

THE ROYAL ORDER
OF THE LAST COIN

THE ROYAL ORDER
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A Christian historic novel by

Joyce Crawford

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DEDICATION

I give my deepest love and admiration to Mama and Daddy. Daddy taught me how to love God even through the direst of circumstances. Mama taught me devotion to the husband that God saved for her.

My thanks to Grandma for teaching me to sing, and to Grandpa for teaching me faith and love without saying a word.

My admiration to Granny B for her strength, courage, and faith.

Most of all, my love and devotion to my God and His Son for showing all of us what love truly is.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	i
Chapter One	1
Walter de Burton	
Chapter Two	19
My Son, Milton de Burton	
Chapter Three	38
Mother	
Chapter Four	51
Maid Claret	
Chapter 5	69
The Boy Becomes a Man	
Chapter Six	125
My Second Campaign	
Chapter 7	145
A Royal Wedding – A Disappointment	
Chapter 8	159
New Treasures, Hurts, and Triumphs	
Chapter 9	178
New Generations - Sir John de Burton, Knight, The Most Noble Order of the Garter	

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Psalm 19:14

“Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.”

INTRODUCTION

One's family oral history is a wonderful thing until you are the only family member left with sparse details.

August 28, 2002, the day Victor Burton died, I felt as if I lost not only a wonderful daddy, but my entire paternal family. My father's family oral history told me that our ancestry included a Native American line, specifically, that of Black Foot. So far, I have not been able to prove or disprove that claim. The few pictures I have of my grandparents show strong cheek bones, smooth, tan skin, and dark hair with a sprinkle of silver.

In my quest to find answers, I received a surprise. My journey took me to 14th century Medieval England.

This is my story.

So why go to all this trouble, extensive research, and then hours of writing and rewriting? My answer is easy: so that, while they love and idolize my daddy, Victor Burton, my family will see where his courage, strength, and faith come from. It is God's gift handed down to him from as far as Medieval England when William the Conqueror's reign began in the year of 1066.

So, my son, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews, this is your story, too. Store it in your heart right next to your memories of Papa, Big Papa, Uncle Victor, and all my love.

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Westminster Abbey, England, Christmas Day, 1066. Geoffrey de Montbray, Bishop of Coutances and Archbishop Aldred of York jointly conducted the coronation of William the Conqueror, the first Norman monarch of England by right of conquest. Bishop of Coutances delivered the Norman rite in French for the benefit of William the Conqueror, and Archbishop Aldred delivered the Saxon rite in English for the English military and citizens.

William ruled England three months short of twenty-one years and died in battle at the age of fifty-nine. I will spare you the gruesome details. So began the half-century Norman rule in England.

William Rufus, William II, son of William the Conqueror, succeeded his father in 1087 and ruled until his own death at the age of forty-four. A well-placed arrow killed William II in the year 1100.

During the reign of William the Conqueror, Lord William de Burton (c 1040-1100) served under his king and was lord of the manor in Ibstock, County of Stafford. He had three sons, James, Oliver, and Richard de Burton, all knights of the kingdom from 1102-1240.

Our story, *The Royal Order of the Last Coin*, begins in 1306 when Richard's grandson, Walter de Burton, infantryman for King Edward I is knighted.

Joyce Burton Crawford

Chapter One

Walter de Burton

1284 - 1317

London, 23 August 1306. The trial was over. The royal coach traveled in gay procession from Westminster Hall to Tower Square. There, in great fanfare, the royal guard escorted King Edward I of England to his viewing box. The King and his entourage, dressed in their finest, laughed and chatted as if waiting for a royal ball.

From the garrison, I watched as an autumn sun broke over the misty horizon. The thick morning fog rolled over the warm water of the River Thames, bathing London in an eerie grayish-orange light. As I sat astride my horse, watching indistinguishable silhouettes move through the strange light, cold fingers of irrational fear ran down my core. Then, looking south, I heard men shouting as they cracked their whips. Occasionally, a horse whinnied in protest, and chains rattled against a prison wagon as it bumped and sloshed through potholes filled with a soupy mix of animal waste, filthy human waste, and kitchen refuse water. The prison wagon traveled north to the Tower of London.

