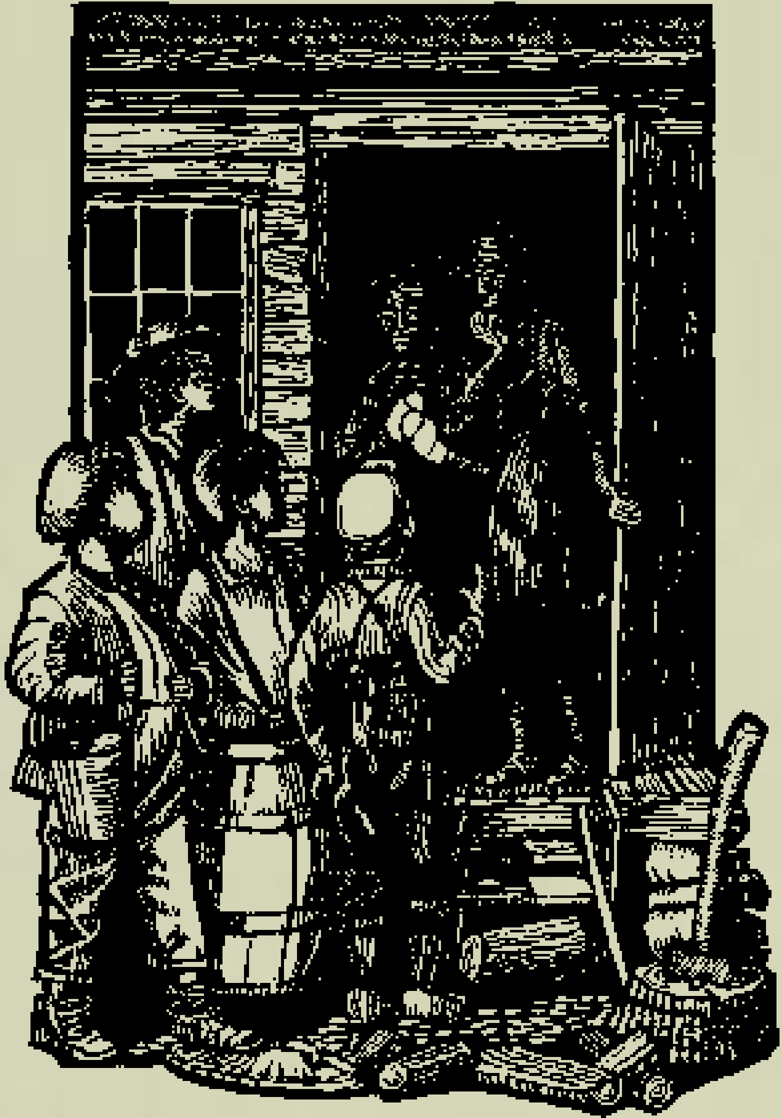

the secret flower

and other stories

JANE TYSON CLEMENT

The Secret Flower

and other stories

Jane Tyson Clement

Illustrations by Don Alexander

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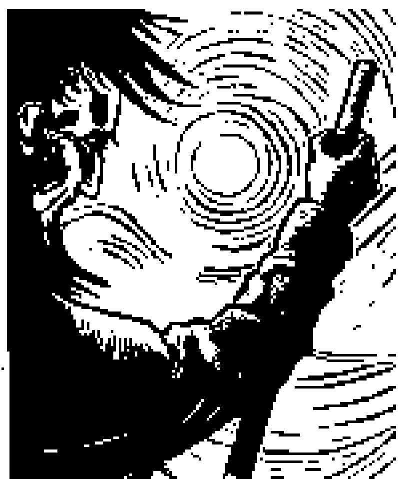

THE SECRET FLOWER

This child was born to men of God:
Love to the world was given;
    In him were truth and beauty met,
    On him was set
At birth the seal of heaven.

He came the Word to manifest,
Earth to the stars he raises:
    The teacher's errors are not his,
    The Truth he is:
No man can speak his praises.

He evil fought and overcame,
He took from death the power;
    To all that follow where he goes
    At last he shows
The kingdom's secret flower.

The secret flower shall bloom on earth
In them that have beholden;
    The heavenly spirit shall be plain
    In them again,
As first it was of olden.

PARAPHRASED FROM THE 17TH-CENTURY GERMAN BY ELEANOR FARJEON

BIRD ON THE BARE BRANCH

Bird on the bare branch,
flinging your frail song
on the bleak air,
tenuous and brave –
like love in a bleak world,
and, like love,
pierced
with everlastingness.

O praise
that we too
may be struck through with light,
may shatter the barren cold
with pure melody
and sing
for Thy sake
till the hills are lit with love
and the deserts come to bloom.

J.T.C.

The Sparrow

IT WAS HIGH SUMMER. On the slopes the berry bushes showed the bare nubs where the children had passed through picking, and here and there an unripe cluster still hung, or a few overlooked under the leaves. In the woods the ferns had long since uncurled and the fronds sprang up cool and graceful. The deep greens of summer were misted over here and there in the fields and hedgerows with purple and yellow of phlox and toadflax, the dull white of yarrow and Queen Anne's lace. The hedges were alive with bees in the blossoms, and with the carefree small birds, whose broods were raised. The road to the village of Drury was dusty, as it drove straight through the meadows, curved down a small hill, over the stone bridge, passed along the river valley into the woods, and came out to the cluster of dwellings and shops and the Black Pigeon Inn on the far side.

Just this side of the woods and set a bit back by itself was the cottage of Giles, the wheelwright. It was sturdy but drab, the windows close-curtained and blank, the garden marred by a broken wheel flung down in a flowerbed. Giles hired out to the cartwright in Drury, the most prosperous artisan in the district. Giles was skilled and worth his hire when he was fit to work, but a wearisome man to deal with. Prudence, his wife, swept and scoured, baked and sewed, watched him with a fearful eye, and bent under the weight of discouragement.

His master was a pious man, with his pew in church and no vices, and was, in his way, just. But he was as cold and lifeless as a stone. He paid for what he hired, and those who worked for him toed the mark or went home with an empty pocket. He kept Giles because his craftsmanship was high and it paid well to use him in the intervals when he could work. The other times, Giles stalked out of the Black Pigeon and with dark, fearsome face went through the streets of the town, his long legs unsteadily deliberate; and then for a week or more he was seen, now here, now there about the countryside roaming aimlessly, or in a stupor by the river bank, and he would curse all who came near him. While no one came close to him even in his good times, in his bad fits all fled from him, and even Prue, with pinched and stricken face, set his food out upon the stone of the threshold as if he were a wild dog, and watched fearfully to see if he would come to fetch it.

While there is ice at the heart of over-riding lovelessness, ice and a firm grasp of the ways of this world, with Giles a dark fire burned at the heart of his lovelessness, and

the bitter sorrow of the man stung all who brushed past him as if they brushed past nettles. Men said there must be some evil thing in his past which haunted him; or that the winter long ago when all his children died of the choking fever had left him weak in the head; but he was never seen in the churchyard near the row of little stones, nor was he ever known to speak of them. Unless mumbling or roaring in his drunks, he was seldom known to speak at all. It was as if he lived removed from all the comings and goings of men, from the births and deaths, the simple friendships and the lasting loves, the shared hearthfires in the winter, posies picked and brought home by a small hand, songs sung in comradeship, shared vigils, shared labor, all the fabric of the common lot. He lived removed also from all pettiness; he did not stoop to try to gain another penny beyond that for which he labored; he cared nothing for what men thought; he had few wants; he never went out of his way, even in his drunken fits, to harm anyone. But all men, good and bad, rich and poor, were cast on the other side of a locked and bolted door. His wife, Prue, he tolerated merely, as he did the mug he drank from and the cot he slept on. And the glance of his eye or the lift of his hand had such bitterness behind them that the threatened blow was almost felt. He scorned even the rudiments of faith, and at his worst times Prue had even heard him curse God.

So thick and heavy the years of misery had become, Prue could hardly think back to how it had been in the beginning: He was a tall lad, dark with already more than a hint of moodiness. He had come out of the city as an apprentice to her father, and said only that he had no family.

She was a quiet little thing, soft-hearted and eager to mend and comfort, disliking the bold self-confidence of the lads she knew. Her father warned her and refused to help him, sensing a danger in him. But she was caught by his loneliness, and thought somehow to bring merriness into his face, and a free ring to his voice. So they had married and settled in Drury, sought work, and somehow all her hopes had withered. As her little ones died, in her own heaviness she could not ease him, and his darkness drove all fellowship from their door.

When summer fell upon the countryside, sweetening the air with scent and sound, softening the edges of the landscape, filling the days with the labor of field and flock, Prue's heart lifted a bit. From her garden work she would find herself glancing up the road, and if anyone passed she would sit back on her heels to watch, an unaccustomed quiver of hope at her heart, for what she did not know. Or she would leave off stirring the kettle to lean in the doorway, dreaming. But Giles was winterbound all seasons, and really the lovelier the earth, the more likely his fits to come upon him.

This summer, as of old, Prue had struggled with the little quiver of hope. In her rare trips to the village she had glanced at each face as if she sought someone. She looked for a sign of friendship, but the stigma of Giles was too strong upon her. She even took a fresh-killed fowl to an ailing woman on the other side of the woods, but the astonished embarrassment of the woman frightened her. What do they care for us! she thought. Even if I gave away everything, no one would really care. Men are hard. Only

the earth is pure. And she wept a little, out of her dead hopes and weariness.

SHE HAD WAKENED that morning before dawn, the old quiver of hope deep within her like the first stirrings of an unborn child. Restless, she had crept out of bed and hung in the window to watch the east slowly fill with light, the pale curving road emerge, the blackness of the woods recede. To wake before the dawn and watch the day come forth out of creation made that day somehow like a jewel in the hand. Now, mid morning, she knelt in the berry patch, weeding, the sun hot on her back, her fingers stained, her heart bruised, and the wonder and the waiting of the dawn all but drained away. Giles had wakened in a foul mood, and not touching porridge or milk had gone off wordless to his work; the look in his eyes had made her sick, half with a hopeless sorrow for him and half with fear. Now in spite of herself and in spite of the years of such mornings, the tears fell on the berry leaves and she wiped her face with her sleeve more than once; and into her mind there crept at last an amazement that still within her there could glow that tiny flicker of hope which was at once her pain and her only joy. She wondered what it could mean, that always it refused to die, to glimmer out, to be quite quenched. For what, for whom, did she hope and wait? Surely for no mortal comfort, no earthly change.

She sank back on her heels, brushing the hair from her eyes, conscious that over the familiar morning sounds of the little homestead there was a pleasant chatter and stir

along the road. Over the rise of the old stone bridge was coming a troop of children, with a tall stranger in the midst of them. They came slowly, evidently listening to a story, at intervals breaking in with comments or laughter. She knew some of them dimly as village children, but others she did not know. Around the troop in circles ran three or four dogs, leaping, coming in to push under the stranger's hand, but never barking. About them all there seemed to gather a brightness lighter than the sunlight, a joyful air, a warmth that refreshed and did not oppress. Prue knelt there transfixed, watching them come, a strange thudding in her breast; she put her hand over her mouth to keep from calling out, though why or what she would have called she did not know. Somehow she felt she must stop them, hold them, receive from them, or join them. They neared the gate, and were passing when a small boy suddenly detached himself from the stranger's side, pushed through the gate, and ran towards her. He carried in his hand a gourd. In front of her he paused with a merry face. "May I have some fresh water from your well, for the man to drink, if you please?"

Unsteadily Prue rose, took the gourd to the well and filled it, and brought it to the boy. He took it from her hands with a smile, and ran back between the flowerbeds to the gate. The troop had paused a moment and now the stranger stopped, taking the gourd. Across the cornflowers and the berry vines he looked at her, and the only sound was the steady hum of bees and the ripple of a wren's song from the lilac bush. The air was luminous and still. Prue

stood and took that look, while her heart thudded and a mist swam over her and the palms of her clasped hands became moist and clammy. Then while she watched, tranced, he drank, hung the gourd at his belt, and the troop moved on. Down the road they went and into the woods, singing, and she watched them until they had quite gone, and listened until that last faint golden note had died. But the brightness…the brightness had not died!

IN THE COOL, NEW-MADE MORNING, with the dew winking on leaf and flower, Giles stood in the door, having woken unrefreshed, sore at heart, time stale within him. The bed of four-o'clocks beside the door with deep green shiny leaves and tight-fisted pink flowers had slung upon it a spider-web, unflawed and spangled. It struck at him as he stared at it; again he was engulfed with the useless blank of his own life, the snaggle and snarl of his own self, when a simple low creature could spin such a gem of creation! As Prue came in from the hen house, six white eggs gathered in her apron, he was already on the path, no word or glance for her, the black look on his face, and no breakfast under his belt. Down the road he went, habit taking him to the shop, but within him iron bands tightening, tightening, and the black mood of hate descending.

Once at work he hung over his bench, hardly conscious of the stir and bustle around him. The shop opened directly on the street, the doors flung wide for air and light in the summer warmth. Across the narrow cobbled way was

the yard of the Black Pigeon, where urchins flipped stones in the dust. Peddlers came and went, and an old man dozed on a bench in the shade. The casement windows of the inn were wide, the old thick doors set ajar; there was a pleasant sound of voices now and then from within, and the pleasant smell of bean pottage and roasting meat.

As the heat of day increased, Giles moved his bench closer to the doors. At the back of the shop there was a great pounding and hammering on the roomy wagon frame for a prosperous farmer of an outlying district. Giles was working on the great wheels, a small pile of finished spokes beside him, and a pile of rough sticks behind him. He picked up a fresh one, secured it, seized the spokeshave, and on the first stroke struck a knot and split the wood. With a curse he flung it on the rubbish pile, and as he did so his eye took in the innyard.

He had been dimly aware that the pleasant sounds and bustle had taken on a new note. But he was now struck by a curious brightness, as if the sun had shifted. He saw a knot of children and knew the sound had been their laughter and talk. They were gathered around the bench where the old man, now awake, had dozed. A stranger sat there, quite a young man, his face half hidden by the children but his large deft hands visible as he whittled and worked away at an old piece of wood. Little by little there emerged from the wood a duck, which when finished was handed to the most ragged child. Another gathered scrap of wood was offered and, with much delight from the children, this time a little dog with pointed ears came forth and was seized

with eager hands. As the third piece was offered for transformation, Giles felt, like a touch of light, the stranger's eyes upon him, and he sullenly shifted back to his work, his heart strangely sore again, the hopeless black like a cloud around him. This time he struck another knot and his thumb slipped and was cut. He cursed again, sucked it, wiped it on his tunic, and labored on. But the wood was flawed, and he flung it away also. The next piece he cut too close. The next piece, with much labor, came right, and was laid on the good pile. He ventured another glance at the stranger, and met a level look that pierced his heart. There was a strange thudding in his chest, the spokeshave clattered from his hand, he rose blindly and stumbled across the cobbles, through the innyard, past the cluster of children who hushed as he went by, the stranger quiet in their midst. Into the dark door he plunged, through the hall, to the bar, where he pounded and shouted for ale.

When he came out, a good hour later, the children and the strange man were gone. Foggy with ale on an empty stomach, uncaring what he did, Giles staggered across the cobbles to the shop, back to his bench. He stopped, swaying, clutching the doorframe. By his bench there lay, instead of a pile of rough sticks, a neat stack of perfect spokes. All the shavings had been swept away, and his spokeshave hung on its accustomed nail. All this Giles took in with swimming eyes, as he stood there, the sound of his own breathing heavy in the still noon air. Then with a curse he wheeled and went off down the road, through the town, out the other way and not towards home. The

very dogs cowered away from him as he went, and the good wives shook their heads and clicked their tongues in pity and dismay as they saw him.

PAST AFTERNOON, THE SHADOW of the hedges stretched halfway across the road; wren and thrush were silent for a while in the heat, but a few brown sparrows fluttered their wings in the cool dust where a puddle had long since dried. Giles, who had lain under a bridge for an hour or so in a drunken sleep till roused by the rattle of a wagon over the wooden slats, now wandered back to the road, not knowing or caring which way he went. He carried a stick, the feel of wood in the hand being a habit with him. He walked head down, hunched, aimless. He tried to press from his mind all thought, all feeling, to hold on to the merciful blankness in which there was no pain; but the old trick of obliviousness, which had served him in its fashion for so long, could not withstand the little prick of memory, the look of large brown fingers putting the wooden duck into the hands of a dirty child, the pile of spokes by his bench, the brightness in the air of the innyard. Creation around him cried God's praise, the simple deed of love awaited his hand; oh, when had evil drowned him? Where had the wrong road begun, with no way back and thick poisonous woods closing in behind? He was the outcast, God's forgotten one!

