man, Master Vowell.'

Richard slipped the papers inside his jerkin.

'What do you think they do to a monk who's caught translating holy writ into the vulgar tongue?'

'Dunno,' the tinker held up his left hand. 'Perhaps they cut off his writing fingers, like what the Frogs did to mine.'

Richard examined the gap where two fingers were missing. As a young man, the tinker had used them to draw a bowstring at Agincourt and other battles against the French.

'Why did you say you were left-handed?'

'I didn't. When you're captured, they make you draw a bow. If they think you're faking, they take 'em off both hands so there's no mistake.'

'At least they let you go. If you'd been a lord you could be rotting in a dungeon while your relatives raised a ransom.'

'Yeah,' the tinker nodded. 'They're not all bad ... the Frogs. They just made it so I couldn't draw a bow no more. They could've killed me.'

'Most of them are alright,' Richard agreed. 'It's the nobles I can't stand ... just like those arseholes we've got here.'

He tapped the tinker's arm.

'Watch out! The bailiffs are here. Walter Gallor and some little runt I've not seen before. I'm going up to the green before they see me ... Owen's here for the fair.'



Owen Ap-Richard leant on his longbow and addressed the crowd in his strong Welsh voice. He wore a stylish costume from Bordeaux, where he had served with a

company of archers. Like Richard, he was showing signs of age and had decided to leave fighting to younger men.

‘Four shots for a farthing!’

He pointed to four wooden heads.

‘One hit wins you a fine ribbon for your lady’s hair. Hit all four and she’ll be taking home a kerchief fit for a queen.’

The heads were on a stand beside the chapel of Saint Thomas on the green. Owen gestured towards them.

‘There you are, my fine sirs, four of the most treacherous and deceitful rogues in all of Christendom.’

An arrow hit one head but failed to knock it over.

Owen turned to the crowd.

‘Our good friend is out to avenge the treachery of the vile Duke of Burgundy who has allied himself with our young king’s enemies.’

The next shot hit the duke’s helm and the head fell onto the ground. A boy of about sixteen put it back and another handed a ribbon to the triumphant archer.

Richard stepped forward and gave the archers’ salute.

‘You’re looking fit, Owen.’

‘I can’t complain, Dickie.’ Owen returned the salute. ‘I’ve got my health and I’m making a good living from the fairs.’

‘Who are the boys?’

‘The big lad is my son Gareth and the other is my sister’s. I’m hoping to place them with Guy Gascoigne when he comes recruiting next.’

Richard pointed at the head that had just been knocked over. ‘You said he was the Duke of Burgundy?’

‘That’s right, boyo.’

‘He looks more like the Duke of Surrey to me.’

‘There is a resemblance,’ Owen agreed.

‘And the bishop?’

‘He’s the Bishop of Reims.’

‘I’d say he looks more like Cardinal Beaufort.’

‘You mean the Henry Beaufort who is uncle to our young king and a prominent member of the Royal Council?’ Owen surveyed the head. ‘Yes. I must agree. There is a slight resemblance.’

‘Here.’ Richard produced a penny. ‘I’ll give you this for four shots.’

‘No you won’t, boyo!’ Owen pushed his hand away. ‘I’ll not have you take that kerchief off me. It’s the only one I’ve got.’

‘I don’t want your kerchief.’ Richard surveyed the heads. ‘I’ll make a bargain. If I don’t bring ‘em all down, I’ll pay for drinks in the Julian ... otherwise, you pay.’

Chapter 4

Harald



The infirmary was to the east of the abbey and separated from the other monastic buildings by a lawn. Harald Gascoigne followed the black-robed monk up a flight of stairs into a room lined with beds. Injury and sickness always depressed him, particularly when a member of his family was involved.

‘Your son has been taken to the dispensary,’ the monk said. ‘Brother Arnold is in Dorchester and Sister Alice has been called. She is a most loving and caring lady, skilled in the art of healing.’

Harald smelt the tang of medicinal herbs and saw vapours issuing from behind a door.