Now, at the age of twenty-four years and a seasoned member of the militia, I remembered how fourteen years earlier, the Baron of Tutbury conscripted me to serve the king. Since the time of William the Conqueror, this was the agreement between the monarch and a land baron. The baron provided boys, men, and equipment to serve in the

Joyce Crawford

king's militia in exchange for the land. I was just a lad of ten and counted it an honor to serve my king as a squire.

Living on the barony as a tenant farmer, my father, Adam de Burton, loved the land, the feel and smell of the earth, the changing of the seasons, and the riches and satisfaction of hard work to make the land produce. He taught me God's truths evidenced through the earth and God's creatures that inhabited it. At his knee, Father taught me that I must serve our king well. However, he also taught me of God's love and dominion, and although I must be loyal to the monarch, I must first be faithful to God our Father.

Throughout my life as a page and later a squire, I received training in the social graces: art, music, reading, and writing. Like a beggar eating a long-withheld meal, my mind gobbled lessons in reading and writing. I savored the classics like *Beowulf*, Dante's *La Divina Commedia*, and *The Inferno*. Yet, what I really wanted was to read the Holy Scriptures. Thankfully, I received training from the castle chaplain not in reading, however, but in the precepts of the Holy Scriptures, such as "love your neighbor," and I filled my longing with those words. Yet, because we were training to be men of war, our leaders turned a blind eye when members of my company killed, ravaged villages, raped women, and even maimed children, things I could not bring myself to do.

After serving two years as a squire, the king promoted me to the infantry. Through both successful and unsuccessful campaigns, I, Walter de Burton, served my king, Edward of England as a member of the infantry and later the cavalry. However, being young with high ideals of God and country, I had no idea the political justification for being in Scotland.

After years of war between England and Scotland, most of the Scottish leaders had surrendered to the demands of Edward, King of England, Edward Longshanks, "the Hammer of the Scots." The king's

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

demands were few—to recognize himself, Edward as the lord over Britain. Now, Scotland was a part of that realm. Only one Scotsman held out, William Wallace. In Scotland’s battle for independence, Wallace and his tattered rebels defeated the English army in several skirmishes, the most notable, the Battle of Sterling Bridge. King Edward never forgot that humiliation.

Noises in the streets jolted my mind from my memories back to the events of the day and, my stomach felt sour.

On this day, William Wallace, finally captured and convicted as a traitor to the King of Britain, would meet his fate.

Citizens of London milled about in the garbage-strewn streets, trying to avoid stepping on mushy piles of rotting potatoes and boiled cabbage tossed in the gutter, dinner leftover from the night before. Minstrels walked the streets playing their lyres, entertaining the citizens with their gay music and tales. Dirty, shabbily dressed beggars picked pockets or begged for coins while gaily attired merchants set up their booths to sell their wares, then mingled in the crowd, enticing the bystanders to stop and purchase their useless trinkets.

Suddenly, a housemaid threw a tub of refuse from an upper window, nearly missing some of the bystanders. Screams, curses, and ale-laden laughter followed, mingling with happy sounds of children dancing and singing songs about the plague, disease, death, and serious political events of which they knew nothing save the rhythm of the songs. The atmosphere was akin to a festival. That was until someone shouted, “Here they come!” Then, it became somber but later in the day returned to its festive nature.

Some distance away, red standards embossed with white crosses adorned the entire perimeter of the king’s royal viewing box. From this vantage point, our much-loved King Edward watched with laughter and boisterous approval when his fife and drum corps marched onto the green. Unlike other special events, the fife and drum corps did not play a gay festive tune but a dirge, and I rode with my regiment.

Joyce Crawford

This day, while I rode with my unit through the streets of London, the foreboding sound of the dirge and the clanging of iron-clad armor brought back to mind those years the militia advanced into settlements of Scotland. From hill and vale, the beauty of Scotland captured my heart, as did the weather-worn and trusting faces of her people.

English troops advanced inland. The panorama of that island country held me in awe, for the white beaches, the blue sky, and blue-green water drew me in, beckoning me to praise our God for His wonderful creation. Further inland, the beauty of the Scottish land stole my breath. Grayish clouds appearing over the blue and purple mountain tops were like magic carpets that I dreamed could have carried me away.