His hand lifted then, for as if in a dream he saw the sparrow in the dust; the stick flew unerringly; the sparrow flut-

tered and dropped, a small ruffled heap, its head awry. Giles stopped, staring at what he had done.

Then down the road, in a path of brightness as if out of a cloud's shadow the sun had moved again, he knew someone came. With a terrible effort he looked, and saw that it was the stranger, still far away, coming alone, at a steady pace. With a groan Giles dropped into the deep grass and crawled under the hedge. For a long moment he hid his face, but then as if compelled he raised his head. A strange thudding began in his chest, shaking his frame. Down the road the stranger came; he walked steadily but he saw all that was around him, not like one intent on his own business. The curious brightness hung in the air about him. The thudding grew; Giles could not move except to tremble; his ears began to pound. Nearer came the stranger, and nearer. It was as if all of life hung and trembled in that instant; and in a mist Giles saw the stranger stop, with his eyes on the road. In the dust at his feet lay the dead sparrow. He stooped then, and gathered it up, cupping it against him in his two hands; and Giles, before the pounding in his ears quite overcame him, saw him stretch out his hands and open them; the bird fluttered and hopped upon his fingers, and flew away.

When sense came back to him, Giles sat up under the hedge. He felt weak and witless, scarcely knowing his own name. Then in an instant he scrambled up and into the road, searching around in the dust for the dead sparrow; but it was gone. Then he ran first this way and then that way up and down the road but saw no one. He stood

there, filling his lungs with air, looking foolish, tears running down his cheeks, the tight bands across his heart parting one by one, the air bright and luminous about him, the cool of evening already stealing out of the wood. Then with a cry of joy he went stumbling across the fields, the quickest way home, to tell Prue.

STRUGGLE

The heart's winter,
　the soul's drought,
the mind's ice
　hardening out,
the deep clutch
　of circumstance,
the numbed spirit
　in a trance…

Oh break! Oh break

fire in the east,
that we may rise,
　that we may wake.

J.T.C.

The Storm

IN A CERTAIN VILLAGE that lay on the banks of a river in the midlands of old England, there lived three brothers. The oldest was the ferryman, the next the miller, and the third the forester of the lord's forest, which bordered the village on the north. So they were all men of some consequence and importance, and were prosperous for those times, having plenty to eat, steady work, tidy houses, and a degree of independence. But the ferryman never sang at his work, as ferrymen are supposed to do; and the miller was not the jolly miller the songs tell us of, so that it was no pleasure to take one's grain to be ground; and the forester tended the beautiful woods with an unseeing and uncaring heart. None had wives to cheer their days, nor dogs to keep them company, nor even a cat to purr on the hearth of a winter evening.

The lord of the fief was a just and temperate man who never taxed unfairly and who lived at peace with his neigh-

bors. But since he was away at the king's court most of the year, he saw to it that he had trustworthy men as bailiff and steward and warden of his lands. He knew the three brothers and trusted them each one to treat all fairly – the ferryman to charge a fair toll and guard the fishing rights on the river, the miller to keep the fair amount of grain for the lord's granaries and to return the just amount to the people, and the forester to guard the forest well, both timber and wildlife, and to deal with poachers with firmness yet with humanity.

So the life of the village went on for a long time, and the three brothers lived from day to day and year to year; their hair grayed a bit and their shoulders grew a little stooped, but they were still hale and strong and did not feel the dampness knotting their knee joints nor their breath growing short when they worked. They never thought about the future or the past but took each day as it came. Once a week on Sundays and on feast days the forester would leave his hut and travel to the mill, and together he and the miller would go by the path along the river to the ferryman, and together the three of them would go wordlessly to church, and after that to the inn to sit in silence over venison pie and a flagon of ale; and then they would go off again, parting with the ferryman first, and then back along the river, where the forester would leave the miller and go on to his solitary, snug hut on the forest's edge.

So it went on, and might have gone on to the end of their days. But they, all unwitting, had not been forgotten, and they, unseeking, yet were being sought for.

For there was a night toward the end of harvest one year when the great storm came. For three days the air had been heavy and dark, and strange white seabirds were seen over the inland meadows, and nights were hushed and dull, the lively crickets silent and the leaves hanging still. The boys who were accustomed to romp on the common hung about their own cottages, and the little lads and lasses clung to their mothers' skirts in a feeling of nameless fear.

On the third night the tempest descended, first with a whirling of clouds in the upper air, and a soughing in the tree tops, so all fled indoors. And then with the dark came the full fury of wind and rain. The blackness was utter and complete, and each man, no matter how strong, felt his own puniness, and a clutch of fear before the unknown.

Now the forester, during those storm-haunted days, walked through his woods and marked in his mind the dead and dying trees that might topple in a great wind, and he noted how still the beasts were, and how hidden and silent all the birds. He noted the soundness of his little, low, snug hut huddled at the edge of the forest, and was glad that he had built it of stone; but he regretted that he had not long since felled a great dead beech that stood a hundred yards from his door.

So it was that the night the storm broke he sat within, the dim glow of the embers on his hearth and the light of one candle on the table throwing shadows that veered and flickered on the walls. He crouched in fear and dread, listening to the tumult without; and he thought of his trees, and the beasts of the forest who would find little shelter,

and he thought of his brothers and how they were faring, and at length he thought of the people of his village, in their flimsy cottages, with their meager harvest unprotected. A little surge of pity crept into his heart; and in that instant he heard the child crying.

At first he did not know what it was he heard, over the howling of the wind and the pounding of the rain. But then it came again, faint and clear – the crying of a child. He rose and went to the door and stood with his hand on the latch.

"I cannot go out there," he thought. "I would be blown away, or crushed beneath a falling limb. I am an old man. And what child would be abroad now? Have I lost my wits?"

But even as he whispered to himself, the cry came again; and after it there was a great crash, the long, thundering roar of a tree falling, and he knew the great beech had gone. He waited, frozen, straining his ears, but no further cry came. Then he waited no longer, but flung open the door, pulling it to behind him, and plunged into the tempest in the direction of the fallen tree; through the raging dark he went, gasping and struggling, until he ran into the sprawling branches. Then on his knees he crawled, feeling with his hands along the ground, under the great prostrate trunk, and calling, "Little one, little one! Where are you? I am here to help! Little one, answer me!"

After an agony of searching, his hands felt a small, wet face, and his palm felt the fluttering beat of a small heart. The child lay pinned under a limb. He began to pull and

tug at the limb, and taking his knife from his belt he began to hack away, gently easing the little body free as he worked. It was as if a strange glow surrounded him, for he could see in the dark; and as he slid the little one free and gathered him up in his arms, the path lay clear before him, and the wind seemed to still and the rain to slacken before his feet.

So he carried the child home in safety, and once within doors, he laid him by the hearth, hastening to blow on the embers and freshen the fire. He stripped the wet boy, wrapped him in his cloak, and he chafed his cold hands and feet. He looked him all over tenderly for any broken bones, and carefully wiped the blood away from a long scratch that lay across his brow. At length the child sighed and woke; he stirred and looked about him, and then smiled into the face of the forester. And with that smile the wind seemed to die away, the drumming of the rain ceased, and a peace fell on the world.

Then the child turned over and snuggled on his side in the old cloak, and fell asleep. The forester watched by him, gazing on the small, still face, the tangled hair, and the little brown hands, until in exhaustion of body and soul he too slumbered.

He awoke to a blaze of sunlight and the singing of birds; his door was flung wide and the cool morning wind flowed in. The hearth was empty, save for his old cloak and the bloodstained rag. The little tattered clothes that had been hung to dry were gone, and the child had vanished. He rushed to the door, calling out into the new morning:

"Little one, little one! Where are you?" But it was the birds that answered, and the squirrels running about on the fallen trees, and the rabbits leaping in the grass.

Then he looked on the devastation of his forest, and he thought of his brothers and the people of his village, and a great pity surged into his heart, and a joy that he was still alive to help them. And he rushed off down the path.

NOW THE MILLER had worked in a fever during those dark days to gather in the grain, till all the lord's harvest was stored safely in the great stone mill. The night the storm descended he climbed into his bed early, pulled the cover over his head to shut out the noise of the tempest and the raging river, prayed that the tiles would not fly off his roof, and sank into a restless slumber. Then he dreamed he was a boy again, playing in the meadow with his brothers, and he dreamed that in anger he struck his younger brother and flung him in the grass, where he lay in a heap and cried pitifully. And in his dream he felt in his heart a tinge of remorse for the loveless blow he had dealt his small brother. And in that instant he awoke, and heard indeed a child crying, over the tumult of the storm.

He lay huddled in his warm bed listening, and a tumult arose in his heart. What was he, an old man, to do? Risk his limbs in such a storm? And what child would be abroad in such a night? Had he lost his wits? But then the crying came again, pitiful and weak, and smote his heart anew. So he rose and rushed to his door. The wind buffeted against it and the rain poured in torrents, but he pushed it open

and let it slam to behind him. Then in the wild dark he listened for the cry, and it came again, down the path; and on his knees so that he could feel his way he crawled, calling out, "Little one, little one, I am coming! Do not fear. I am coming." And at length, when his knees were torn and aching and his hands bruised, and his voice hoarse with calling, he found a rock by the path and clinging to it a little huddled form, sobbing and sobbing. At the touch of his hands the small arms went around him, the wet wild head was on his shoulder, and he felt the sobs that shook the pitiful frame. "Never fear, little one, you are safe," he crooned, and rose to his feet, for the path was strangely clear now, and the wind and rain ceased to buffet him. So he carried the boy safely home, and once in, laid him tenderly on his bed, stripped off his wet clothes, and wrapped him in his blanket. He carefully wiped the blood from a long thorn-scratch that lay across the little boy's brow, then he brought him broth to sip. The child sat with his head against the miller's shoulder. Gradually his sobs ceased and his breath that had come in shuddering gasps came evenly again. Then he looked into the miller's face and smiled, and with that smile the sound of the wind died away, and the rain passed, and a peace fell on the world. Then the child lay down, and snuggled in the blanket to sleep. The miller watched by his side for a long time, and then lay down on his own hearth, with his cloak rolled up under his head, and slept, out of exhaustion of body and soul.

When he awoke, the door stood wide and the sunlight of all the world streamed in; the birds sang in the fresh,

new-made morning. The miller leaped up and rushed to the bed, but the child had vanished; the little garments hung up to dry were gone; there was nothing but the imprint of his form on the bed, and a bloodstained rag, and an empty cup. Then he ran to the door and cried, "Little one, little one, where are you?" But the only answer was the song of the bird. Then he saw the devastation of the storm, and he thought of the flattened and ruined grain of the villagers, and the fat harvest that had been gathered safe in his mill, and a great pity filled his heart. And he saw the path before him, the path to the village, and he set off at a run, with strong hands and a newly beating heart.

THE FERRYMAN HAD GRUMBLED for days. The river had been running wild and sullen and dark, almost at flood crest, and he had pulled his ferry far up the bank and lashed it to the stoutest trees. Then for no amount of money would he take any across. He sat on his doorstep and studied the sky and counted his losses and felt sour and discontent. The night the storm descended, he went indoors early, bolted the heavy shutters, and sat over a flagon of beer, listening to the roar of the river and the wild wind, and the beating of the rain.

He thought of his brothers and wondered how they were faring, if they were safe as he. Then he thought of the village and the peasants with their little fields now being beaten and pummeled. And he remembered the man and his wife who had stood on the far bank but yesterday and called to him to fetch them across, for they had been to the

town to a wedding, and now wished to get home to their children before the foul weather broke. But he in hard-heartedness had not heeded them and had gone inside, and at length they had gone away, up river. With a pang he wondered where they were, and how their children fared; in his heart he felt a stir of remorse that he had been so cold and hard and careful for his own skin. And in that instant he heard a child crying.

He set his flagon down and listened, straining his ears, and again the cry came. He leaped to his feet in terror then, for indeed the cry came, not from near at hand, but borne by the wind from across the water, from the far bank. He stood rooted to his floor thinking, "What cry is this? What child is abroad on such a night? Am I, an old man, to risk all, crossing the river on such a night? Impossible! I cannot! I would be out of my wits!" But the cry came again, desperate and clear. He stood, in his heart a battleground, then he pounded with his fist on the table and shouted, "Fool that I am!" and rushed out into the wild and roaring dark.

In the swirl and tumult he pressed his way to the bank and stood waiting for the cry again, and when it came he judged its source – down river near the bend; it came thin and clear and lost. He strained his eyes staring into the pitchy dark, and then, as if the moon glowed for an instant through the flying clouds, he caught the faintest glimmer of a small form, downstream, clinging to the overhanging willow near the bend.

"Blessed God," he gasped, "the little one will be drowned if I do not hasten."

Up the bank he plunged then, to where the ferry was securely tied. In the dark his fingers struggled with the ropes and freed them one by one, then he dragged the ferry down the bank, pushing it into the raging river and leaping aboard, pole in hand. Down the rushing torrent he was borne, thrusting in his pole to ease the tossing craft across the river if he could; as he poled he gave thanks each time he felt the sturdy pole strike the bottom, and he shouted, "Little one, hold on! Little one, I am coming!" His shoulders ached, his chest burned, and his breath came in gasps; he struggled to keep on his feet, and to keep the pole in his hands. But he would not give up, and a final lunge took him against the far bank, where the ferry caught in a snag and swung round beneath the willow; he caught the body of the child; the little arms let go and the child dropped down fainting. The ferryman sat on the slippery, rocking deck of his ferry with the rescued boy in his arms and he wept, for joy and relief and exhaustion. The weeping hurt him, so unaccustomed was it to him, who had not wept since childhood; the tears rained down on the little white face that lay against his breast, and the child stirred and woke from his swoon. He looked up in amazement, and then he smiled into the eyes of the ferryman. And with that smile the wild wind died away, and the rain ceased, faint stars shone through the clouds, and the ferry rested peacefully on a quiet river.

"Now to get thee home, little one," breathed the ferryman. "The river is at peace, by some miracle, and there is such a glow in the sky that I can see the way easily." He laid the child gently on the deck and seized the pole again,

thrusting the craft off from the shore and pushing with sure strokes across stream till they lodged on the bank. Then he stooped and gathered up the wet and shivering child, hurried up the bank, and carried the light body home.

There he laid him on a pallet by the fire and stripped him of his wet clothes, wrapped him in his warm cloak, and tenderly wiped away the streak of blood from a long scratch across his brow. The child slept quietly then, and the ferryman knelt by his side for a long while, gazing into his face. Then at length he sighed and became aware of his own aching weariness; he sank down on his cot, and slept.

When he woke, the door stood open wide, the sunlight of a new morning flooded in. He heard the kingfisher calling over the river and the singing of a lark. He leaped up then and ran to the hearth, but the child had vanished. By the pallet lay the bloodstained rag with which he had cleaned the wound. The little garments that had been hung to dry were gone. He ran to the doorway then and cried aloud to the new day, "Little one, little one, where are you?" But nothing answered. The ducks paddled peaceably in a little backwater by the shore, and the kingfisher on the far bank rattled. He stood looking at the devastation of the storm, his ruined garden, the broken trees. He thought then of his brothers, if they were still alive, and of the stricken village, and his heart ached for them all. But he looked at his hands, hard and strong and able, and he thanked God for them; then he set off down the path to the village. And as he went he looked up, to see his brothers coming, such a light on their faces as he had never seen before.

On the path they met and stood looking at one another. Wordlessly they clasped hands. The forester was the first to speak. “In the night, brother, I heard a child crying, and I found him.”

And the miller broke in, “And I also, brother.”

And the ferryman cried aloud, “And I also, my brothers. On the far bank he was, nearly to drown, but I reached him in time…and when he smiled the tempest died…and this morning he was gone.”

“Even so it was with us,” the miller said. And the three stood silent, filled with wonder. After a long while the forester spoke. “And now the world is newly made.” Then together they turned and went off to the village.

THE GREAT STORM had indeed left ruin in its wake, and death to man and beast. Three had died, one a little girl who had strayed seeking her lost kitten, one an old man whose heart had stopped from fear, and one a young husband who had been killed by a falling tree. Houses were broken, fruit trees down, flocks and herds scattered, fields laid waste. But wherever the brothers went sorrow was eased, a new hope came, warmth crept into the heart. At length they all rallied; what little was left was shared freely. Together they mourned and buried their dead, together they began to rebuild.

The three went to the lord of the fief and laid before him their need.

“There is grain in the mill but none for the villagers,” said the miller.