‘Sister Alice is the new matron of the almshouse,’ the monk continued. ‘She came as soon as she heard about the nature of the injuries.’

Nature of the injuries!

Harald shuddered. He’d hoped it wasn’t serious but they’d called in someone special. He entered a room and saw William lying on a padded table. The boy’s head was swathed in bandages and his arm strapped to a wooden splint. A woman in a nun’s habit bent over him. He expected someone in middle age. When she looked up Harald saw she was younger than himself.

‘Sir Harald, thank you for coming.’

He couldn’t imagine doing otherwise.

‘Your son has had a bad fall and is suffering from concussion.’

Her voice was that of a well-educated woman.

‘I have examined his pupils and there is no sign of dilation. Nor is there any discharge from the ears. There appears to be no fracture of the skull but we must remain vigilant.’

She started to roll back the bandages.

‘His scalp is badly cut and will need immediate stitching.’

Harald saw bare bone and thanked God for people like Sister Alice. In an emergency like this he was totally useless. His father and brother wallowed in blood and gore. They’d made him physically sick with stories about eyes protruding from heads and blood squirting from severed limbs. The thought of William taking up arms and joining them in France was horrifying. His ambition was for his son to attend university and become a priest or lawyer.

‘I am using a suture of my own preparation.’

She took a pair of tweezers and removed a needle and thread from a pot of steaming liquid. Harald looked the other way. His son was unconscious so he wasn’t in pain. That was a consolation. But what if he remained in a coma? Such things happened following a blow to the head. Sister Alice said there was no sign of a fractured skull. That didn’t mean there wasn’t one. Liquids could be building up inside. What would they do then? Harald doubted if there was anyone in all of

Dorset who had the skill to pierce the skull and release the pressure.

She returned her scissors to their case.

'I have sutured the wound and applied clean bandages. It should heal within about three weeks. The stitches must then be removed. I shall do so if you wish. In the meantime, I advise you to take William to see Brother Arnold in Dorchester. He is better qualified than I and his opinion should be sought, both on the injury to the head and the broken arm.'

Harald noted that William's right arm was broken. His son referred to it as his sword arm.

'Brother Luke has set the bones and is concerned that this type of break can cause deformities in later life.'

A deformed sword arm didn't seem such a bad thing to Harald. His poor eyesight had saved him from the Gascoigne obsession with fighting. Pen and paper were more to his liking than sword and shield. He felt more at home with farmers and business people than with his own family. He often wished he could break loose from them.

Chapter 5

The Julian

A sign above the entrance of the Julian Inn depicted a buxom woman with rouged cheeks, claimed to be a likeness of Saint Juliana. Richard Vowell blew her a kiss as he went inside.

'Look who's here?'

He was greeted with shouts of applause. Men with ruddy complexions and women with children reached out as he squeezed past.

'You taught 'em a lesson, Dick!'

'That's right!' a woman shouted. 'Dick farted and the monks came tumbling down. They'll be nursing their bums for weeks.'

The peasants sang a song about a monk and a milkmaid. Richard waited until they reached the verse where the monk climbed into a barrel then made his way to a table crammed with pewter mugs. Owen Ap-Richard was there with his boys and a dozen others, including the tinker. Owen picked up a bladder of wine.

'We've been saving this for you, Dickie.'

Richard fingered the limp offering. 'You've not been saving it. You've been drinking it!' He looked around the table.

'What's this then ... an Agincourt reunion?'

'There's only seven of us,' Owen said.

'Yeah ... but you would have cut a hundred French throats between you.'

'Noble throats,' the tinker interjected. 'We wouldn't have done it if they'd been commons.'

'You speak for yourself, boyo!'

Owen groped under the table and produced another wineskin.

'The Frogs were preparing to counterattack. If I thought my prisoners would stab me in the back, I'd slit their bloody throats whoever they were.'

'That's not what your nobles did,' the tinker reached for the wineskin. 'When King Harry gave the order they refused.'

'I know, boyo. They wanted to ransom them.'