The militia approached the village in an air of superiority. As it did, warm, inviting smoke curled its way into the blue sky, carrying with it the warm aroma of bread freshly baked over an open log fire. Peasant women dressed in plain homespun frocks, drab wool cardigans, and aprons soiled from long hours of work, bent to cut wheat in fields heavy with ripe grain. The women and a few aged men looked up from their labor only to stretch weary muscles and to keep a watchful eye on children. A cool breeze rolled over the fields, creating ripples of gold. Children played happy games, and chased cats, and pet goats and calves. I thought this, surely, could inspire a master of the brush to paint such a treasure. Had I a great hall, indeed, I would be pleased to display this masterpiece in my castle.

As a soldier loyal to the Crown, I dare not show my true heart, a heart of sympathy for these poor people of Scotland. These woeful people watching the display of horse and rider, shining spear and shield, ax, and longbow, had no idea why this army invaded their peaceful rural village or why so many of them would be killed or maimed by the end of the day.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

Seeing the pompous display of our militia, Scottish men dropped their hand tools and ran to the village in a feeble effort to protect their homes and families. Brave yet poorly armed men of Scotland charged up from the high grasses of surrounding fields. This sudden charge of rebels caught the field marshal by surprise, and his steed reared, nearly throwing his rider. Once recovered, Thomas Gwyneth of Wessex gave the order, and the English militia lashed out with flashing cold steel, cutting down Scottish warriors, women, and children. Severed and mangled body parts flew into the blue sky of Scotland, changing the picturesque panorama to one of grizzly death. A severed arm or section of a head hit me in the face more than once. Copious amounts of human tissue obscured my vision while blood burned my throat and tongue; the taste of blood turned my stomach, and I retched. Some villagers screamed in horror, others in pain, still others in burning anger as we advanced, and for what? Besides the satisfaction of retaliation against the Scots for their alliance with France, there truly was little in these hills of Scotland to swell the coffers of our king. But I dare not voice that opinion, for that would be treason and sure death.

I sat astride my horse in shock as my steed whinnied and pranced in confused circles. I was frozen and could not give my horse an order. As I watched the massacre, I heard the voice of God saying, *“Put feet to your prayers of compassion, Walter.”*

Feet to my compassion? What does that mean, Lord?

“If you truly have compassion for these, My children, help them,” God directed.

Help My children. Help My children. Those words echoed in my head. “How can I help them, Lord?” I prayed.

Black smoke from burning thatch stung my eyes and nose. Lethal steel rang as the calvary mounted a barrage upon the poor peasant farmers armed with pitchforks. Amid this chaos, I heard the screams of women and cries of babies, and I knew what I must do.

“Haw! Haw!” I kicked my now startled horse and I shouted, urging him to run. He ran in earnest until he reached a burning cottage where

Joyce Crawford

horrified women tried to shield their children from danger. I pulled the reins to draw him up. In a cloud of dust and stones, I just as quickly jumped from my saddle. In an effort to calm the distraught women, I pulled off my steel helmet and threw it on the ground. “Come! Come!” I shouted and motioned for the peasants to follow me. It was a slow process, because to them, I was the enemy not to be trusted. So without thinking, I grabbed a baby in my arms and dragged the mother by her hand to a haystack protected by a stone wall. There, I pushed the mother down and placed her crying baby into her arms. Then, I went back for another mother. This time, convincing the farmers to trust me was easier, and as I ran to the haystack, they followed.

Feverishly, I asked, “where is the privy and supply cottage?” Not that I had to make use of the privy, but because I could set fire to it without fear of harming anyone.

One young woman understood and pointed the way.

“Thank you, Lord.” Then I turned to the frightened peasants and motioned for them to stay. Hide.

I retrieved my helmet, hoping my comrades would recognize me as an English warrior, and ran to the tool cottage and set it afire. Then, I ran to the privy and threw a lighted torch into the pit. It immediately exploded, drawing attention to my feeble acts of war in the name of my king.

The boisterous crowds that lined London’s streets startled me back to the reality of the day’s events. I had to swallow hard to keep my stomach in its place, for the smells of equine excrement, human sweat, and rotting garbage hung thick in the air. Fear and inner conflict boiled in my gut. The scent of squeaking leather tack and the sound of rattling armor sickened me further. I wanted to turn and run—to run away from the images burning in my mind of the massive loss of innocent Scottish lives, but I was a soldier. I could not run. Besides, I had a twelve-year-old son watching. Milton de Burton, a squire to the king,

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

was eager to earn his battle armor and the approval of our sovereign, and I could not let my son see fear and spiritual conflict on my face. So, I shook my head to clear the memory of the carnage in Scotland and marched on in obedience.