"There is firewood and game aplenty in the forest, but cold hearths and no food in the cottages," said the forester.

"There are plenty of fish in the river, but not to be had by right," said the ferryman.

And the lord of the fief could not withstand the light in their faces. "The forest, the river, and the mill belong to the village now," he said. "I have no need of them."

So they all lived through the first hard winter, which was indeed the most joyful they had ever known.

And thenceforth the miller sang at his work, and the children begged to be allowed to carry the grain to the mill. The forester always had a child at his side as he walked through his woods and together they discovered the nests of the birds, and the dens of the foxes, and the thickets where the shy deer hid, and each tree became a friend. And the ferryman took children back and forth across the river all day for the price of a song, so that the river rang with their music and their laughter. And all people shared what they had; none went hungry or cold or suffered loneliness and fear. This they did out of their new joy, and because it was like a new morning.

And strangers coming to that village were puzzled, feeling something had been won in that place; for it was different from all other places they had seen. And the villagers could only say, "It was the Great Storm, when we suffered so much. Then this joy came to us, and the world was new made."

And the brothers kept the Child in their hearts.

THE MASTER

He who has come to men
dwells where we cannot tell
    nor sight reveal him,
until the hour has struck
when the small heart does break
    with hunger for him;

those who do merit least,
those whom no tongue does praise
    the first to know him,
and on the face of the earth
the poorest village street
    blossoming for him.

J.T.C.

The Innkeeper's Son

IT WAS A BITTER NIGHT, though very clear. Under the sparkling stars a wild north wind drove cold into the veins, into the cracks and crannies of the tightest dwelling, and the tree limbs sighed and creaked. The snow that had fallen yesterday swirled up afresh and made new drifts, and the frozen earth was swept bare in wide swathes. No creature moved abroad, and except for the moan of the wind the world lay silent.

But the inn was warm and cozy in the firelight and in the lamplight flickering from the walls. The smell of roast goose and pudding and spiced wine permeated the air. There was the glitter of holly on the shelf above the hearth, and greens were hung in bunches from the great black rafters. The four men at the table set their flagons down in

unison with loud thumps and burst into raucous singing, not for the first time that evening to be sure.

God rest you merry, gentlemen,
Let nothing you dismay,
For Jesus Christ our Savior
Was born upon this day!

Perhaps it was concern for the decorum of his house that brought the innkeeper from the kitchen then – or perhaps concern for a sale of more ale – for he came in bearing a foaming jug and set it before them, and stood with arms akimbo, grinning, as they filled their mugs and drank his health. Then his glance flickered to the settle by the hearth, where his boy sat alone. He was a slender lad, dark, with great blue eyes that stared emptily into space, blinking occasionally. His hands lay upon his knees. The innkeeper's face shadowed a moment, then his mind came back to his guests.

"So, gentlemen, here is more cheer for you this bitter eve. The goodwife sends you greetings, and hopes you won't tarry too long this night from your own hearths."

The townsmen laughed and the first one spoke, "More cheer here than on my own hearth. Bickerings and brawling brats! No peace on earth for a man there, Christmas Eve or no."

But the second chided him. "Come now, what say you, Nat! They are all hale and hearty, just a bit lively and numerous. This is a holy eve, and like as not we should all be home," and he pushed back his chair as if to rise. But the

third laid a hand on his sleeve, saying, "Like as not, but it's warm and merry here, and cold and bleak without."

And in a low voice the last one spoke, "But a night of mystery all the same. We should be home by our own hearths, for this is the night the Christ Child walks, by the old legends."

Then the innkeeper leaned upon the table with his hands and shook his head. "A likely tale, a likely tale!"

"Nay, but 'tis true," broke in the second. "You know the kindly woodcarver from Terminaison beyond the mountain who said a heavenly visitor carved him a most marvelous chest when he was an awkward and mistreated lad?"

And the third spoke, remembering, "And that woman of the same town whose long-lost husband was led home by a fair-haired angel child one Christmas Eve, after years of wandering?"

"And that lame girl," said the fourth man. "Do you recall that lame girl in the next village – the village of La-Croche – she who gave her last crust to a little lost boy – and next morning awoke with legs as strong and straight as yours or mine?"

Then the innkeeper glanced again at his son on the settle by the hearth, and he eased himself onto a stool and put his head close to his guests. "There was a time," he said in a low voice, "when I prayed for him, yonder, that his affliction would be lifted. Aye, and my wife and I laid many pence before the altar, and lit many a candle. But his eyes are still vacant, and scant use a blind lad is to a man like me! He does what he can, but that is little enough."

But the boy had heard, for he drooped his head and passed one hand across his eyes. Then he sat as before. A little silence fell upon the room, and the fire crackled and hissed. At length the first townsman spoke.

"Such tales are told to give us comfort. Not one of us has seen such with our own eyes. 'Tis true that now Terminaison has a name for good works that is unsurpassed in all the province, and the girl in La-Croche is said to be a veritable saint, giving of her own to the poor till there is nothing left for herself. But who can say the world itself has changed?"

Still the uneasy silence lay upon the room. The boy sat with bowed head, the innkeeper poked at the fire, and the men slouched in their chairs, all merriment quenched. Then the third townsman slapped his thigh and spoke in a loud voice.

"The priests sometimes, to get our pence and our candles, spread these miracles. I do right as I see it, and look for no sudden and unearned ending to my troubles. But why be sad, for the world is full of sorrows and disappointment, if we dwell upon it." And he rose with the jug, to lean across the table and fill all their mugs, until the last drop was drained.

So they all broke into song again, and as they sang they did not hear the soft knock, nor see the latch move and the door slowly open. The stranger stood against the night unnoticed, watching them; then he quietly shut the door behind him. He was dark and thin, and wore a threadbare cloak, and clutched a gnarled staff with one brown hand. He waited for a moment while their song rang out.

In Bethlehem in Jewry
This blessed babe was born
And laid within a manger
Upon this blessed morn.

But the boy had turned his head with the opening of the door, and rose now, his hand against his heart and his head following the stranger as he slowly crossed to the fire, laid down his staff, and stretched out his hands to the warming flames. And suddenly the song died out as the innkeeper saw the newcomer by the hearth and got to his feet, with a troubled face.

"What now, a wayfarer, on such a night! What do you seek, stranger?"

But the man simply looked up, smiling, and held his brown hands to the flames. The innkeeper, a bit nettled, said grudgingly, "Well, warm yourself, and later I'll fetch you a bite. 'Tis no night to turn a man out." Then to the four silenced townsmen, "So now, lads, 'tis going on twelve o'clock, and like it or not, soon out ye go!"

And they all chimed in:

"One more toast, that this blessed eve is a bright one the world around!"

"Riches, and a long life!"

"Health, and an obedient wife!"

"An end to all domestic strife!"

They drained their tankards and banged them down with loud laughing and crowded to the door, flinging sheepskin jackets over their shoulders, slapping one another upon the back. The innkeeper followed them, herding them out like noisy and unruly cattle. He shut the door

upon them, calling cheerily, "God bless you one and all, and until next year!" and they were heard going off into the night with shouts and singing.

In the silence that fell, the innkeeper stood a moment, his face blank and tired. Then he came wearily back to the table, gathering up the empty tankards and the soiled cloth. On his way to the kitchen door he stopped a moment, looking to the fire where the man still stood, and to his son, who waited in the shadow.

"Son, fetch this stranger the ends of bread from the pantry, and see that he is well warmed before he goes forth. I'm off to bed. Tomorrow bids fair to be a busy one, and my bones ache." Then he went across the room, kicking the door open with his toe and letting it fall to behind him.

After a long moment, when the fire whispered and glowed more golden and peace seemed to come gathering down from the shadowing corners, the man gave a vast and weary sigh. He sank upon a low stool by the fire and laid aside his cloak. He felt his worn shoes, now thawing and wet, and slipped them off to set them nearer the flames to dry. The boy still stood with his face toward the man, but now he turned and went to the hutch. He felt carefully around till he found the snowy cloth covering six loaves of fresh, white bread. One of these he drew forth and laid it on the board, cutting it in generous slices. These he put on a wooden trencher, and then fetched a wedge of yellow cheese from the shelf. Slowly he crossed the room and set the supper on a bench beside the stranger. For a long moment the man looked up into the boy's face, glowing in the firelight; then he began to eat. Again the boy turned and

crossed the room, and this time he brought back a slender green bottle of mead, and a blue mug. These he set down beside the bread and cheese. He stood for a moment, as if listening to be sure the man was indeed eating, then he went to the great chest in the corner of the room. Opening this, he lifted from it a fur rug. He carried the rug back to the fire and kneeling, spread it carefully before the hearth. Then he rose and backed off and spoke softly, "Master, when thou art done, rest awhile."

He slipped away then into the shadows and sat on a stool, waiting. When the man had finished, he stretched out on the rug in the warmth of the flickering fire and sighed again, and after a bit there came the sound of peaceful breathing. Then the boy arose and felt his way carefully across the room. He stooped over the man, and with his hands hunted for the shoes laid out to dry. With his delicate fingers he felt the soles and found the holes in them; then he laid them against his own foot, to try to size. The match was perfect. He slipped off his own shoes and put them where the man's had been. Then he went back across the room and set the old shoes beside the great chest. From a peg on the wall he took down a cloak, his own, heavy and serviceable. He crept back across the room and felt again on the floor near the man, until he found his cloak. He ran his fingers over the worn spots, the patches, and the holes. Then he laid his own cloak down in its place, and took the old one back across the room, putting it on the peg where his had been. Then he went softly across to the settle near the hearth and sank upon it, and he whispered to himself, "I will watch by his side tonight, lest he lack for anything."

The clock struck the hour of one, and the man slept on. The boy sat unwavering, his face peaceful and full of joy. The quiet room was bright with the steady glow of firelight, for the wood seemed not to be consumed, though no seen hand replenished it. The sound of the wind faded, and the hiss of blown snow against the pane. The flicker of starlight came beyond the window.

The clock struck the hour of two, then three, then four, and still the man slept, and the boy, smiling faintly, watched on. But then the peace, the utter quiet and content, settled over his heart and little by little his head nodded, till his cheek rested against the side of the settle and his blind eyes closed.

When the clock struck five, the man stirred. He stretched, and then sat up, and in the faint, warm light he took in the sleeping boy, the new shoes, the sturdy cloak. He rose then, and in the old room he seemed very tall and fair, a king and not a beggar from the road. He swung the cloak about his shoulders and slipped his feet into the shoes, and knelt to fasten them. Then he crossed the room and stood for a long moment looking into the face of the boy. He reached out his hand and with one finger he softly touched the eyelids of the boy, and then with gentleness he stroked his hair. The boy smiled in his sleep but did not waken. Then the man turned and went across the room to the door. The latch clicked as the door swung wide, a gust of morning air, cool and fresh, blew in, and then without a sound the door closed. On the hearth the fire suddenly winked down, only a few coals glowing still, and the room grew chill.

Perhaps it was the chill that woke the boy, or in his heart the knowledge that a presence was gone. For he suddenly jerked awake, and with wide eyes looked into the dim room, where dawn was already striking at the windows. He stared, leaped to his feet, and rushed to the hearth.

"Master!" he cried. "Thou art gone. I slept. I did not watch by thee!" And he bent his head upon his knees, and wept. But then his sobs suddenly ceased. He raised his head and took his hands from his eyes and looked around.

"But I see!" he gasped. "I see!" He seized the crust of bread left upon the trencher and the crumbs of cheese. "Look, where he ate!" And he felt the fur robe with wondering fingers. "And see where he has lain." Then he saw the staff. "And this, this he leaned upon." He leaped up then, holding the old staff, and ran to the chest in the corner. "And these are his shoes, and this his cloak. Here are the rents I felt last night…but now I see…I see!" He stood dumbstruck, panting, and stared around the room, the tears upon his cheeks. "But oh where, where has he gone?" Then he rushed to the door and flung it wide and looked out upon the world. He stood thus, clutching the frame, while the blue and rose and gold of the first dawn grew and blossomed in the east.

"Hast lost thy wits, stupid boy!" thundered his father, in the dark, cold room behind him. "Shut the door! Put wood upon the fire and hasten. This day ye know full well the draper and all his clan feasts here. 'Tis Christmas and more to do than we have hands to manage. Shut the door, thou fool!" He pulled the boy back and slammed the door to in a fury. "Now the room is icy. We must start the fire

afresh before we set up the trestles and lay the cloth. Look lively! Nay, I wonder at thee."

He went to the bin behind the settle and brought out a log, lugging it to the hearth. In the shadows he stumbled over the fur rug and with a tinkle of glass the bottle of mead toppled over and smashed. The innkeeper dropped the log and stared about him in dismay, and with an oath turned to face his son. The boy stood staring at him with wide, dark eyes, his face stricken.

"Is this the way ye served that beggar last night? Mead!" He nudged the trencher with his foot. "White bread! The best robe! Are ye bewitched, crazed?"

The boy stood, wordless. Then the father went up and seized him by the shoulder. "Fool, blind fool," he shouted into his face. "Without sight and without wit also. What have I done to deserve such misfortune!" He gave him a shove, then, in a calmer voice – "Fetch kindling from the bin and stir the fire. And don't cut thy stupid knees on that glass. I'll get the broom to sweep it up. The next stranger that comes I'll deal with myself, and give him short shrift!" And he went out muttering into the kitchen.

The boy looked after him, his face pale, the tears welling out of his eyes. For a long moment he stood, trembling, the silence of the empty room pounding in his ears. He raised his hands and pressed them over his eyes, and whispered: "Oh, Master, who has given me sight, now I must serve thee, and follow thee, even to the ends of the earth. But where, where has he gone?"

Then he lifted his head, listening. Words came back to him, spoken half in disbelief, yet with a core of truth.

"La-Croche," he whispered. "Terminaison…perhaps there. At least I would find others who have seen him also, and believed."

He went across the room. With sure and steady hand he took the stranger's shoes and put them on his own feet. He flung the man's cloak across his shoulders, and he held the old staff in his hands. Then without a backward glance he strode to the door, opened it, and disappeared into the morning, and the door swung shut behind him.

THE CHAIN

Too late we break the siege
of the close-bastioned heart,
and find the city starved,
dry to the bone, and dark.

Too late we cut the chain
who cannot find the key;
the captive soul has died,
the captive flame is quenched.

The devil does not thrust
against the armored gate;
nor counsel us to yield –
he counsels us to wait.

J.T.C.

The King of the Land in the Middle

ONCE UPON A TIME, not so long ago but that the dragons had already become legendary and the last unicorn had vanished into the forests, and one could no longer go into the world to seek one's fortune with some likelihood of finding it, there was a king of a certain kingdom. Now this kingdom was neither north nor south, east nor west, but more or less in the middle of things. And this king was neither tall nor short, dark nor fair, thin nor stout, wise nor foolish, wicked nor good, but just about middling in all of these qualities. He had about the ordinary amount of courage, humor, agility, intelligence, greed, unselfishness, and anything else one might think of.

Now this was a period in the childhood of the world when the time of fairy tales was drawing imperceptibly to a close. If we are living in a time of change we seldom

know it – unless we are extraordinarily wise and gifted, as this king was not. It is only later, when the path already trod is all laid out behind us, that the historians look back and nod their heads sagely, and set names to this stretch or that. When this king lived, the kind of magic the fairy tales tell us of had all but faded away – no touch of a wand could transform a loathsome frog into a handsome prince, no secret chant open an unknown cave in a mountainside where treasure gleamed. What spells there were, were of a more subtle nature, and treasure could go unrecognized.

Our king had a pleasant castle, with no luxury but no discomfort either, set on a middling-sized outcropping of rock by a middling-sized river, across from which lay pleasant and adequate fields. These yielded him a decent living, along with all his people. There was also a nice, comfortable amount of mineral deposits in the neighborhood, to be mined by comfortably paid miners who delved into the hillsides with a minimum of danger or discomfort.

The king had a pleasant-enough wife and four sturdy children, two of each kind, not exceptionally bright or dull, naughty or good. They lived a bit aloof from the other folk of that little land, as was right and proper. There were no great feasts, as nothing happened to celebrate. Birthdays were everyday affairs, and death, when it visited, came at the end of one's period of usefulness. Life was so well-ordered and calm none grew weary before their time or bent under stress and died too young; disease was scarcely known, so held no fear. Winters were mild and pleasant. Spring came gradually and in no glorious burst. Summers were warm and long but never hot, and autumn

was a gradual fading away into the first snowfalls. Of wild and dangerous beasts there were none, only the harmless rabbit and here and there a herd of brown deer. The birds that flitted in the hedges had soft colors and pleasant songs but nothing that stopped one's breath and held one wonder-struck. The flowers were plentiful but mild of hue, and the bees were busy as usual but not frantic and dizzy with the ravishing scent and sight of blossoms, and so unmolested they had quite forgotten how to sting.