'That's not the reason,' the tinker squirted wine into his mug. 'They refused

because they recognised them nobles as their foul brothers ... oppressors of the common folk.'

Owen considered the point. 'I'll grant you they were a bit upset when we did it for them.'

'They weren't just upset ... they was scared!'

The tinker looked from face to face.

'They saw us commoners ... seventeen-year-old lads like what we were then ... slitting the throats of great lords. That frightened them because they knew if we could do it in France, we could do it back here.'

'Like with Wat Tyler,' someone said.

'Aye, Brother, like with Wat Tyler. Our grandfathers showed us the way. They could've taken London and freed their young king from the evil influence of the earls and barons but they was betrayed. They was told their just demands was agreed to and they could return home but that was just a wicked lie ...'

Heads turned towards the tinker as he ranted on. Richard glanced outside and saw the glint of steel. Men-at-arms were gathering in front of the inn. He recognised their uniforms.

'Shut up!'

He glared at the tinker.

'Sir Humphrey Stafford, Lady Margaret Gough and half the sodding shire are here for the ceremonial handover of the Julian to the almshouse. Anymore of your chatter and we'll have ourselves arrested for sedition.'

The tinker held the lantern and Owen struggled with the key. They had come down to All Hallows with the intention of sleeping there. It was the middle of the night and the monks had just returned to their beds following the matins service.

'Boyo! Come and see if you can get this thing to open.' Owen shouted to Gareth who was relieving himself against the abbey wall. 'It's the key Dickie Vowell gave us. I can't get it to turn.'

Gareth adjusted his clothing and walked across.

'Are you sure you've got the right key?'

'Like I said, it's the one we got from Dickie.'

Gareth tried the key and it worked first time.

'You're pissed ... that's your problem!'

He pushed at the door and it swung open. Candles burnt on the Easter Sepulchre and on the altar. Owen squeezed past and fell on his knees.

'It's here somewhere.'

He groped beneath the alter and retrieved a flask.

'Here you are. This is what the gentility is served at Mass. The best Bordeaux ... not the rabbits' piss we poor sods get given.'

He handed the flask to the tinker.

'Wrap yourself around that, Tink. Blood of Christ! A present from our good friend Dickie Vowell.'

The remark brought an immediate response from the tinker. 'Doest thou truly believe that the wine has become the blood of our dear Lord Jesus?'

'That's what they say,' Owen grinned mischievously. 'The priest blesses the wine and bread and they become the blood and flesh of Jesus.'

'Foul Blasphemy!' The tinker raised his hands to heaven, spilling wine on his tunic. 'Wouldst thou have us believe that our Lord's father was a vintner and his mother a baker?'

Owen grabbed the flask before more was lost.

'The wine remains wine and the bread remains bread. No words of a priest will change that. Hast thou not heard the teachings of the wise John Wycliffe who repudiated the foul doctrine of transubstantiation? Hast thou not read his learned denunciation of papal authority? It was the brave Wycliffe who dared translate the Holy Scriptures into the common tongue. It was he who sent out preachers to tell the people of the tyranny that oppresses them ...'

The tinker ranted on and Gareth wandered off. Tink's English was difficult to understand at the best of times and hadn't improved with the drink. He took a candle from the altar and went to the porch where his cousin, David, was examining a niche in the wall.

'Take a look at that!'

David splashed something wet at him.

'Have you found more wine?'

'No! I've found Holy Water. You can get good money for that. There was a woman at the fair. She was selling it at a penny for just a little bottle. It'll cure warts and it's good for the flux. See if you can find something to put it in.'

Owen appeared by the boy's side.'

'What are you crapping on about?'

'Holy Water, Uncle. We can put it in bottles and sell it.'

'Don't be daft!' Owen pulled a face. 'It has to be in special bottles and you have to get a priest to write on it.'

'We could get Dickie Vowell to do that.'

'Don't waste your time, boyo. There's much better to be had. They've been working on the roof. There'll be lead all over the place. We'll have no trouble selling that.'