Upon reaching the Tower green, the entire parade stood at attention. The field marshal's steel helmet and face cage flashed in the morning sun. Even his horse wore shining steel armor adorned with colorful plumes signifying his status as a Field Marshal's warhorse. In contrast to the stalwart armor, the blue and red plumes atop the shining cage hung limp and impotent in the still air, thick and heavy with putrid smells and humidity.

Facing the field marshal, fifty spearmen raised their spears in salute. This military unit was the largest of all the militia, the first line of defense, loyal to the king, wore no armor, and was expendable. Behind the spearmen stood the infantry. Unlike the spearmen, the infantry wore some protective armor, albeit minimal. They were masters of their weapons and eager to use them. Some wielded spears or axes, while others mastered the crossbow and longbow. Just as the spearmen did, the infantry troops also stood at attention with their weapons held in salute. Hundreds of spears and axes flashed in the sun, creating an appropriate commencement for a royal celebration. Following the infantry's example, our cavalry unit stood at attention in a show of gallant loyalty. We sat tall and proud on our warhorses in gleaming armor as our mounts festooned in regalia pawed the ground. Despite my moral and spiritual struggle, I, too, held my sword to my armor faceplate in a salute to honor my promised loyalty to our king. Then my eyes cocked toward the sound of laughter and a wagon, and my pride crashed and vanished.

A royal mounted guard guided a prison cart through the streets with only one occupant, William Wallace of Scotland. In stark contrast, the Lord Archbishop of York, William Greenfield, walked in solemn dignity following the prison cart. It was the lord Archbishop who would preside over the public execution.

Joyce Crawford

Starting in the early hours of the morning, Wallace had survived the pain of beatings, burnings with hot irons, and hanging by the neck to near death. Still, when the Archbishop asked for Wallace's confession of treason and loyalty to King Edward, Wallace spat and refused to pay homage to the King of England.

Now, mid-morning, I stood with my company at attention and watched as the prison cart entered the street of London. Heavy chains secured the tortured prisoner to the wooden cart. His entire body was burned, torn, and bloody. His neck, arms, and ankles looked black and angry from fresh rope burns from the rack. Each time the cart thudded over a pothole, a jolt seared through Wallace's already tortured and broken body. The prisoner grimaced silently in pain, yet he did not slump in exhaustion but stood tall in defiance of his torturers. Wallace gathered the last of his waning spirit and glared and spat at the crowd lining the road.

As I watched, I wondered why the people laughed and cheered at Wallace's pain and humiliation? He was a man, just as they, with feelings and family. Was this torture worth his refusal to pay homage to the King of England? I felt his pain but held my tongue for fear of being labeled a traitor myself.

Walking behind the lord Archbishop, Exzachary Gross, a burly, black-hooded executioner, moved his thick arms and legs in a waddling gait. Soot from the dungeon's firepit and dirt floor had blackened his mesomorphic body. Copious amounts of sweat, evidence of hours of inflicting pain and torture, ran over his bulging muscles, drawing black dirt lines and soot over his arms and chest. He was oblivious to these black rivulets of mud that trickled down his thick thighs and legs. Instead, Gross set his eyes ahead to the execution scaffold where he had made ready freshly sharpened blades in various lengths and purposes. The lethal edges of the sharpened blades gleamed in the sun and almost twinkled expectantly.

Today, using his many tools, the royal butcher would demonstrate his skill in the art of torture: disemboweling, drawing, quartering, emasculating, and beheading, not necessarily in that order.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

When the royal carpenters hastily constructed the death platform, they made little effort to create a smooth finished structure. Instead, jagged edges with great thick splinters infested the wooden steps and death bed.