So little happened that there was no history taught in the schools, and sums were so simple as to be no pain to anyone even had there been an exceptionally dull scholar (which of course there was not). There were no ballads, since there was no history to sing of, and no odes, as there was nothing to write them about, and no elegies, as there was no great sorrow, and no songs of praise, for what could be praised in that unexceptional, peaceful existence?

Now it so happened, one spring morning, that the king awoke at his usual time, seven o'clock or so, and in due course rang his little bell for breakfast. Breakfast was always a beaker of fresh milk, two eggs, two rolls, and a mug of coffee. The page brought it all in on a tray, set it before the king, bowed, and retired. And the king, as usual, took up his coffee first of all for a swallow or two.

Then, for the first time in his experience, an extraordinary thing happened. The coffee was boiling hot! He spat out his swallow and sat gasping, with his mouth open, fanning his burning tongue, his eyes watering, and a most peculiar feeling creeping all over him. He had wits enough soon to take a long drink of cool milk, and then he sat

back, staring before him out of the window over the green fields, this same strange feeling tingling at the roots of his hair and curling along his spine. There was no word for that feeling in their language, since there had been no need for it, but we know it as astonishment.

The king sat there, filled with astonishment. Something was the matter with his coffee. And then into his mind crept another feeling, a pushing little feeling that left him restless. It was, if he could have put a word to it, curiosity. What was the matter with his coffee, and why?

At last, when he had sat still for a while and aired his sore tongue, he slowly reached out his hand again to his little bell, and rang. The page below, in the kitchen, felt a little quiver of something (astonishment, we know it to be) when he heard the king's bell so soon again, but up he went and stood before his monarch, who simply looked at him and said:

"Who prepared the coffee this morning?"

"A lad came in from the highway yesterday, sire, and asked for a night's lodging, and said he would pay for it in labor. Steward didn't know what to say, so said yes. He helped Cook this morning and fixed the coffee, sire."

"He fixed it all right," said the king, feeling his sore tongue. "What did he do to it?"

The page wasn't used to questions and didn't know what to say. He stammered, for once at a loss for words.

"I – I don't know, sire. What was wrong with it?"

The king sat and thought. What was wrong with it, anyway? At last he said, "It was more than enough hot."

"Oh," said the page, who had never heard of such a thing.

"Where did the lad come from?"

"I do not know, sire. He came by on the highway."

There was another puzzled silence. Finally the king spoke again, and who's to say what event was more fateful for him – the coming of the strange lad to the kitchen, the swallow of the boiling coffee, or the next words he spoke:

"Send him in to me."

And so the lad came before the king, and again the king felt the tingle in his hair and the pushing questions in his mind as he looked at him; for the lad was very tall, and dressed in bright green, with a brooch like a dark green leaf fastening his tunic. He had black hair and a lively eye, and looked at the king with a smile.

"You asked for me, sire?"

"Yes." And they looked at each other.

At last the lad said, "What did you wish of me, sire?"

"You fixed my coffee this morning?" And the king gestured to the tray still before him.

"Yes, sire, I was so privileged. What was amiss with it?"

The king frowned, hunting for the right word to express it. "It was more than enough hot."

"Too hot, was it too hot?" Then the lad slapped his thigh and laughed. "Is that all, sire? A thousand pardons! In my land we like it so hot it warms one all the way down to the toes and to the tips of the ears. On a frigid winter morning when the gale is blowing in great blasts and snow drives in the cracks of the windows, what gives a man courage like a mug of coffee right off the fire! On a mild spring morning like this I should have used my wits and been more temperate."

Then the king sat and stared with his mouth open, and not for a burning tongue. Such gales and snows he'd never heard of, and to be warmed to the tips of one's ears! And what did the word "temperate" mean to one who had not known extremes?

"Where did you come from?" he managed at last to say.

The lad put one foot up comfortably on a bench then, and rested his elbow on his knee.

"Away up north," he said. "I'm a forester. Our ancient maples have a blight. Some leaves curl and drop before the flaming fall comes, and branches die here and there. We dared not tap the trees for their sweet sap for three seasons now for fear of weakening them, and we lack sugar badly. I'm traveling south to where there are great forests, to seek out those foresters and learn if they know of such a blight, and its cure. They are noble trees, and make all the land golden before the winter storms break. They nourish us in our need, and shade us from the blazing summer suns. If they can be saved, we would like to know. I saw no such trees hereabouts, sire. Do you not know them?"

"No," said the king, faintly. "I know them not."

"I saw no peach trees, either – orchards that lie pink and fragrant in the spring, and the bees go fair wild with it, and one can scarce get to one's work with gazing! Spring comes late in our land, later than here – but it seems more fair. I know not…" and he looked out the window in a puzzled way, "this land seems lackluster, lifeless." He looked back at the king. "Nor have I heard any singing, only a tuneless humming now and then. Is the land in mourning? I saw no signs of grief. But no joy, either."

"No," said the king. "For what would we mourn? Why should we sing?"

The forester straightened up then and looked at the king a long moment. Then he sat down on the bench and leaned forward earnestly.

"Did you never lose anyone by death?"

"My mother, and my father. But they were growing old, and I was grown, and their time had come."

"Were you never given children, sire, to bring grace to your days?"

"Yes, two sons and two daughters."

"Did you never lose a child, a little one?"

"No. I do not remember such a happening in all the kingdom."

"Truly you have been blessed," said the forester in a hushed voice. Then after a little silence, "My small sister died, two years old, as bright and lovely as a meadowlark – gone, just like that. When we laid her away, my mother's heart near broke with grief. Her greatest joy now is to tend all the sick ones in the village, and if death comes, the first one turned to is my mother, so steadfast is her courage now. And no one rejoices more in the children that are given. Truly, one must suffer loss to know what it is to receive a gift."

The king put his elbows on the table and his head in his hands. His ears seemed to pound and his wits seemed scattered. He closed his eyes and felt his world whirling. The silence deepened between them, and then the lad jumped up.

"I rattle on too much, sire! I am always told I talk too much. Forgive me. I tire you, and keep you from your

labors for your kingdom, and tell you all about myself, and your breakfast sits there, and your coffee cools. But it was too hot, remember, which was why you summoned me. I'll run fetch another cup now, which shall be neither hot nor cold…" and he made to leave.

"Stay," said the king. "Sit, please, and talk with me more. Tell me. I know nothing of all you speak about. I know nothing except this little land of mine, and here it seems – it seems – nothing touches us. All the things you speak of – I know nothing of them. They sink in my heart, where I feel a great hollowness. How could I learn about it all? What you speak of – grief – what is that? And that one must know it if one would also rejoice, and what is it to rejoice? I know nothing. And this land of mine that you found so – what was it you called it – lackluster, lifeless – what is it that makes it so? What must I do for my land? Can you tell me?"

The forester then sat down with a troubled face. He laced his fingers together and frowned at them, pondering, and then shook his head.

"I am a poor, simple man, sire, hardly a man even, but almost yet a boy. I would not pretend to give counsel to a king. Yet I will tell you what I feel." He looked up eagerly. "This land seems like one under a spell, not an evil enchantment, where dark things happen, but somehow as if there were a line on either side beyond which one could not go, either for joy or sorrow, beauty or ugliness, good or evil, but was always between, in the middle, neither hot nor cold. I would not know how to break that spell. It is

not for me to do, nor for one man to do. Perhaps it waits for God to do. Or God waits the hour to do it."

When the king still sat silent, the forester spoke again. "At least you could see for yourself some of the things of which I have told. You could make a journey. That at least you can do. You could at least come back with a pack of stories to tell your people, who seem about as quiet a lot as any I've ever met up with."

The king sighed. "Where should I go? Where should I start out?"

The forester laughed. "That is easy," he said. "Since this is the land in the middle, the highway north and south, or the highway east and west will at least take you somewhere else."

The king rose then, and the lad stood up, searching his face. The king drew his hand across his forehead. Then he straightened and smiled at the boy in green. It was a warm smile, though the face was tired, and if his own people had seen him then they would scarce have known him.

"It was good you came, my lad. If you return this way, come again to my castle, and perchance you will find a bit of difference. Now when you go down, would you ask the steward to come to me? I will prepare for this journey. And if there is aught you need, take it. And I wish you well."

He laid his hand on the boy's shoulder. Then he turned to the window, and when the steward came he found his king standing, arms laid across the sill, gazing over the fields to the far mountains. The steward did not know it yet, and the king only dimly sensed it, but the old time had ended.

THE KING TRAVELED as a stonemason, the craft in which he had been trained as a boy. He set out a week after the young forester had gone. First he put the affairs of the kingdom in order – what little needed to be done in that orderly realm – and he tried to explain to the queen. If she had ever known that there was such a thing as madness, she would have called him mad. It was her turn to know astonishment, and of a deeper kind than that of having one's coffee boiling for the first time in one's experience. Finally she looked at him for a long time, and something strange hurt in her chest. At last she put her hand on his and said in a puzzled way, "But I cannot think how each day will be if you are not here." And a little prickle came behind her eyes. "Nor do I understand all that you tell me. But I will try, and I will wait for your return."

Then she stood on the ramparts and watched him go. He traveled west, first riding with a wagoner taking pens of ducks to a farm on the outlying districts of the realm, a pleasant ride through sunny days and cool evenings – not much talk except the prattle of the ducks and now and then a comment from the wagoner, who did not know his passenger. They put up at quiet inns, and at the dawn of the third day they were at the border. The king, all unknown, left the road and disappeared through the hedge, not to be seen again for many weeks by his own subjects.

The mountains there were very steep and sudden, with thick evergreen forests on their slopes. He wondered at himself that he had never wondered before what lay beyond them. It was a stiff climb, and he, while strong, was unused to such, and when he camped for the night his

bones ached so he could hardly sleep. He finally stirred himself before dawn, ate a frugal breakfast, not knowing how long it would be before he could replenish his pack, and then climbed on. At daybreak he neared the top, and reached a great rock, gray with age and flecked here and there with bearded lichen and little ferns clutching the cracks. Here he stopped and looked back across the valley of his land, just as the sun rose. The sky was all afire, the deep blue of night driven back to green, to gold, to pale yellow, and to rose; and the stars went out as he watched, and all about him birds sang, pealing melodies clear and sweet. Below, the valley lay in soft mist with the river winding dark and small, and the road a tiny white track. His heart swelled with the beauty of the world. At last he spoke aloud.

"Farewell, my little land. I wish that you could see the beauty of this dawning or that I might find words to tell you of it. Perhaps even there the day will come when the sun will rise with such…with such…" and then words failed him, and he could only stand silent with tears on his cheeks, before going on.

On the other side the shadows fell long, and the new valley that lay before him seemed dark. Such fields as he could see were brown, and the only road a small track by a wide, shallow river, thick with tumbled stones. Far off he could see great smokes rising, and a haze drifting. He could make out, he thought, in the nearer distance, a cluster of houses close to the river, so he went down, through thorns and clinging catbrier, over loose stone, down where it seemed no man had ever been, down to the edges of the

nearest fields. And then he could see they had been parched dry. Surely this had been an early bean field, for the withered, half-grown pods lay there, among the crumbled vines. He had never seen a field like this, but it looked like a plant he had once found in a corner of the potting shed that had been forgotten, all dry and withered so the leaves fell to dust.

"Surely," he said, "it must be there has been no rain. But then how do men live, if the land fails?" And he stood in thought and searched the sky for clouds – but all was clear, except for the haze; the sun, now climbing the sky, smote the earth with heat. He found the road and went on, his feet raising dust at each step. The hedges were withering, now and then a pale flower tried to bloom. And over all there was the taint of smoke – not the cheerful hearth smell of chimney smoke, nor the ingathering smell of autumn leaf piles burning, but the smoke of something lost and dead.

He came at last to the village. A pale, thin child with a smudged face stood by the nearest house and watched him come, then ran inside. A man came out, club in hand, as he drew near.

"What want you?" he growled.

"I am a traveling stonemason," said the king.

"There is no work here. Where did you come from?"

"Yonder, over the mountains, from the land on the other side."

The man stared in amazement.

"Do you have rain there this year?"

"What we need, no more, no less. But here..." the king gestured with his hand.

The man came closer. The king could see more clearly now his lined face, his gaunt black eyes.

"Is there food there for all?"

"Yes, all we need."

"Have they not come to seize it?"

"They? Who are they?"

"The enemy, the destroyers, the cursed ones who take what little a man has and burn what shelter he has left."

"We know none such as that. I did not know such men lived."

The man pointed to the distance where the sky was dark with smoke. "Go there, and see for yourself," he said in a trembling voice.

And the king went.

IT WAS A WEEK OR MORE later that the king lay, wounded, in the hut of a peasant on the edge of the town. The face of the woman bending over him, when he opened his eyes at last, seemed to his befuddled mind like the queen's, only more gentle and more tired. Outside there was the soft sound of rain.

The woman bathed his shoulder, and it stung fearfully, the pain going deep down his arm. She smiled at him.

"It heals well. If we had more food to give, you would be stronger again fast. But now the rains have returned, and we can feel the earth coming alive again under our feet." She bathed his face and smoothed his pillow. "And

now the war is done and the enemy withdrawn, with a new pact between us. Surely God has been good to us in spite of all the death we have wrought upon ourselves."

The king lay wordless, looking up at her. He began to remember all he had seen – the field of dead, the weeping women, the charred and shattered houses, the hate in the eyes of the men who had attacked him as he walked, all unknowing, into the middle of a foray. Most of all he remembered the wan and frightened children, and he thought of the calm, rosy faces of his own. He was too weak to speak; he closed his eyes, and all the sights that he had seen flashed before him again, a raving, noisy, terrifying succession. Then he saw again the last sunrise over his own land, the golden splendor filling all the sky, the quiet land lying simple and at peace. He opened his eyes. Beside the woman now stood a man, dark and troubled, looking down at him. The man pulled up a stool and sat close to him.

His eyes were kind, but weary and sunken. His hands trembled a bit, so he clasped them together.

"Friend," he said. "You came unknown amongst us in a dark and fearful hour. Now the wind changes and a new time comes, perhaps, for this seared and sorrowing land. Now you lie here mending, and we will do what we can to strengthen you – though we have lost nearly all. But there is still time for a late harvest – now the gentle rains come. When you are well enough, you will go on. Already many take the road, to find sufficient food until our own fields yield again, or to seek new homes. Those of us who stay will have much work." He looked at his hands that still trembled. "Nor have we much strength left to labor. But

you…" – and he looked long into the king's face – "where did you journey from, and for what?"

But the woman set a steaming cup into the man's hands and said, chiding, "Give him a sup first, he is too weak to speak much now." So the man raised the king's head, and he sipped the brew and felt it flow all through him. It was hot and strong, seeming to reach down to his toes and to the tips of his ears, and suddenly into his mind came the remembrance of the young forester, and the boiling coffee. He looked up into the man's face and smiled, saying, "It is hot, it is good. It gives a man courage."

The man laid him back on the pillow and said, "Now tell us who you are."

"I come from the land on the other side of the mountains. There I have lived all my life. It is a peaceful little land, where all labor and have enough." He stopped, not knowing how to continue, how much to tell, how to find words for it. The woman set her hand on her man's shoulder, and they both looked at him, patient and a bit puzzled.

"But I came to know, one day, that the world must be very different, that we lived only in a kind of dead center, that there was such a thing as grief, and such a thing as joy, and such a thing as great beauty, and great evil, but I knew it not, nor did my people. Nor did I know that there was need in the world, that any others lived except as we lived. So I decided to journey, to see for myself, and to return to my people to tell them if I could. At least to have a tale that would set their minds a-wondering. Now, what I have seen…I can scarcely grasp. And if I, who have seen, can scarcely begin to fathom it, how can I hope to tell my

people, to speak of it to them…?" He stopped, exhausted. The two still looked at him.

"You speak of your people. What were you to them?"

"I was their king," the king said simply. "Now I must seek the way to reach the hearts of my people, to open their eyes, to show them at least how little we know, how little we feel, how much we must do, and at length how powerless we are – as I lie here."

The three were silent in the little hut. Outside the soft sound of rain continued, and a cuckoo called insistently and near at hand.

"Tell me," said the king, "what will touch the small hearts of my people? What will break the spell that binds them?"

"Sire," said the man, "no man can tell you that. Perhaps it will come to you, as you mend, to find the right way."