Owen opened the processional door and staggered into the abbey nave. The tinker followed, lost his footing on the steps, lurched forward and crashed against the baptismal font. David raised his candle.

'Have a look at that!'

'What, boyo?'

'The font! It rocked when the tinker hit it. We could take it away. Find a church that doesn't have one and sell it to them.'

'Where we going to find a church like that?'

'All Hallows doesn't have a font.'

'Don't be daft, boyo. It already belongs to them.'

'So what's it doing in here?'

'The monks took it.'

'Verily!' The tinker staggered to his feet. 'The foul brethren of this accursed Benedictine abbey stole the ancestral font of the good people of Sherborne. The Lord God has brought us here to right a great wrong.'

Owen grabbed the little man by his tunic.

'What you going on about?'

'We can return what was wrongly taken.'

'You mean take the font back into All Hallows?'

'Aye, Brother.'

Owen considered the proposal. It had merit but there were serious logistical problems. As a young man, in the service of King Henry, he would have shrugged them off. In late middle age, he wasn't so confident of his ability to transport large pieces of masonry.

'We'd never get it up those steps.'

'Remember Caen?'

'What's that got to do with it?'

'They said we'd never get the cannons up the hill but Dickie Vowell wouldn't listen. He found some block and tackle and we gave the Frogs the surprise of their lives.'

'You're right!' Owen's face brightened. 'There's bound to be some lying around.' He turned to the boys. 'See if you can find some of that lifting gear. The masons will be using it on the tower.'

Gareth ran off and David followed. Shafts of moonlight streamed through holes in the roof of the tower, illuminating the belfry and the scaffolding below.

'Take a look at that!' Gareth pointed upwards.

David craned his neck. 'I can't see nothing. There's all those poles and things in the way.'

'That's what I'm talking about, boyo. That's what it looks like ... poles and wheels and things.'

He ran to a ladder and David followed. They climbed like drunken monkeys, going from one ladder to another until they reached a wooden platform.

David looked around. 'I can't see none of those wheel things.'

'What wheel things?'

'Those block and tackle wheel things.'

Gareth couldn't either but he could see some ropes. He jumped up and grabbed one. David grabbed another. The ropes sank and rose again. They pulled a second time and the result was deafening. The scaffolding shook with the din and the boys collapsed in a heap laughing.

In the monastic dormitory, Brother Mathew jerked into life. He'd just fallen asleep, following a tiresome matins service. The sudden noise came as a severe shock to his system. He struggled from his bed and went to where Brother John was lying.'

'Did you hear that?'

'What?' John pretended to be asleep.

'The abbey bells ... someone's ringing the bells!'

'Are you sure?'

'I heard them distinctly.'

'There's nothing now.'

'That's because they've stopped.'

'So there's nothing to worry about.' John buried his head in the hood of his gown and tried to return to his slumbers. Mathew shook him.

'We've got to do something.'

'There's nothing to be done.'

'Yes, there is! We're responsible for security.'

'That's something for the bailiffs.'

'They're abed and asleep.' Mathew reached for a lantern. 'We must go and see what is happening.'

'Shouldn't we call the bailiffs?'

'We can't do that until we know there is a problem. They're not like us. They don't work for nothing. They get paid every time they're called out.'

He raised the lantern and John followed him downstairs, past the ablution block and into the cloister. It was a cold night and their sandals crunched on the gravel. John hung back and glanced over his shoulder as Mathew unlocked the door leading into the abbey.

'Can you see anything?'

'Villains!' He closed the door. 'They're trying to steal the font.'

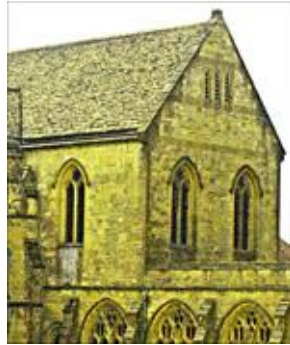
John crossed himself.

'We must call the bailiffs!'