Stone-faced guards marched beside William Wallace up the steep splinter-laden steps without flinching. Wallace, weak from loss of blood, stumbled. His feet gave way, and he fell to his knees, then to his chest. When he tried to get up, sharp pains tore through his chest like shards of hot lead. He fell again. This time, the right side of his head bounced on the next two steps, gouging deep splinters into his swollen temple and forehead, still black and purple from earlier torture. The guards grabbed Wallace's burned arms, squeezing the inflamed flesh; they drug his limp body up the splintered steps. The pain in his chest screamed, but Wallace was silent. Sheets of bloody flesh tore down his torso as thick shards of wood gouged and lodged in the length of his body. Waiting at the top of the steps, the artisan of pain, Exzachary Gross, restrained Wallace to the equally splintered death table using leather thongs. Then, with a thorough and heavy hand, Gross made an exhibition of meticulously inspecting each blade for the right tool of torture. This ritual gave Wallace ample time to look deep into the blue sky and realize that he would enjoy no more days of peace, love, and family in his homeland of Scotland.

After this pre-meditated delay, Gross stepped forward but hesitated again, giving Wallace more time to anticipate and agonize over the slow and excruciating pain. However, Gross's skill and the selected blade would not quickly end Wallace's suffering. Using each of his razor-thin blades, the executioner penetrated the angry, swollen flesh of Wallace's chest just deep enough to draw beads of blood.

Wallace was silent, but his face spoke of his intense pain.

The Lord Archbishop of York, William Greenfield, paused the execution ritual to ask Wallace for his declaration of obedience to King Edward. Still, Wallace would not ask for mercy nor acquiesce to Edward as his sovereign. Unmoved, the Archbishop waved his ring-encrusted hand, signaling the execution to continue.

Joyce Crawford

The royal butcher wielded his tools with skillful hands and made short, halting slices on Wallace's groin. Gross moved his thin blade slowly down the inner muscle of the prisoner's right thigh. Crimson threads seeped from the incision, then gushed from the severed muscles. Unable to maintain his silence, Wallace writhed and cried out in pain.

The artisan of pain paused and held his knife in salute to King Edward. The king laughed his pleasure, nodded his approval, and the torture continued.

Again, Gross slowly punctured the muscle and tendons of Wallace's groin and duplicated the cuts to the left thigh, allowing the razor-sharp blade to slice mere inches from sensitive body parts.

When Wallace lost consciousness from the pain, an assistant threw a bucket of cold water mixed with vinegar on the bloody prisoner, causing the blood-tainted water to flow from the execution platform to the ground. There, Wallace's blood mingled with filth from the open sewers.

After a calculated pause, the executioner chose another blade, equally sharp and lethal. A quick upward slice from the left thigh, which was now a mutilated and gaping wound, gave the revelers a preview of what was to come. The crowd cheered. Another cut, this time upward from the right thigh, stopped just short of Wallace's genitalia. King Edward rose to his feet, wobbled and cheered, carelessly sloshing the contents of his royal goblet.

Another bucket of water, this time poured on the prisoner's face, brought Wallace back to consciousness. For the last time, the Archbishop offered Wallace the opportunity to pay homage to King Edward, receive absolution, and a quick death.

With pain and hate in his eyes, Wallace scowled through his bloody pain at the executioner and the people, then at the king, but still refused to yield.

I watched as Edward drank deeply from his goblet, cheered, and toasted the headsman during the long torturous day. Wallace screamed

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

with each cut that sliced through the Scottish patriot's muscular core, and my king goaded his enemy. However, what I heard was not screams of pain but screams of defiance, refusal to pay homage to the king of England, and a refusal to die. Cuts, blood, then respite. This agenda continued through the course of the day. Wallace's screams of defiance rang in my ear and reverberated through my soul. Was Wallace's devotion to his home country worth this torture? How would I know? I had never been tortured, at least not until now. Yet, my heart and soul felt tortured along with William Wallace. I felt compassion for this man and the people of Scotland, yet I knew I must remain loyal to the English crown.

To further inflict maximum pain, Gross used multiple straight and curved blades, each making their small, potentially lethal cuts to Wallace's gut. With each quickened heartbeat, blood and water spewed from Wallace's body. The crowd cheered, lifting fists into the air when his entrails oozed from his gut and slithered from his body cavity onto the death bed. As his bowels slowly piled onto the executioner's platform, Wallace turned his head to glare at Edward. I turned my head, choking down sour bile.