"I wish to mend quickly now, and return. We must give help to this troubled land. We must share with you," and the king moved to sit up.

"Wait," said the man. "Perhaps God has brought you low to give your own heart time to understand all that has come to you. Rest now, and take a little time of peace. I am not one to give counsel to a king, yet I know how little man can do, unless God sets the seal."

"I praise him," said the king, "that I fell into your hands."

"Nay, we praise him that you have come."

So the king stayed and grew stronger bit by bit. On the third day he went out and sat on a bench by the wall and looked at the havoc all around. He watched on the road as

the wagons passed, some going south to seek a new home, some carrying the dead for burial, some bringing new-hewn logs for building, some bringing in from outlying farms the ill, the homeless, or the old. Each day he watched, and his heart bore more and more. And on the sixth day he was strong enough to climb into a wagon and go out with the man to a distant farm from which there had been no word.

"He is the beekeeper, and his wife, and one small child. A great, strong man, hardy and brave – but they have suffered much in the drought. And the enemy came that way first. I fear for them."

And they rode on in silence. By noon they came within sight of the cottage, the beehouse, the neat hives. But all was silent. There was no sign of fire, but the yard was trampled and the gate thrown down. When the man called, the silence only deepened and grew thick. They climbed down over the wagon wheel, pushed through the tumbled yard, and went up to the open door. There they stopped, and their indrawn breath was the only sound. Here death had indeed visited. But as they stared in horror and in grief, they saw the child still lived; he raised a terror-numbed, ashy little face and whimpered. The king gazed long at him, the great black eyes that seemed to look at nothing but fear, the little hands like claws, the sunken temples; then he knelt and gathered him up against his shoulder, and turned with a tear-streaked face to the man.

"Is this not the answer? Will this not melt a heart of stone? Is any heart so small this child cannot find room there?"

And so it was to be.

The next day the king set out for home. He went south on the road to the highway, knowing he could not cross the mountain with his burden and the weakness from his wounds. In two days he reached the highway and turned east. Along the road there had been so many fleeing from the ravage of the war that few had cast more than one pitying glance at the child resting against his shoulder. But on the highway there were many prosperous and well-clad who looked in distaste and dismay at the king and his burden. So he covered the child with a tattered shawl, and sought – also out of his own poverty – the poorest inns, and gave the child all that he could beg or purchase – though the little one would scarcely eat. On the fifth day he came unrecognized into the borders of his own land. At the first farm he stopped. The good wife stood in the door and stared at him. There was something in his face she dimly knew, yet how could she know anyone so soiled and torn and tired, so gaunt of face and sad? She called her man, and he stood at her elbow, for a moment dumbstruck, before he stepped forward suddenly.

"Sire!" he cried. "Dear master, what has befallen you?"

Then the king smiled, and a great relief flooded his heart.

"I am coming home after a long journey. Now I would ask two things of you. First, start the word throughout the realm that the king would speak to the people before this night falls, by the castle ramparts, so all who can will gather. Then I would beg your wagon for the rest of this journey, for my burden, though light, is more than my strength can carry."

Then the man called his sons and sent them out with the word, and he fetched his wagon, and the king climbed in while the man leaped into the seat and took the reins himself. But the good wife ran out with a bowl of milk, and would not let them go until she had placed it in the king's hands and seen him drink. He handed it back empty and said, "That was a blessed draught, for which I give you thanks." Then he gathered his burden more closely to him, and the wagon started on.

In the long late spring twilight they drew near the castle. Behind them on the road there were many people and wagons, and down the lanes more gathering. But there was little noise and no confusion, and in all a wonder grew and grew. On the ramparts the queen waited. She ran down as the first wagon came. With haste and a beating heart she ran up to it, and looked in the king's face, laying a hand on his knee. He looked down at her.

"Do not be afraid, though all things now change for us."

Then he stood up, holding his burden against his shoulder, and gazed out over the people that gathered closer, wondering and still.

At last he spoke, his voice clear and strong.

"Dear people, dwellers in this sheltered little land. Many days ago I set forth, clear to the borders and straight over the mountain into the unknown beyond. This I did, as your king, because of a simple traveler who, all unknowing, spoke words that shook my heart. He spoke of weather I had not known, of needs I had never seen, of death coming to the young and fair, of flowering trees, of great joy that filled the heart. All this was so strange to me,

the words were like another language. What lay beyond this quiet little land? What lay over us like a smothering mist to keep our hearts unquestioning, unquesting, our days so small and mild? So I set out. And I went indeed into need, and where the hand of love reached out to me also." And in slow words plain and bare, he told them of the drought, the hate, the war; destruction, death, and pain. He told them of his wound, and of the peasant who had succored him. And how he searched for a way to tell them, his people, to clear their eyes, to help them find with him the way for them now.

"And then, in the last farm, I found this child, orphaned, starving, stiff with fear. He has come to us, the first from beyond our borders that have stood too long."

Then he drew back the tattered shawl. The child lay with his cheeks against the kings shoulder, the thin little hands clasped about his neck. The king turned slowly and the child raised his head and looked out over all the people to the setting sun. And in the west the rosy light grew until the air glowed and they seemed to be standing in the midst of the light. But the people looked only at the child, no movement except that here and there a mother put her arms around her own young and drew them suddenly close; and hands were pressed to hearts that suddenly pained. And a sound grew, very soft and low, that had not been heard before in all that land – the sound of many people weeping.

So it was that a new time came. For as there was the sound of weeping then, so also there came the sound of singing – not a tuneless humming but songs of praise,

songs of joy, songs of courage. They seemed to spring up out of the earth. And men labored long, and great wains rolled out with food for the hungry. Looms hummed late in the night by lamplight, and the wagons carried coverlets and clothes. The sick came to be healed, and some to die. Homeless children found father and mother again. And north, south, east, and west the king sent travelers to come back with knowledge of the world – and the map makers tore up the old maps and started out afresh.

The people dared much, and some suffered for it. They knew what it was to be tired to the bone, sick, beaten, yet not for anything would they go back to the old way. Winters grew longer, cold, and the snows more wild – but spring also became a time of bursting blossom, of burgeoning earth; summers were hot, but the cool of evening more blessed; and the harvests so heavy there were hardly hands enough to gather them in, while the trees flamed on every side.

And the children grew more naughty, but also more warm of heart and full of joy. While a father now and then had to lay a hand to his son, he could also look more deeply into his eyes, and trust grew.

And it was a time when grief came, more than a word, an actual thing. But then came joy as well. And the greatest pain was the cold heart, the offered help that was spurned, the hand held out that met no answering clasp; that, and the sense that neither they, for all their labors, nor any man, could heal all the hurts of the world, until the new time came for every heart.

And some may ask, what became of the child? In a certain way it would make a happier story to be able to write that the child thrived and grew bonny and strong and lived long. But such was not to be. Perhaps by all the hunger and need some deep hurt had been done to his little body that no broth and coddled eggs and loving words could mend. The little one died after many days, but first his small face had come to smile, and the great eyes to grow alight, and he laughed and sang even as he faded away. Then the women wept and the men stood with grief-stricken faces, helpless, and the children stood beside the little bier with flowers in their hands and tears on their cheeks, and understood best of all, perhaps, that God had sent the child for a purpose, and for his own purpose had called him home.

They laid him in a little grave set round by birches, at the roadside, and on the stone the king himself graved the words:

In memory of the child, who led us
from the land that was neither hot
nor cold, into God's wind and weather.

NOW BREAKS THE ICE

Now breaks the ice upon the silvered branch,
the brief assault of sun sufficient grace
to crack the cold enchantment and redeem
the straining weighted form. It takes not much

of concentrated radiance to dispel
the sheaths that hold us rigid; one brief glance
of brilliant love will give sufficient heat
to start in frozen heart a tentative beat.

J.T.C.

The White Robin

THE SPRING THAT THE WHITE ROBIN was seen was the year of the great drought. No one marked it at the time, for no one knew what the time ahead was to bring. But as the weeks passed and the sky was cloudless day after day after day, and the sun became a merciless enemy instead of a life-giving friend, people remembered, and the muttering began. Though who began it, no one knew.

The white robin was seen in the early days of March, on the hillside where the sheep grazed. It flitted from small dark cedar to maple sapling, from clump of sumac to the tall old hickory, down to the golden dried grasses and up again to the tip of a white pine, where it sang and then flew away into the woods. Seth, the shepherd's boy, whose small house stood by the side of the road that skirted the pasture hill, was the first to see it. He ran home to tell his mother, and dragged her forth from her baking, and they stood in the road, he pointing and exclaiming, but all she

saw was a glimmer of white as it flew in among the trees. But later that day, as evening settled down, warm for March, Seth crept up the hill again, bringing Ned and Jamie, and Robert and Gerrit and Jack. They sat in a thicket, and a little wind riffled in their ears, and the first querulous song of the peepers rose from the marsh below. The white robin flew along the hill, and perched in the old hickory. It flicked its tail and sang its evening song over and over. The boys watched it, amazed and staring.

"'Tis a robin, sure enough!" whispered Jamie.

"'Tis a wonder, that's what it is!"

"Wish I could get my hands on it," hissed Ned.

"And I!"

"Nay, nay!" gasped Seth. "'Twould be a sin! To touch a feather of it would be evil!"

"Why for, little fool?"

"Just look at it," said Seth. "White as snow, as no other robin ever was! And God made it, and it came to our pasture, and we dare not touch it!"

They all were silent, watching. And then Ned spoke again, jeeringly.

"It is as white as Solomon is black!"

And they all fell to laughing and rolling around, and when they looked up the robin was gone, just a glimmer vanishing among the trees at the forest's edge. So they rose and trooped down the hill to home, and the word spread in the village and among the farms. Solomon, the black boy, heard of it, as he went to work at the mill; and he heard the jest, too, whispered behind his back.

"It was as white as Solomon is black!"

"Truly?"

"Aye, truly, as white as Solomon is black."

BUT IT WAS A FAIR SPRING, with soft rain by night and warm sun by day. The grass greened in the hollows, the berry vines thickened, the ferns pushed up curled and furry fiddleheads; the hepatica shone blue on the wooded hillsides, the moss was velvety and thick, and the saxifrage starred white among the rocks. The women went out to gather dandelion for salad, and early lamb's-quarters. The men plowed and seeded. The new lambs frisked on the hill. The mill was busy, and along the river road the wagons lumbered, bringing great logs to be sawn. The boys cut saplings for poles and fished by the river banks in their idle hours, and brought home long strings of perch and bluegill and sunny, to sizzle over the fires for supper.

The other robins, the ordinary ones, came back with the other birds, the redwings and bluebirds, the grackles and swamp sparrows, the kingfishers that flashed, rattling, along the river, and the slow, patient heron. But the white robin was still seen here and there, by the woods, along the hill. And of an evening the boys went to look for it, and grown-ups too, and little children, clinging to a parent's hand.

"Hush, I hear it – yonder, in that tall tree."

"No, see, there it flies! See that flash of white!"

"See, see! I told you it was white!"

"As white as Solomon is black!"

The schoolmaster heard of it, from the boys. He explained to them how sometimes a creature, any kind of creature, was born white, though otherwise like its fellows, and he had a fancy name for it. He'd seen a white toad once, he said, and a white deer, years ago, and this white robin he'd like to see, too. So one evening he went out with them to look for it, and there it was, perched on a fence post near the pasture gate, preening itself. There it stayed for a long time, while they stood in a row in the road, silent, watching, the schoolmaster in their midst.

Seth touched his arm at last.

"'Tis truly a robin, sir?"

"Aye, truly, and no mistake."

"'Twould fetch a price, no doubt, in that place in the city you told us of, where they keep such things, stuffed?" asked Ned.

"What if it would," said the man, frowning. "I like it better there as it is, preening itself, peaceful, in the evening."

They all sighed and stood, silent again.

Then Jamie spoke. "Will it stay, do you think? Will it nest?"

The schoolmaster shook his head. "Who knows? The birds are not settled yet. Some are still moving north. It may go on. It may stay. But leastways, you can say in later years, you've seen Robin white as white."

"White as Solomon is black!" laughed Jack.

And then they saw him, Solomon himself. He'd come along the road, the other way, to fetch water from the vil-

lage well, for he and his mother lived up on the mountainside, where they had scratched a small patch of garden from the stony soil, and there was no spring. He had a yoke over his shoulders and two wooden pails. Now he stood a little way from them, watching the robin, his black face set and his eyes dark.

"Hush!" said the schoolmaster. "'Tis an unseemly jest. Solomon was a wise and ancient king. He knew God made black and white alike, just as that robin is a robin still, despite its color."

But Ned persisted. "Was that Solomon black, too?"

"Blacker than you," said the man, "and far wiser." And he turned and strode away, back along the road toward the village, with a troubled face, the boys at his heels.

The robin fluttered up and flew off, but Solomon still stood, staring after it, hatred in his face.

THAT WAS THE LAST TIME they saw the white robin, alive. Seth, coming home from school one afternoon, saw a spot of white in the grass by the fence and, running over, found it huddled and stiff, a wound on its rumpled breast, and a bit of blood by its beak. By it he found a smooth round pebble, such as they used in slingshots. He stared at the stone before he picked it up and slipped it in his pocket. Then with trembling hands he gathered up the white bird and carried it home. He met his father coming from the sheepfold, and he stood still, woebegone, while his father came up and put out a gnarled forefinger, parting the feathers on the soft breast.

"It's been shot," he said.

Seth nodded, wordless with misery.

"Who could ha' done it? Who would ha' done it? 'Tis a boy's mischief."

Seth shook his head.

"That Solomon's the best aim hereabouts," said his father, "and hatred enough too. Best bury the thing and have done with it."

Seth buried it, under the lilac hedge. He said nothing of it to anyone – but his father let it out, and the word went round.

It was then the drought began, as they remembered later.

APRIL CAME IN warm and sunny. The river ran quiet and cool between its banks. The maples leafed out early, and the oak, and the silvery little birch clumps here and there. Children went barefoot far too soon, according to their mothers. It was lovely, but too lovely, with none of April's fitfulness and sudden storms, just a steady, relentless, uneventful spell of good weather. The fields of wheat and barley showed green and sturdy, but by May the blades that had come up so fast seemed to pause, waiting; and many a farmer stopped and glanced a dozen times a day at the sky, where a few little fluffs of clouds hung motionless. The road was thick with dust and the wayside choked with it. Dust devils whirled and danced in the school yard. By now the weather was the first thought in

the minds of each one old enough to know that all was not aright.

And it was quite evident that they were in the midst of trouble. A good spell of rain could fix all in no time, it was true. But no rain came – except a spattering of drops that made the dust leap and left little imprints in the dry road. But it must come. This was unheard of – no rain in all those weeks. Summer brought a dry spell now and again – but to set in so early and keep hold so long – unheard of!

But what was to be done? Would the well hold out? The men sat together and considered. It had been dug deep and had never been known to fail. Nevertheless, word went out that as much as could be, water should be fetched from the river, for most uses.

It was then that they noticed Solomon coming, two or three times a day, down the road, past the cluster of dwellings, the school, the store, the smithy, with his yoke on his shoulders, to fetch water and trudge back up the mountainside. He went, a silent black figure, through their midst and back again, and the boys, if they were idle, would stop their whittling and watch uneasily as he passed.

Seth asked the schoolmaster, "What does he get his water for, so often?"

"I expect for their garden. Where they live, it must be dry as bone. Where else would they grow their food, except in that patch up there?"

"Was his father a slave, sir?"

"So I have heard. But there are no slaves now."

"Does he get paid for his work at the mill?"

"Such as it is, yes. But he should have his chance at school, like you lads."

"Solomon at school, like us?" scoffed the boys. "Not he! Have you seen the looks he gives us? Think you we'd have him there, killing our birds? He'd strangle a toad with his bare hands, I'll wager!"

"Remember what he did to the white robin? Remember?"

"Yes, it was he – back in the spring, before the drought began."

"Before? Nay – it was *when* the drought began. No rain since, no rain since."

"'Tis a fact, 'tis true! No rain since, not from that time."

BY JULY the river was running low. Stones and boulders the boys had never seen before appeared, and for a little while they played along the newly revealed shore, when they were sent to fetch water, and were admonished for it. But then in the yellow heat of day, when haze and dust settled on the land and the fields cracked, such a heaviness descended over all, that the boys had no heart for play. They toiled with their elders as best they could, and then sat in the shade, weary and listless, and uneasy fear began to haunt them. When Solomon came down the road each day, their mutterings and their abuse were all but audible – though Solomon gave no sign of hearing. To the boys, day followed day in an endless dazzle of dust and sun, and windless, warm nights brought only uneasy sleep and no rest.