'You are right, Brother.' Mathew began to shake. 'Walter Gallor is the nearest. He has his lodging above his slaughterhouse. We must go to him at once.'

Chapter 6

Might is Right



Canon William Bradford waited outside the abbot's chamber. The door was ajar and he could hear the chaplain conducting morning prayers. He couldn't see the abbot but knew he would be propped up in bed, swathed in warm quilts, fumbling his rosary with swollen fingers. A sickly aroma hung in the air. An infusion of fenugreek, stale sweat and other bodily excretions. William knew it from visits to the sick and dying. It was an old man's smell ... the smell of death.

The chaplain reached the end of the service. William heard the bed creak and guessed the abbot was making use of his commode as he always did after prayers. A bell rang and a woman went into the chamber. She left with a pot covered by a linen cloth. William decided that the morning ritual was complete and he could now enter.

'Pray be seated!'

Abbot Brunyng indicated a bench. For twenty years, he had stamped his will on Sherborne. One of his greatest achievements was the rebuilding of the abbey which was falling apart. The cost was staggering but his will prevailed. Now the poor sick man hardly had strength to pick up a small bowl. He coughed and black phlegm splattered the silver surface. William guessed there would soon be an election for a new abbot.

'Did you question the bailiff?'

'I saw Walter Gallor in his yard,' William replied.

'Did he confirm what Brother Mathew said?'

'He did, Father. Four ruffians were trying to drag the font into All hallows. Three spoke Welsh. The other was a Lollard tinker.'

'This is serious!'

'Aye, Father. And it didn't happen by accident.'

'How do you know?'

'Master Mason Hulle came to me. His son was climbing on the scaffolding, playing with a friend as boys will. They saw one of the parishioners use a rope to pull the platform down. The priest, Richard Vowell, was involved.'

'Can you vouch for what Master Hulle said?'

'Aye, Father. He told me he'd thrash his son to within an inch of his life if he thought the boy was lying.'

'He's a good man, that mason,' Abbot Brunyng coughed. 'He does good work and knows where his loyalties lie.'

'He does, Father, and so does the butcher. Walter Gallor has informers ... people he can trust. They told him Vowell spent the evening in the Julian with the Lollard tinker and some Welsh archers.'

'Plotting something, no doubt!'

'Aye, to steal the font. And there's more. Earlier in the day, Gallor saw Alice de Lambert speaking to the tinker.'

'Who's she?'

'The new matron of the almshouse. She came here from the convent at Shaftsbury. I have it on good authority that the local people regarded her as a witch. The sisters were glad to see the last of her.'

'Do you think she is one of them ... I mean that tinker and the other Lollards?'

'I do, Father.'

'William,' the abbot clutched his rosary. 'This is taxing me beyond my mortal strength. You must take whatever measures you see fit.'

Alice placed a hand on William's knee. The boy was astride his horse and holding onto the saddle with both hands. The colour had returned to his cheeks but he looked weak and drowsy.

'Keep your head covered and ride slowly,' she said. 'Your father has the potion I prepared. It is made from the milk of the poppy and will take away the pain. You are allowed two measures a day ... no more.'

'Thank you, Sister.'

'You are a very fortunate boy, William. If there had been nothing to break your fall, you wouldn't be with us now.'

'We must thank God for that.'

She heard Harald Gascoigne's voice.

'He watches over us,' she replied automatically.

'And he sent his guardian angel.'

'Guardian angel? I don't know what you're talking about, Sir Harald.'

'We couldn't have managed without you, Sister.'

'I'm sure you would,' Alice looked embarrassed. 'The brothers would have administered proper care.'

'They sent for you, Sister.'

Her cheeks grew red as he continued.

'I owe you a deep debt of gratitude.'

'Sir Harald ... I don't know what you are talking about.'

'You have been a guardian angel to us, Sister.'

Alice gathered up the skirt of her gown and prepared to leave.

'I must bid you farewell.' She sounded flustered.

'Can't you tarry a while?'

'No ... there are pressing duties at the almshouse.'

Harald tried to find words and stuttered.