Before making a final yet not life-ending cut, guards drug Wallace's nearly spent, disemboweled body from the platform. Two teams of eager horses waited, facing opposite directions and prancing at the ground. Exzachary Gross tied ropes around Wallace's burned wrists and ankles and lashed them to the horses' thick leather collars. Then, the executioner made one last slice through the tortured purple flesh of Wallace's genitalia to symbolize England's complete emasculation of Scotland. The king and his subjects cheered. At the king's signal, the sergeant at arms gave the whip to the now terrified horses.

Some onlookers cheered at the gruesome sound of ripping flesh, sinew, and popping bone, while others grimaced through heaving stomachs. King Edward stood in his viewing box, gave one final intoxicated cheer, and toasted his royal headsman.

Joyce Crawford

As the cruel ropes and chains tore apart William Wallace's body, my inner conflict was no less tortured, and my soul was no less torn apart.

While witnessing this execution my mind recalled events that led up to this day, and I felt angst in the pit of my belly. Was not this gruesome punishment sufficient for my own torture?

My mind traveled back to Scotland when England retaliated for the defeat at Stirling Bridge. The ear-piercing noises of battle, screaming horses, the smoke that stung my mouth and nose, the crackling sound of burning thatch houses, and the terrified screams of women and children echoed in my mind. Still, during that campaign, I swung my sword with fury, fueled by orders from the company commander. Destroy. Take no prisoners. In the chaos, I tried to avoid delivering blows to the innocent. I merely set fire to dwellings, but the putrid smell of human flesh burning to a blackened char lingered in my nostrils and seared into my mind. I obeyed orders, even though I did not understand or condone them. How could I, Walter de Burton, a Christian man, a peace-loving man, take the lives of innocent people merely to swallow up their land to increase my beloved king's coffers and thus his realm? Yet, I dared not voice that inner conflict, for I was a warrior and loyal to my king. But what about my loyalty and service to my Heavenly King?

Throughout each battle, I prayed, "Lord God, forgive me."

"I am here, Walter. As I told the Christian Jews in Rome long ago, 'let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be ordained of God. Whoever therefore resists the power, resists the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.' So be strong and of good cheer, my son, for I am with you."

Those words gave me peace and strength, not to kill and destroy but to follow my king's orders as best I could, without violating God's commandments.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

“My sword is yours, my Lord God,” I vowed. “I will keep Your commandments.”

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After the rending of Wallace’s body, Gross beheaded what was left of the distained prisoner. His last service to the king was to transport the tortured carcass sections outside the city gates to hang for several days as a gruesome warning.

Following the execution, the king stood and announced, “My lords and ladies, and fair subjects of the Crown, hear this. Let it be known that England will not tolerate sedition in any form. Remember this well. Now, let us continue to the great hall to celebrate victory over this rebel and enemy of the realm. Everyone is welcome.”

With shining brass trumpets adorned with the King’s coat of arms, the royal trumpeters raised their instruments and announced the king’s departure with a fanfare. Surrounded by a contingency of royal bodyguards and himself on ale-shaken legs, the king stepped from his viewing box. A procession of lords and ladies followed King Edward to St. Thomas Tower, the temporary residence the king had built for himself.

Having returned to the Tower Green to collect the king, the royal coach stood guarded by armed guards dressed in grand parade attire. Seven elegant coaches also waited for his entourage.

Once the king was aboard, the field marshal lifted his ceremonial sword in homage, then gave the order, “Parade, attention. Parade, face right. Parade, march.” The entire company of spearmen, infantry, and cavalry, obeyed and marched in step ahead of the king’s coach.

The caravan of coaches bumped and sloshed their way back through the sewer-like streets of London in an elegant display, making their way to the castle’s great hall. King Edward waved his white silk hanky to his people, acknowledging their cheers, then covered his mouth and

Joyce Crawford

nose against the stench that rose from the muddy animal and human waste that was the road.

Almost immediately, dirty, base commoners dropped their tools and baskets and ran, pushing, and shoving in a loud and raucous throng. The crowd was anxious to partake of the king's feast.

In their cliques, gentry lords and ladies lagged well behind the commoners, loathe to touch the dirty bodies of their fellow villagers for fear that filth would rub off and soil their persons, their delicate silks, and lace.