Before August the crops had failed beyond recall. In the timber lots the trees were brown. The sheep pasture had

long been seared and barren, and Seth had helped his father take the flock to the river meadows where a little grass remained, and there was water for them. But they were sickly and many died. In the orchards the apples withered and dropped. The mills had been closed for weeks, the river ran so low and the millrace was dry. Ruin stared them in the face – and ever present was the fear of fire.

FIRE CAME, for all their caution and their fear. Jamie's mother, baking bread in their outdoor oven with the last of their wheat, pulled out the coals, and one rolled unbeknownst to her into the dead grass. A puff of wind did the rest. When she saw it and cried out, the little flames ran outward already in great spreading circles, and the wind came along with a whoosh and drove sparks into the shed and along the road. The cry went up, and from everywhere they came running, with spades and brooms and sacks and axes. Seth, down by the river meadow, heard the bell and saw the smoke billowing. He shouted to his father, and ran. The fire was traveling fast toward the highroad. They might stop it there, but it would spread along to the school – and one house at least lay in its path, and an orchard and meadow, and beyond, the woods – the dry tinder woods that stretched for miles.

Seth met the schoolmaster, running, rake in hand. "To the road," he shouted. "Stop it at the road. Tell all the boys you meet!"

Seth found Gerrit and Jack, and ran with them. Jamie and Ned and Robert were already there. They spread out

along the road and watched the advance of the licking flames through the dead weeds and dried brambles. They beat down the underbrush and the smoke blew chokingly into their faces, but the fire was held.

The schoolmaster came by, shouting, "Robert, there, you watch no spark leaps the road. Sing out if it does. The rest – come to the school. The fire will reach it but maybe we can make it go around either side. The men plow a wide lane beyond the Jenning orchard. That may stop it."

Unquestioning and numb, they obeyed. Running up the road, with the wind veering the smoke off to their left, they ran beyond the leaping edge of the fire to where the schoolhouse stood, bleak and vulnerable in its dusty yard, smoke already swirling toward it.

"Trench, trench!" barked the schoolmaster over the crackle of flame and the thudding of their hearts. Seth found a spade thrust into his hands and he began to dig, Jamie on one side of him, Gerrit on the other. The schoolmaster leaped in front, beating down the undergrowth, and others joined him, hacking and flailing, turning the dry sod under. Clouds of smoke billowed into them and for a moment they were blinded and choking; then the wind shifted a little and the smoke rolled away. The schoolmaster leaped back across the trench and ran along it calling, "Are you all right? Here, down here, on this side! Dig the trench on along here! Seth, watch this point and beat it down as it comes. And here, you!" he called to another, unrecognizable for soot and smoke smears, "Stand by him here and do likewise."

Seth beat at the little half-starved flames crawling toward the trench. His companion did the same.

"It's done for there, and there, and there," croaked Seth in triumph, pounding with his spade, but his companion struggled on wordlessly. Seth glanced at him, whoever he was, for he was blackened with the smoke and grime. Then, "Watch that bush!" he yelled, as a shriveled shrub suddenly flared up. Both boys leaped for it, fearing that roaring sparks would fly across the yard to the schoolhouse.

"Hack it down, then we can trample it!"

The boy leaped back over the trench, seized an axe, leaped across again, and leaning down, swung sure and strong under the bush, bringing it down in a flaming shower. Seth heard a little moan, but he himself was already beating at the scattered boughs, and the other soon joined him, until the bush was harmless, smoking embers.

"Come!" called Seth. "They need us down here."

And the two ran to join the rest – dim forms in the haze and smoke. But the crackle and roar were quieter, and the hungry orange flares flickering down, winking out, sputtering away.

"We've held it here," gasped the schoolmaster. "But we'd best go down and give a hand at the front. Walk it, boys, and save your wind. You're fair spent, all of you. Done a man's work, each one of you. Come."

They set off down the road, carrying their tools, to where the advancing edge of fire roared and billowed with diminishing fury. There they all fell in with the men, beat-

ing with methodical deliberateness and exhaustion at the little tongues of flame on the fringes, while the heart of the fire leaped up to the wide-furrowed trench and halted. At length the schoolmaster came by, touching each one on the shoulder.

"Come, lads, the worst is over now. Come to my place, for a drink and a bit of rest. Then home to supper. Unbeknownst to us, evening is here."

They dropped their tools and trailed after him, down the road, across his little yard, up to his stoop. There, with deep sighs, they sank on the benches beside the door; all save one, who stood holding his two hands in front of him, swaying a little. The schoolmaster, coming from the springhouse, set his jug down suddenly and sprang forward.

"Let's see those hands, lad. Nay, there are burns, real ones, blistered deep. You should have stopped a while back and gone home for help." He peered in the boy's face. "But it's Solomon! Solomon, good lad, poor lad, those hands! Wife! Here's work for you. Wife! Come inside, boy. We'll bind those up with some salve she has, and fix you up fair in no time. Now, lads, there's the jug. Have a drink and rest. I'll tend this fellow." And with his arm around Solomon's shoulder he went inside.

It was suddenly quiet. No one made a move for the jug. They sat silent, heads bent, hands clasped between their knees. Inside they could hear a bit of stir, and the schoolmaster's wife murmuring.

Then Jamie muttered, "I never knew he was there, working with us."

"Look at us, all of us as black as he," said Ned shakily.

"I think 'twas he hacked down that flaming bush, back by the school, and then was when he got the burns. And that was long ago and he worked on, and said not a word, and I knew not even who it was. I thought him one of us," whispered Seth.

"He *was* one of us," said Gerrit.

They were all silent again, till Robert got up and fetched the jug.

"Master bid us drink," he said, handing it to Ned. They all drank and the precious water ran down their throats. Then they sat wordless again, listening.

The schoolmaster came out, his arm about Solomon, who stood with his head down, his bandaged hands glimmering white in the dusk, and held awkwardly against his breast.

"I'm taking him home, lads. He'll do, in a few weeks – but a scar or two to remember our fire by. Don't rest too long. Your families will be wanting to know you are still in one piece. I'll be standing watch down by the fire this evening. Come by if you need me for aught."

And they were gone in the shadows of the road.

But the boys still sat, waiting, pent, exhausted, ashamed. Then Seth straightened up and spoke in a clear voice.

"'Tis we killed the white robin, not he. We killed it with our jest."

And all around the circle ran the sigh, "Aye, aye, aye."

Then Ned spoke, "How can he carry water now, with those hands?"

They all sat up, thinking. Here was something needed doing.

"That rain barrel by our shed – let's take that up. And fill it enough for two-three days. And see that it stays filled till his hands heal."

"When will we do it?"

"Now, now of course."

"'Tis still light enough."

"I'll fetch the stoneboat from our barn, to help haul the barrel."

"I'll help haul. 'Twill take two all that way uphill."

"We'll get buckets. Two trips anyways, if we think to fill it enough."

So they set off, scattering, to meet again on the steep, worn track going up to the little holding on the mountain-side. Smoke still hung in the valley, but the air was fresher here. The stars glimmered faintly as the golden light drew down into the west. The forest edge was dark, and there was no wind, and no bird singing – only the sound of their feet in the dry leaves, and the rattle of stones sent rolling down the slope.

By the door of the little hut they set the barrel down. At the unaccustomed noise, Solomon's mother had come forth, amazed, as the boys drew up in an awkward row and stood silently.

Seth stepped forward. "Ma'am," he said, "As Solomon burned his hands and all, helping with the fire, we knew you'd be hard put to it to get water, so we wanted to help."

"We brought up the barrel," explained Ned, "and we'll keep it filled till he's well again at least."

"If that's all right with you, ma'am," finished Jamie.

In the dusk one could not see her face, only her eyes. She put her hand up suddenly and covered them. Then she put her hand down again and her voice was husky.

"It takes a mighty load off of my heart, a mighty load."

"We'll fill it now, ma'am, if you don't mind."

They emptied their buckets into the barrel one by one and went off down the slope, slipping and sliding on the loose rocks. Down, down to the river they went, and back up, laden, their breath labored in their throats. Solomon's mother sat by the door, waiting, and behind her in the dusk stood Solomon, his bandaged hands white against his chest.

Again they emptied their buckets, and then they stood, silent, searching for some word of release.

"We are sorry, Solomon," spoke Seth at last.

And the dark boy answered, his voice quiet and clear.

"That's all right. We put out the fire, and the hands will soon mend."

But that was not all that Seth had meant.

So they went off down the hill, calling softly goodnight, and the two by the house softly answering. They spoke no more to each other, and scattered to their homes, weary, but with a strange peace in their hearts.

WHEN SETH CLIMBED to his little room and lay on his pallet by the square of window, he could not sleep, exhausted as he was. When he closed his eyes he saw dancing rings of flame, and when he opened them, he could see the

pale stars winking down at him. Had it been one day, or an eternity – their bitter fight with the fire, and then – Solomon?

He lay a long time, staring out of the window. And then he knew, he suddenly realized, the stars were gone, were winking out even as he watched. He heaved himself up and knelt, his fingers clutching the frame, and thrust his head out. The air was sweet and cool, the smell of burning blown away, and overhead the stars indeed had gone. He caught his breath in disbelief. It could not be! Could it be?

But the soft wind blew, and with it came the rain, the blessed and forgiving rain.

THE GATE

No one compels you, traveler;
this road or that road, make your choice!
Dust or mud, heat or cold,
fellowship or solitude,
foul weather or a fairer sky,
the choice is yours as you go by.

But here if you would take this path
there is a gate whose latch is love,
whose key is single and which swings
upon the hinge of faithfulness,

and none can mock, who seeks this way,
the king we worship shamelessly.
If you would enter, traveler,
into this city fair and wide,
it is forever and you leave
all trappings of the self outside.

J.T.C.

The Secret Flower

Author's Note:

This story takes place in the England of the Middle Ages, specifically during the months from June 1382 to February 1383. The year 1381 had seen the upheaval and apparent fruitlessness of the Peasants' Revolt, and the beginning of the Lollard movement that was to be strong for the next fifty years or more, with far-reaching influence. John Wycliffe had already faced persecution and retired to Lutterworth, and his "Poor Priests" with their English Bibles were slowly beginning to be seen about the countryside and in the towns. The terrible years of the Black Death (1348-1349) were close enough to be a horror still, and the plague had visited enough since then to be an ever-threatening reality. The established church

was corrupt, sterile, hypocritical, and wealthy, while the commons were poor, and misery of every sort walked abroad. Still, the hearts of many were full of courage and a simple faith, and certainly the vision then of brotherhood and Christ's truth catches our eye even through the intervening centuries.

I

COLCHESTER WAS AN ANCIENT TOWN, full of memories. The Celts had first settled there. Buried under its fourteenth-century cobbles were the coins and pagan graves of Rome; the Norman keep had been built partly of Roman stone, and the streets followed the old pattern. Its heroine was Queen Boadicea. Its spirit was independent; it bred rebels like Wat Tyler and John Ball, and was to become a stronghold of Lollardism in the 1400s. It lay close enough to the coast to have a sense of blue distance and far places; from time to time strange mariners appeared in its markets, come up from the Hythe to see a foreign town; and the gulls followed the River Colne up from the sea to wheel and cry over the marshy meadows by the Middle Mill and the King's Lands, reminding the land-bound citizens that not so far away was the end of the world they

knew and the beginning of the unknown.

It was a sturdy town, and lively, allotted five yearly fairs, ten parishes with a cheerful mingling of bells, the Abbey of St. John prosperous and handsome just outside the walls, and a leper hospital at a healthy distance. Lord Fitz-Walter rode in from Lexden now and then and made a stir in the streets. If one went in and out at Head Gate on the south side of the wall, one could see the windmill wheeling down on the Bishop's Fields. The river was a constant element; the three water mills clacked away from dawn till late afternoon, and the tanners and fullers toiled on its banks, while the wind often blew laden with the smell of old fish and drying nets. Many a tidy garden had its paths paved with the bleached white of oyster shells, some from the ancient heaps left by the Romans.

There were such shells on the paths in Simon Beston's garden, crushed and broken almost to a powder now, but he had never wondered whose ingenious rake had dragged them up from the river bottom, or whose hands had prized them open, with a tool long since lost. Other men's labors he gave little heed to, especially that centuries old, for he was deeply wrapped by his own, care-ridden and joyless, prosperous and proud, lonely as the heron that stood long hours in the marshes below the Lower Mill but, unlike the heron, with no young to whom to carry home the trophy. He was obscure and nameless, yet was one of a new man in England, enterprising and independent, shrewd and industrious, with a quiet, steady eye to his own outward welfare. As for what happened inwardly, Mass and the confession and communion at Easter took care of that, he told

himself. Though now and then, especially with the dawn when something woke him, doubt like a great, gray abyss would loom under him, and he would feel himself swing out over it, helpless in terror. Sweating, he would scramble out of his massive bed to cling to the window sill, gazing over the garden and pastureland to St. Botolph's and beyond it to the mistily rising towers of St. John's Abbey. Such times were few, but they left him shaken and questioning for a day or two till the accustomed rounds and the press of business swept over him and carried him on uncaring.

But that doubt was a hidden jewel set deep in his mind, and now and then it caught the light to burn forth clear and undeniable. Perhaps that was why the heart had leaped when he had heard John Ball preach some ten years ago now, on pride and lechery and covetousness and sloth, thundering out against the church itself and calling all humble and true men to link hands as brothers and rise together; but John Ball went on his way and the jeweled fire died amid Simon's own sorrows. Now and then he heard the name of the priest, with a little flicker deep inside, and then in the mutinous, terrible times of the uprising—Simon had drawn the shutters close, stopped his ears, covered his eyes, and spoken to no one.

As for Wat Tyler, he was a loud and insolent fellow who had lived in a daub-and-wattle hut, now pulled down and turned to dust, on St. Helen's Lane, in the town itself; he had served in the French War and had killed his erstwhile master during the London insurrection, Simon had heard, which hadn't surprised him. Now Tyler himself was dead

and his ready tongue silenced forever; many a time Simon had heard him pounding on the table in the Falcon and sounding forth for the power of the commons and the smashing of all wealth. But no fire gleamed in Simon in response. Why? He never wondered. Perhaps the lovelessness and arrogance of the man left him without warmth. Perhaps also he feared a bit for his own house, so snug and fine, and for his well-swept, well-stocked shop.

That piece of land outside the town had been his from his father's time. He had been a young man when he set his eyes on it for a house for several reasons. First, he wanted a house, a good, sturdy one, and one to be proud of, no patched and mended stuck-together-anyhow shelter, but a house made to last, with his initials carved over the door and the mercer's sign hung out. Also he had his eye on the spot as a likely one for business—outside the walls it is true, but near the juncture of the London Road and the old Roman Road by Botolph's Gate, and it was a busy thoroughfare with much traffic coming up from Magdalen Road also, or the comings to and fro from the big abbey. Many had scoffed at the time, but had shaken their heads later at his shrewdness, and all around the town now outside of the walls business had spread; he had quite started a trend, which helped him, too. Also ever since all of the town in the North Hill Gate section had gone up in flames when he was a boy, he had feared city fires, and he wanted a place at a safe distance, not crowded shoulder to shoulder with its fellows and vulnerable to their careless sparks. And, perhaps, though he never knew how big a part this played, he wanted a fair, new place for Hawise. But she

didn't live longer than there was time to plot out the garden and set out the apple trees with him, and she only saw them bloom once.

The house had been for him, when he built it, pretentious, but not so now that he was well-to-do; now it was suitable. It stood directly on More-elm Lane, on either side it a brick wall with neat, solid gates, surrounding the garden. To the right as one went in was the hall, beyond the screens, and to the left a door to the shop, whose wide shutter opened on the street. Directly ahead one glimpsed the kitchen, and beyond, the buttery. Above the shop and kitchen was a second story with storeroom in front, and chamber behind, both reached by a winding stair from the kitchen. The hall itself had a fireplace built in the far wall, quite a new-fangled thing, and also the kitchen had its built-in hearth, and above it Simon's chamber had its fireplace, so the house was serviceable and fine. No man could ask more for comfort within. And without? Well, he took pride in husbandry, for all he was a mercer by trade. Beyond the buttery he had added a shed and cowstall; against the east garden wall were set the hives, among the apple trees, and beyond them the chicken roost and the vegetable garden with well-kept rows of cabbages, leeks, lettuces, kale, and beans. There was a duck pond with a big willow overhanging it, and beyond it the land dropped off to pastures, a wandering small stream, marshland, and in the far distance southeasterly the parish of St. Mary Magdalen's, and past it the river; northeasterly was the cluster of abbey buildings with his own parish of St. Botolph's huddling nearer at hand.