'God be with you, Sister.'

She turned and saw the pained expression on his face.

'God be with you, Sir Harald.'

They travelled at walking pace. Harald was in no hurry. He wanted to collect his thoughts before plunging into the trials and tribulations that awaited him back at the manor. He'd never wanted to be a country squire. His ambition was to be a priest or lawyer but his parents had other plans. Like most of their class, the Gascoignes ran the family as a business. Marriage alliances were the cornerstones of power and they expected total obedience from their children.

At sixteen, he had been betrothed to eleven-year-old Judith Knowles. The marriage was postponed for two years until the girl was judged to be of suitable age and Harald had finished his studies at Oxford. Another two passed before she became pregnant with William. Some said they had waited so long for a son and heir because twenty-year-old Harald had been slow in taking up his conjugal rights. Others went so far as to claim that his fourteen-year-old brother, Guy, had been called upon to perform the service.

Judith died in childbirth and Harald still felt pangs of guilt over her death. He'd confessed to a feeling of relief when he received news of her passing and had done penance for it. He'd never liked the girl. It wasn't just her silly, childish ways. She was vain and headstrong. He'd tried to teach her to read but Judith had no time for learning. She did, however, have time for Guy. In his darkest moments Harald wondered if William was Guy's son.

His thoughts returned to Alice. She had nothing in common with the female members of his family. His mother and his aunts could scarcely read and their knowledge of the world was confined to the petty jealousies of the shire. Alice was gentle and caring. She spoke Latin and French and was conversant with the writings of the saints and the authors of antiquity. They had talked together for a long time while they were keeping watch over William. Harald said he would call on her services again when William's stitches needed to be removed. He wondered what other excuses he could find.

Alice changed into her matron's gown and took her place at the head of the table. She said grace, broke bread and tried to concentrate on what she was doing. Her mind was on other things. At twenty-eight years of age, a man had entered her life. She had blushed when he'd called her an angel and turned away lest he see her confusion.

The Gascoignes lived in a place called Wolf Wood. Sir William and his son, Guy, were fierce campaigners in the war with France and had a reputation for brutality. Alice had assumed that the entire family was like them. Now she knew she was wrong. It was like picking up a coin and finding a demon on one side and a saint on the other. Harald was a cultured, sensitive man. She thought how different life might have been if their families had been better acquainted.

Her aristocratic parents borrowed large sums of money to buy land. It was an unwise move and her father had to find a way out. His solution was to promise his baby son to the daughter of a rich merchant. The boy was twelve years younger than the girl. Conjugal bliss didn't come into it. One family needed to stave off bankruptcy and the other wanted to join the land-owning aristocracy.

The merchant cancelled her father's debts. Two years later, her parents died and her five-year-old bother was put through a form of marriage ceremony with his seventeen-year-old bride. The merchant was now her guardian and she was an unwanted guest in her former home. Fortunately, her predicament did not go unnoticed. The Abbess of Shaftesbury took Alice under her wing. She went to live

with the sisters and received an excellent education.

At the age of nineteen, she contemplated taking holy orders. Again fate intervened. Two requirements had to be met. One was a proven dedication to the life of religious contemplation. The other was a financial contribution to the upkeep of the establishment. Alice was uncertain about the first and knew she lacked the second. With nowhere to go, she remained at the convent but not as a full member.

Like many others living there her role was that of a servant. The lay sisters, as they were called, came from different backgrounds and had different reason for entering a religious house. Often it was the dangers of childbirth. *Better to die a virgin than bleed to death in agony.* Alice had heard that many times but did not agree. As a younger woman, she'd longed for a child at her breast. Last night that longing was rekindled. She wondered if it was not too late.

* * * *

Life changes for Alice when she meets Harald. The chance encounter takes her from the secluded life of a nun to the dangerous world of court politics. Her world is never again the same again.

The full book has 44 chapters and is available for reading with iPad, iPod, iPhone, Sony, Nook, Kobo, Kindle, computer, etc. For only \$2.99 from:

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