The garden Hawise had planned was in the angle of the house, near the wall; it was fragrant with rosemary and saffron, thyme and lavender; corn poppies grew there, and white violets in the spring; roses, blue scabious, and herb Robert. Simon tended them all, partly out of love for growing things, partly out of pride, and partly out of a lonely, sorrowing memory for someone that, as far as he could remember, he had once loved.

SIMON, ON THAT FRESH, sparkling June morning, knelt in the storeroom before the large oaken chest where he kept his stock of gloves. He picked them over carefully, laying some aside in small piles on the floor to be taken below to the shop. When he finished he let the lid fall to with a thump, and then turned to a coffer that had a peacock painted on the lid, a strutting bird with a spread tail and bright eye; with the back of his sleeve he smoothed and dusted it, for it had belonged to Hawise, and he remembered her delight in it. Now it held the richest belts, and he opened it to finger them over and take out three or four; he chose only one that was jeweled, as they were too precious to display much for fear of theft, and not greatly in demand in the town of Colchester—nevertheless, one girdle gleaming with pearl and emerald would signify that there was more wealth, perhaps, hidden away for one who could afford it. He chose also a wide red belt embossed with dragons and a knight at arms, with a golden clasp, and two more modest, green-braided ones.

When he had gathered them together with the gloves he went into his chamber to go below, and then stopped to listen to the voices he had heard dimly in the back of his mind while he had been working. One was Margrit, the old woman who kept his house, and the other was a man's voice, and unknown. He was puzzled that anyone had come, for Ben, the great mastiff chained by the kitchen door, always raised a fury when a stranger appeared. With his foot on the top stair, Simon paused. He could see only a patch of sun on the well-scrubbed floor, and as he listened, he heard the bell ringing for Terce across the fields from the abbey. Simon waited for the strange voice to speak again, but it was Margrit.

"You'd best eat a bit before you go on. The master wouldna' mind. He's not stingy for all he's not generous."

"Have you no mistress, then?" The man's voice was clear and fresh, with a gentleness in it. Simon could not place it, nor its inflection; certainly not an Essex man, anyway, nor one out of the North.

"No, nor little ones here, either. Mistress died of the plague, ten years ago now, and a baby daughter too, and another on the way. It was a sad time, and the town bad hit, also, though not as bad as that first spell of it, when I was a girl. That was bad beyond all thinking—half the town lying dead and mostly unburied, and the priests either dead or fled away from fear, but that was over thirty years ago now and one forgets a bit except sometimes in the night or when the sickness strikes again, as it did when Mistress Hawise died."

Simon stood and waited. He could not go down now.

The old time flooded over him again, the terror and the stunned sorrow, Hawise lying cold and still and the child crying in fever; how no one would come to help but old Margrit, not so old then, and her idiot son Piers, and how together they had made the bier and he had fetched the priest who all hasty and fearful had mumbled the service, and the lonely walk down the lane in the drizzling morning to the burying with no bearers but the bier laid on the haywain and the old horse plodding; and the fresh earth being thrown in the grave with a sickening sound; and the next day it all to do over again with the little lass. And then the days afterward empty and cold, no one coming near but old Margrit from her hovel down the lane, the shop closed, the street quiet, until after the early frosts when the contagion passed, and fear began to dwindle; people spoke again, and St. Denis Fair opened as usual in a brilliant October with the townsmen, jocund and noisy, here and there one in mourning, but all eager to put death behind them and make the most of the day.

"It is a brave house for one man alone," said the stranger.

"That's how he chose it; that's how it is to be," said Margrit flatly. There was a little silence.

"Where be you from, mister?" There was a respectful curiosity in Margrit's voice that puzzled Simon. He heard her begin to shell peas, the pods snapping open and the peas rattling into the bowl.

"Here, I can as well do that, while you do something I cannot do," said the stranger's voice, and there was a little stir while the job was handed over, and Margrit stumped

over to the table. The patch of sunlight was blotted out. Simon could hear dough being plumped and rolled for a pasty.

"Where be you from, and what is your trade, mister, if I may ask?" she repeated.

"I come from a city a ways from here, and I am a shepherd," said the man quietly.

"Have you been here for St. John's Fair?"

"Well, in a way, perhaps." The man chuckled a little. "Though I brought no sheep to sell, and mayhap bought none either."

Margrit thumped the dough. "Your master will chide you."

"No, not mine. Maybe you rightfully do not know my master. He bids me travel about now and then, to seek the sheep that have lost their true shepherd, or never found him."

"You speak in riddles, mister. Where is it you come from, and what nonsense is this you speak? It smacks a bit of the time so lately passed, just a year ago, and some of the words we heard then. That is over and done with now, and best forgotten."

The man went on shelling peas, and Simon, as if he had been drawn by a magnet, came slowly down the stairs. At his step, the man looked up and smiled, and Margrit bobbed a curtsy. Simon stood there at the bottom, his hands full of belts and gloves, and stared at the man. He was bearded and brown-visaged, with piercing blue eyes and dark lashes like star points; he wore a dusty gray tunic and hood, and broidered over his heart a bright blue

flower. He laid the bowl aside and stood up, looking Simon through and through. The sunlit silence lengthened.

Finally, “Sit,” said Simon, motioning to the bench, and the man sat again, taking up the pea-shelling, which was nearly done.

“You’ve come a long way?” asked Simon, though he knew not why.

“That depends,” said the man. “From where you are, mayhap quite a way,” and he flashed Simon a smile, “but not too far to be reached.”

“Who is your master?”

“None better,” came the quiet answer. Margrit waited for Simon to flare up in impatience.

“Has he no name?”

“If I told you, would you believe me?” The man let his hands rest and looked at Simon squarely. “There are things a man will not believe, even when he hears them with his own ears. What if I told you that my master was our Lord himself?”

“The man is mad,” muttered Simon, and turned to go. But he checked himself and turned back for another question.

“What manner of city is it, then, where you dwell with such a master?”

The man bent his head a bit, as if to gauge his words, then his voice came soft and joyful.

“A city of music, and little children; a city where peace dwells, and no sorrow but what it is shared and turned to blessing; a city of labor but no strife, where no man speaks but in honesty and love; where sin is turned back at the

gate and driven out not by the sword of hate but by the seal of purity; a city beyond our words to reckon…" His voice died off, and then he looked up, such a light in his face as Simon had never seen. "I wish I could show it to you, brother." His voice had a longing in it.

Simon stood motionless and stunned.

"And where is this place?" he finally dragged out.

"North, and then west. Over the hills. A long way, and a hard way, full of danger. But not too far for every man. A fair blue flower grows there that grows in no other land," and his hand went to his heart.

"Do you take me for a fool, to believe all this?"

"It isn't for me to say," came the voice of the man, and he smiled at Simon, "but if you do, then you are God's fool, at least."

The shop bell tinkled insistently. Simon's hands on the belts and gloves were sweating. He turned away and went into the shop, letting the heavy door swing to behind him. The kitchen was silent for a while, Margrit too dumbstruck to finish her pasty and the man sitting there peacefully with his hands on his knees, the bowl of the shelled peas on the floor between his feet.

"A daft way you have of speaking," she said at last, and slung the round of dough into a deep pan, trimming the edges with deft movements. "Methinks he was angry."

The man sighed and stood up. "I have cheese and bread in my wallet," he said, slapping it, "and a ways to go today, so I'll be moving. Say farewell to your master, and mayhap someday I'll set eyes on his face again."

He stepped out into the sun, under the blossoming

apple trees that hummed and quivered with bees, and his eyes rested on the yellow hives, and the trim wall, and then on the big dog that lay at his feet with head between his paws, his eyes turned up, and his tail flapping.

"Good fellow," said the man, stopping to pat him. Then he swung off down the path, out the gate, and left along the London Road. The gate swung to with a little click behind him. Far off the abbey bell rang Sext, and all the other bells chimed in, mellow and soft in the noon sun.

WITH THE COMING OF EVENING, Simon went out of the house door to lower the lattice and shutter over the shop front; a fastening had caught in a rose vine and he pricked his finger freeing it, and was sucking at the blood when Derek Munsley came by with a string of fish from the river. He lingered a moment. Simon turned back to his work, but Derek had too much talk in his head to be daunted.

"Do you remember the day a year ago, happen, Simon?"

"Best forget these days now. Over and done," muttered Simon, as he slammed to the shutter and bent back the rose vine.

"Wat Tyler's forgotten them, dead and buried no one knows where, all his brash talk and free notions gone to earth. And John Ball too, with his fancy rhymes and fetching phrases. What good did it do us, or anyone? The world's the same, and always will be."

Simon stopped at his doorstep and looked back at Derek.

"If ye think that," he said, "why breathe?" Then he went inside, to the dim quiet and the emptiness, shutting the door on the road and Derek standing there with a blank face, and in his head his own words echoing, "If ye think that, why breathe?" Had he rightly said it to Derek, or to himself?

Why indeed breathe; why get up in the morning and wrangle in the market and count the silver and wait for the folk to come into the shop to buy; why go to Mass and hear the priest Fulcun muttering at the altar, and trouble at that picture of doomsday over the door, with the flames of hell and the devils torturing the damned; why go to the Falcon for a draft of ale in the quiver of a hope to find a friendly face and an honest word; why go down to the churchyard ever and anon to lay a posy on Hawise's grave and the little one beside it; why prune the apple trees and harvest the honey and breed the cow and gather the eggs and weed the garden and put back the tile on the roof when the tempests displaced it; why keep old Margrit in the kitchen and her lazy lout of a son, Piers. If the world's the same and always will be, he thought, time might as well stand still and the sand stop running through the glass. I might as well be done with it now. What little I had of joy is under the ground now and what little I knew of God is false words and a foul priest. He latched the shutter from the inside and began to put the shop to rights, in the dimness of the light that came from the hall door. In the kitchen he could hear Margrit groaning and grunting to

herself as she fixed his supper, beans and bacon by the smell of it.

Then he pulled out into the open what he had pushed under all day, the gnawing, haunting memory. That man, that strange man this morning. The look in his eye, the warm fresh look, the smile at the corner of his eye, the clear undertone to his voice, the bright blue flower sewn on the breast of his worn tunic, the look of his hands as he slid the peas from their shells, the clear glance that could not be withstood. And those riddling words that rang with truth.

All day long like a bright spark dancing among the dark memories of a year ago the image of this man had come; now the spark ignited the dry dust of the past and all flared up newly revealed. Somewhere a man walked who was free within and without; in whose eyes there seemed to be no shadow of fear, who seemed to have not mirth nor bawdiness nor loud foolery, but a true joy. And the fair city he spoke of, it must be heaven itself!

Simon left the dusky shop and stepped over into the empty reach of the hall; with his arms folded across his chest he paced back and forth from the hearth to the screens, and let the full flood of memory sweep over him. A man could not have gone through that time indifferent, not if he had a beating heart at all. He remembered first the rumors and the wild hopes in the town, set alongside the scoffing and belittling of others. What would ever hope to change the old order, said some? Wealth was wealth, and power was power; the poor were poor and never would be otherwise except in paradise. But throughout Essex the

word went that the time was come, that the boy-king was to be faced and would be found favoring the commons, that the fat friars and proud abbots were to be thrown down, and all men joined equally under their true Head, as Scripture would have it (if only all men could read it for themselves, not hear it mumbled in an ancient tongue). But the burgesses wagged their heads and counseled caution and warned against treason. Simon had listened and kept his own opinion to himself, if indeed he knew it; he remembered John Ball and felt a flicker of hope; he remembered Wat Tyler and felt a wave of disgust.

But then, like thunderheads piling up in the west, the storm gathered, silent at first, but dark and overhanging. Essex was rising! went the word. A few men vanished from town and their wives went about with dull faces. Mid-June came, and each day dawned taut and expectant, and at last the riders came in from London one hot, dusty noon. The king, young Richard, had granted all! He had pledged himself to the commons. Justice was done at last! And Simon listened bleakly, feeling the world turned topsy-turvy.

After that the thunder broke, and like gall the once-sweet words burned on the tongues of those who had brought the news. London was in murder and riot; the king had betrayed his pledge; Wat Tyler was dead, and John Ball seized for a heretic and traitor; the king's men were marching against the commons at Billericay.

And then followed the darkest time of all. He remembered standing by Head Gate as the first stragglers of the peasants came into town, sweat-streaked and wild. There had been riots in the market, with the commons crying for

support, and the burgesses shouting them down; the bailiffs were called out, and even as the town authorities strove for order, the Earl of Buckingham's men came marching in, and the last dim hope any man had held that the old power had power no longer dwindled to a little dust under the trampling feet. In place of the murdered chief justice, Sudbury, Tressilian was carried in on a litter, with a cool level stare, and the bloody assize began.

Simon laid his arms on the carved mantel over the hearth, and put his head on them, half sick with the memory. For all he had seen a bit of life and thought he had a strong stomach, the hanging and quartering that had gone on that week had shaken him fearfully; he never went by the junction of St. Martin's Lane and High Street without a shudder, and the cobbles yet looked brown to him, and even a faint stench of blood still. The gallows past East Mill Gate and over the river had been black with vultures for weeks.

And then this man, like an ambassador from a foreign land speaking a foreign tongue…a place of no fear, no hating, no sorrow.

He raised his head listening, for he heard Piers outside fetching up water from the well, and mingling with it from the street a singer, with a familiar tune, but English words that fell new on his ears.

Thou hast brought forth thy holy son
That man's redemption might be won;
He shall forgive and all men shrive
From evil.
Our present help is come
To bring us joy eternal
And out of exile home.

Simon heard Piers go lumbering into the house with a full bucket, and he drew his sleeve across his eyes as if to brush the mist from them. He suddenly knew he was weary to the bone, and where his heart had been numb and cold, there was now a great aching.

NEXT MORNING, being a Wednesday, was market. Simon woke in a cool dim dawn, feeling somehow that the world was different, but not knowing why. After a bowl of porridge and a beaker of cider, he and Piers started out, Piers pushing a barrow with their gear in it, through Botolph's Gate, already thronging with farmers and tradesmen going the same way. They went straight, then left past All Saints, into the market. In the bustle and stir there, the voices sounded loud and raw, or tired to desperation. The banter and merriment seemed thin; beneath it lay a bleakness that smote Simon. He looked about and paused, while Piers tugged at the barrow and grunted at him to move on.

Their stall was set up at the eastern end, where one caught cross-traffic as well as those who strolled around fingering goods and taking their time. As the morning broke fresh and fair, the crowds came. The faces Simon saw, even the ones not new to him, were strange now, and he was so mazed by studying them that Piers, standing back, nudged him now and then when a likely sale was all but ignored. He had sold the green braided belts he had fetched down the day before from the storeroom, and a

small blue purse with a white violet stamped on it, and two needle cases with silver needles when the lady came along, with a Maltese spaniel on her arm, and a waiting woman behind. She was feeding the dog morsels of fine white bread from a wallet at her side. She fingered Simon's stuff idly.

"Have ye not any blue silk? Last time I was by ye had blue silk, at a fair price. This russet would make me look like a Poor Priest!"

"No blue silk, mistress, but Friday there will be. But here is a blue girdle, straight from London."

The little dog yawned, showing two rows of white, sharp teeth and a long pink tongue; he licked the end of his nose and whined for more bread.

"Friday I may come, or I may not, but have it here all the same," and she idly turned away. A beggar was in her path, an old man with a gray face and shriveled legs, rheumy blue eyes and sunken lips. Speechless he held out his hand to her. She lifted her skirts carefully and stepped around him, her face cold. Simon stood with the blue girdle in his hands and watched; the beggar scuttered off, crablike. Simon put his hand to his heart, where the ache was, and Piers nudged him as a fat goodwife stood there with her fingers on a small red wallet.

"You are asleep today, Master Simon. I could have waited here till Doomsday," she joshed. "Come, give me the price of this, and make it fair, and make haste. I want this home before it spoils in the heat," and she motioned to a mesh bag of cod over her arm.

Simon hastened and took her silver, and she went off,

her broad skirts swinging. And now the abbot himself came by, two chaplains at his heels. He stopped long enough to run a stale eye over Simon's goods, and then proceeded on. Simon saw the beggar, who had huddled behind an empty stall, come creeping forth, his hand held out to the abbot. With a little gesture, the abbot indicated his will, and one of the chaplains dug into his purse, and dropped a coin in the beggar's hand. The old man slid away again, this time toward the alley where an alehouse stood. Simon watched him out of sight.

Piers nudged him again. Before him stood a little girl, her face besmudged and her blue smock dusty. Her eyes scarce reached above the rim of the stall, and her fingers clutched the top, their tips pressed white beneath their dirt. She gazed up at him. Simon leaned over toward her.

"What is it, my little lass?"

"My mother went to buy clogs, and I have lost her and myself, too," and she began to weep soundlessly. While Piers stared at him, Simon smiled and came around the stall to her. With the edge of his tunic he wiped her face.

"I'll take thee where clogs are sold and likely she'll be there. We'll find her, never fear, and likely she's looking for thee, too. Watch the goods, Piers." And turning his back on his business, Simon walked off holding the little girl's hand. She took his trustingly, and the feel of her little hard palm in his was very strange. As they went past the flower stalls, Simon could feel her dragging, so he stopped and let her look them over. She seemed less frightened now, and he,not knowing how to deal with a child, still ventured a word.

"What is thy name, little lass?"

"Gillian," she answered.

"Where's thy home, Gillian?"

"Duck Lane. My father is a carter."

"Have you a garden?"

"Not much. The ducks dig it up."

Simon bought a posy of roses and campion and put it in her hand. Her eyes were dazzled and she was speechless. He looked down at the brown tangles of her hair and thought she looked not much cared for. Then they went on.

By the clogs they found her mother. She was a large woman in a brown cotte, and had a baby on one arm and a basket on the other. When she saw Gillian she put the basket down and gave her a slap, glared at Simon, then seized the basket again and with it drove the little girl before her. Gillian gave one backward look, clutching her posy and weeping, and then she disappeared into the crowd and up St. Martin's Lane. Simon stood like a stranger looking after her. It had happened so quickly, the child engulfed and carried off in her mother's anger, that he was suddenly and unaccountably bereft, like one who had found a jewel, only the next moment to lose it in a swift, black river. But she was only a dirty little girl who was lost; what had come over him, standing openmouthed like a fool in the middle of market day, and Piers no doubt making a mucks of things back at the stall. He turned and went swiftly through the crowd, his face set. He found Piers in a fluster, some knave having snatched a pair of red-broidered black gauntlets from under his very nose, and no sale but a mea-

ger one for a small purse. Simon wordlessly set the stall to rights again, while Piers snuffled and looked frightened at the untoward behavior of his master. He would have felt more assured had he had a tongue-lashing.

Next day, being the feast of St. Paul, the shop was closed. Restless and ill at ease, Simon paced in the garden. He felt a strange, unreasoning fear growing in him; the night had been sleepless or filled with fitful dreams: Hawise lying dead with Gillian's posy in her hands; the fat abbot suddenly scuttling crablike in the old beggar's rags; a mesh bag of cod stinking in the painted coffer when he flung up the lid. By dawn he had been up, and now, as the bells rang merrily from all over town, from the valley, from the far meadows, he had the fowls fed and the cow milked and out to the pasture, and a blank day ahead. Nothing, nothing, nothing. He stopped by the pond to watch the white ducks paddling; eight little ones; with what hawks and turtles would get, maybe there would be three left to fatten for Margrit's oven. He thought of the empty house. He could smell the savory roast in the air—apple, onion, sage—and see the brown, dripping carcass in the platter before him. But none to share it, no one, no one. The fear clutched his throat again. Why? He had been content till now to live in this way. True, he had been joyless, but the days had been full and ever fuller with work for house and homestead and shop; trips to London for the latest goods, the whole enormous pressure of business swallowed him up, the long years of building up respect—Simon Beston, mercer; bows and curtsies on the streets, and his heart fattening on pride while his soul starved.

Now suddenly, frantically, he stopped short before an abyss, like that dream, that doubt which had haunted him intermittently. Was he ill? Was he mad?

He clutched the old willow and watched the ducks paddling around, leaving little spreading ripples behind them that made the reflection of the willow branches dance crazily. He forced his mind to steady. Before that man had come, he asked himself, hadn't everything been as before? Couldn't he go back to before the morning the stranger came, only two days ago, and go on unchanged?

But he could not force his mind back to that time. He had to own that the seed of this unrest had been in him before; man or no man it was there and was only flowering now. But why? What was wrong with his life? He harmed no one; he lived to himself. Ah, but what was right with his life? Was it not barren and void of all but the chink of silver? A cold respect? And a tidy holding? For whom? For himself alone. Alone. But not by his choice, by God's choice—God, who had snatched his wife and child and left him comfortless and cold. God had done this to him! But to how many others? And what did they do? Were they comfortless too? And even those who had not lost wife and child, did they not more often than not curse at one another and beat their children, as Gillian had been beaten?

Gillian. She had looked at him with brown eyes in a smudged face. She had put her hard little hand in his.

She had looked back at him weeping. If he could find her…Duck Lane, she had said. Ah, but what could she matter to him—or he to her? Still, no harm, no harm. At

least it was a place to go, a spot to head for, a direction to set his feet. And maybe his mind would steady, this turmoil would settle, his eyes would clear, and his world fall into place again.

He left the pond, walked along the path between the wych-elms and went out the garden gate, turning his face toward Duck Lane.

It was past noon when he got there. The town had been merry and full of life. Derek Munsley had caught him near Holy Trinity to tell him that William Faircloth, Draper, was selling needle cases and braided belts in his own shop, and was selling kersey and murray in false lengths. Simon had shouldered him off finally to go into St. Martin's for late Mass, which had sickened in his throat. He had come out finally to go into the Falcon across the road, to wash down the whole mess with ale. The Falcon was cool and quiet, and he sat over his tankard in a daze, until a gang came in from the street, ribald and noisy, and he had pushed himself up, tossed his coin on the table, and made his way out into the blinding sun.

Now he stood just outside Rye Gate and looked about him. He couldn't remember when he had last been this side of town. Northeast the land sloped off to meadows and marshes lying in the curve of the protecting river; a white gull flashed in the sun and settled on the water. Directly before him down a little path was the Mill, silent today, and beyond it across the river the King's Mead. There was no thoroughfare here; it was quiet after the flurry of the town. Then he looked left along the hovels of Duck Lane—a miserable spot. What had brought him here?

What had he hoped from this?

The noon heat of a bright June day lay on the road and hushed the air. He went along slowly. A few dogs came out and barked at him, snapping warily at his heels; he made his way carefully through a little flock of ducks, bedraggled and dusty; they scurried to make passage for him. There was a faint smell of cabbage cooking, and a stench of garbage. Most folk were indoors. Smoke rose from a few roofs. There were untidy gardens, the fences knocked awry by the pigs. A thin tethered cow raised its head and looked at him with large, sad eyes. A ragged little boy with a harelip stood gaping at him, then ran indoors. A fat woman by one hovel was taking clothes out of a basket to lay them on a hedge to dry. Simon looked at her. It was Gillian's mother.

Then he stopped in his tracks, not knowing what to do. He looked around for Gillian, but there was no one save that fat woman. She had not turned to see him yet. While he stood there in the dust of the road, Gillian came out of the doorway lugging a pail of swill, and went around the cottage to the pig trough where she dumped it in, the pigs shoving against her skirts and squealing. At the sound the mother turned, and saw him. For a moment she stared at him, and then slowly she remembered; a flush rose on her face, a black look of hatred and fear. She glanced around swiftly, seized a hoe that lay on the ground nearby, and came toward him. He stood dumbstruck and waited till the blows and foul words began to rain upon him.

"Child-snatcher—lecher—filthy old man! Get off—get gone—do your whoring elsewhere! Hunting out children,

buying them flowers, spying and prowling—the devil twist your soul! Get out! Shame and hellfire!"

From the nearby cottages the neighbors ran, seizing stones as they came. Amidst the pain and the hail of words Simon saw Gillian clutching the gate, her little face white, her eyes big with terror, and with all his voice he cried, "No, Gillian, do not believe her! Do not believe her!"

He thought he saw her face change, grow old with understanding and terror of a new sort, and then the hail of stones became too much, and he fled.

Simon had fled up Duck Lane, past Rye Gate, and along the wall where the lane ended in a footpath that hugged the ancient ramparts; he plunged through the thickets and brambles heedlessly, stumbled over refuse heaps, and finally, realizing that he was no longer followed, he sank down and lay there sobbing and panting, surges of pain rising over him. He finally lost consciousness in a kind of stupor. When he stirred himself at last, the shadows of the walls lay over him and halfway down the slope to the meadows; he was cold, sore, thirsty, and filthy. He came to himself slowly, his shocked and battered mind piecing together the cause of his being there. To have been the center and target for the revilings and blows of men—he who had been as withdrawn and secure as a man could be—that mystified him. Also an exhausted peace had hold of him; he was drained of bitterness or vengeance, and had only an acceptance of what he remembered had happened.

He began to wonder dimly what to do, and how to get himself home. It would be long till darkness fell, for the summer twilights were lingering. Anyway, what did he

care who saw him; it was only that he felt raw and naked, and he dreaded the questioning and shoulderings of men.

He heard a plover crying on the meadow, and he could see the people coming and going on East Hill Gate Road and over the meadows and the Lower Mill; a few boats were on the river, the town lads in them beating the water with their staves and splashing one another; their shouts reached Simon's ears from a great distance. When the shadows reach the river, he thought, I will go home.

July 22, Feast of St. Mary Magdalen

RAIN SWEPT UP from the southwest that morning. When he wakened, Simon heard it beating on the tiles and dripping off the shutters, and a wind soughed around the house. His first thought was of the fair, one day old and this the last day, and he felt a fresh sickening at the stench and clamor of it yesterday. Today he would not go.

Slowly he climbed out of bed and went to the press where his clothes hung. He took down an old brown tunic and shook it out. He pulled on his hose and buttoned the tunic with clumsy fingers, for on one thumb there was a festering wound. Margrit would make another poultice for it, he thought, maybe the last it would need. He remembered how the throb of it had wakened him the morning after he had come back from Duck Lane, and he had asked Margrit to bind it up with one of her messes. A bramble or a blow from the hoe must have done the damage. She

hadn't asked, and he hadn't said. She'd grumbled at his torn and filthy surcoat, but had not questioned. The bruises on his face had astonished her more, no doubt, for he was not one to brawl. But they were gone now.

Rinsing his face in the basin, he wiped it on his sleeve and went down. The kitchen was still dim, but he opened the door to let in the dawn light and the morning air. The wind and rain beat from the other side, and he stood looking out at the hives set along the wall between the apple trees; a wren sang out suddenly; the morning was sweet and wet and wild. He laid his head against the doorframe and shut his eyes. What would he make of this day? He would not, he could not, go to the fair, though soon the townsfolk would come trooping out at Botolph's Gate, rain or no rain, along the Roman Road past St. Botolph's, and turn off on Magdalen Road down the hill to the hospital. The last time he had stood so with a blank day before him—it had meant Duck Lane and that sight of Gillian's little face. The pain of that still stung him. Nor could he ever make amends.

If he went away from the fair, where could he go? Through the town on the other side would mean Duck Lane—not there. The London Road would be crowded. He would go the other way, down More-elm Lane and across the fields to the East Mill and over the river, and then out past the gallows and on the road to Ipswich. Out there, they said, before one came to the road to Wivenhoe, there was a hermit. The hermitage was on a hillside, where there was a tumble of rocks and a big pine. He knew that much from what Derek had said one day, in the Falcon. At

least it would be a place to go, a spot to head for, a direction to set his feet.

He turned back into the kitchen. A bottle of mead stood on the table, and a loaf of brown bread. He ate and drank, and then sliced bread and bacon for his wallet. The gusts of rain beat less fitfully against the house now, and he was anxious to be gone. Fastening his belt and pulling his capuchon over his head, he went out into the weather, the door swinging to behind him. He went up the path and into the lane; the gate closed behind him with a little click.

About midmorning the sky broke up; in ridges and humps the clouds hurried off eastward before a brisk wind; the sunlight fell in shafts over the hills and then came out fully except where the black cloud shadows sailed slowly over field and woodland. By noon Simon sank in the grass by the roadside and took out his wallet; he felt hungry and weary. When he had eaten he rolled over and looked about him. There was an immense silence over everything, and he lay in a sort of hollow in the land, before the muddy track went over a little rise and skirted the beech woods. There was red clover all about him, sweet-smelling and bee-swarming, and by a stone a slender plant with sturdy blue flowers, succory; he had seen it many times, yet his eye fastened on it now and his mind circled around a memory and finally came to rest on that other blue flower, sewn on the man's tunic: blue and round like this one, but cupped like a buttercup, blue-veined gold in the center, with three black stamens tipped with gold. He was amazed at how he remembered it; and he stared now at this flower, wondering dully where the other

flower grew and if he could ever find it, and why a man would ever travel anyway except on pilgrimage to save his soul, or if one were driven to it by poverty or sin, or by some desperate quest.

He watched a hawk coasting around and around far up, and wondered if it spied him with its sharp eyes, an unaccustomed lump here by the roadside. A cricket clambered through the grass near his hand. Bird and bug and man, he thought. Peace and naught else. What if I should come to that, like the hermit. Then he roused himself and stood up; around the curve of the woods and up on the hill, beyond which lay the forest of Wivenhoe, there was the hermit, or so he believed. He stooped and plucked a flower of succory, thrusting it in his tunic, and then he went on up the road.

When he reached the bend in the road he saw the great pine on the hillside, saplings and jumbled rocks at its foot, and a tiny hut. He stood and watched for a moment; there was no movement about the place except for a thin trail of smoke. What to do next? He had heard it often said that people came to see the hermit. Derek's wife had brought their sick baby here, and afterward it thrived. It was said by some he was a wizard and by others he was holy and by others he was mad. He may be all three, thought Simon, and began to climb the hill. As he came nearer he called out, "Father, Father," and waited; then he called again. This time the skins over the door parted and an old man peered out; when he saw Simon he slowly came forth. He was bent, grizzled, in a ragged brown robe.

"A blessing, Father," called Simon, and the old man

made the sign of the cross in the air before him. Simon drew nearer. Now, he could see the old man's eyes, very black, with red rims, and his toothless mouth.

"What is it ye seek, son?" he asked, looking at Simon with an unchanged face.

"Peace from torment," said Simon.

"What is thy torment?"

Ah, what *was* his torment!

"I am of all men alone, and I have a great emptiness, within me and beneath."

The old man still stood motionless and pondering.

"To be single and alone is good; only so are men not trapped into sin."

"Is that God's will?"

"Yea."

There was a silence between them. Then Simon with that ache in his breast said, "What of the emptiness?"

"Fill thyself with God."

"How can I? How can I?"

"Forswear thy fellowman, stamp out Adam. Leave the foul world."

Simon stared at him, the crumpled face, the sharp eyes.

"Father, is there no other purpose, no comfort?"

"None."

Simon slowly shook his head; he felt rising in him a tide of refusal; the words No, no, no! surged up in him, but he throttled them at the sight of that pitiable face, those tattered shoulders. Then he turned and plunged down the hillside, fleeing as he had fled Duck Lane, and he ran until he was around the curve of the road again. Then he slowed,

panting. When he passed his former resting place he saw the succory, blue and sturdy, by the stone, and he looked at the flower in his tunic: it was limp and gray, all color drained from it.

August 24

SIMON HAD TAKEN A DAY from the shop to bring in the hay from the lower meadow; with Piers he had worked long in the sun. Far off he could see the Bishop's Fields of wheat, bright orange and a dull gold where great cloud shadows drifted over them; another day or two and they would be laid low and gathered in, the great stooks standing in rows. It would be a good harvest. Now he went to the well and splashed water over his face and arms, and then flung himself down by the shrunken duck pond. The wych-elm leaves hung dusty and still. The ricks that had been empty were full now, by the cowshed, and Piers clambered about pitching the last sheaves in. The shadows lay long across the grass and the cropping sheep. It was cooler, but the air was pent. A haze of midges danced before his eyes, and he brushed them away. Margrit tossed a basin of water out the buttery door; it fell in a silvery shower. Near at hand and clear in the still air, the passing bell began to toll at St. Botolph's. Simon listened, and ran over in his mind who was ill or dying in the parish, then he sat up. It rang the three-times-three strokes for a man, and then the heavy, steady toll of years.

"Piers."

OH SEEK

Oh seek - while the hills remain.
God calls, though daylight fails,
the cruel, the pitiful, the proud,
the weak, the brave, the covetous,
the faltering, the wise, the poor,
the kings, the lepers, and the crowd.

Struck through with death, we hold the seed;
life springs, though our pale roots are dry:
though heaven never seemed so high,
God stoops, to touch our need.

And all the ages fall away;
eyes meet, and shoulders touch at last;
Christ waits, and gathers in His day
the present, future, and the past.

J.T.C.