The militia was last to enter the hall, and when we did, my senses tingled with the plethora of aromas of food, flowers, and herbs. Thick wooden tables laden with rich food seemed to groan under the load. Wide-eyed commoners gawked as steamy aromas rose from massive sides of beef, pork, and venison. The hefty aroma of roasted meats filled the great hall and mingled with the stinging body odor from the crowd. Unfamiliar with social graces, the commoners elbowed each other to the laden tables. Their grimy hands wiped away unrestrained saliva that fell from dirty mouths atop empty bellies. Great hewn bowls of hot buttery golden corn, roasted potatoes, boiled carrots, and cabbage brought a delicious pain to my own cheeks and tongue. Barrels of ale flowed freely while laughter, song, and dance permeated the walls of the great hall.

When everyone had filled their plates and found seats, King Edward stood and motioned for the fanfare, then he spoke. "Friends, we have another cause to celebrate today."

Wide-eyed revelers gasped, and an uneasy silence reverberated throughout the crowd. I, too, gaped in anticipation of more torture and pain.

"Nay. Nay, good people," the king lifted his hand to assure his guests. "This celebration is a happy one to acknowledge our own." Again, the king raised his jewel-bedazzled hand to silence the murmuring crowd. The thick velvet cuff of his burgundy robe fell to the bend of his arm as he continued. "This day, I present to you two of

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

my deserving warriors who have proven themselves worthy in battle. Therefore, Walter de Burton and Marcus Percy, come forward.”

Someone gave me an elbow, and my weary and strained mind, still held captive by scenes of carnage in Scotland, returned to the reality of the day. Mingled fragrances of flowers and herbs, hearty food, and body odor of ale-filled men and women drew me back to the great hall and the calling of my name.

I? Was I to receive the king’s recognition? Suddenly, I felt as if a red-hot sword pierced my heart. My soul sank with the knowledge that I was not worthy. The inner turmoil of killing in service to the king and our Lord God’s compassion for these innocents twisted inside my heart. I choked on my distress. My palms sweated. Then, as if searching for a tangible source of strength, I found the adoring eyes of my twelve-year-old son, Milton, now a squire to our king. It was those eyes that gave me the courage to step forward.

I reflected as my rubbery legs lifted my trembling body; I was but a soldier in the king’s militia, little more than a peasant.

My mind traveled back to 1066 when the Norman, William the Conqueror of France, invaded and defeated England, winning the crown. My fourth-generation grandfather, William de Burton, served the Norman conqueror and received a manor and land at the hand of the new English monarch. A portrait of this stately yet burly Anglo knight, standing in his steel plate and carrying the de Burton coat of arms and a shining sword, still graces the manor’s walls. That same land and estate in Tutbury, Staffordshire, eventually passed down to my father, Sir Richard de Burton, gallant knight, where I grew up.

The flat land-locked count of Staffordshire still beckons to me. Staffordshire, my home, painted brown with ancient soil and rocks, green with lush, thick meadows dotted with British heritage sheep, and sturdy with tall trees filled with their stored knowledge of English history, always filled my soul with the calming sense of God’s peace. Still, with this heritage, strength, and peace, my journey began as a simple standard-bearer for King Edward. I had no land. I had no

manor. I had no title. What I did have was four generations of faith in God.

A silence fell over the crowd as Marcus Percy and I humbly, yet bravely, marched up to face our king while a regal fanfare announced our presence. Milton's eyes, still on me, bespoke of his admiration. So, with feigned courage, I grasped the hilt of my sword to keep it from rattling up the three steps. Once Percy and I stood before our sovereign, Edward took Excalibur from its place of honor, then continued, "Walter de Burton, step forward and kneel."

My heart stuck in my throat and would go neither up nor down, but like a good soldier, I followed orders. Feeling like a hypocrite, I genuflected before my king.

"Walter de Burton, warrior of my British realm, for bravery beyond all others, and in the face of danger in defense of your king, I hereby knight you, Sir Walter de Burton."

As I knelt, I whispered a prayer, "*Lord God, I thank You for Your ever-present strength and wisdom. Now give me Your strength to continue in Your Words. Give me courage, also, to speak words of love to whomever I meet, both friend and foe.*"

Unaware of my proclamation to a greater King, the king of the British realm touched this warrior on each shoulder and said, "Arise, Sir Walter de Burton, knight of the realm."

I rose, bowed my homage, and stepped back, still unsure of my footing.

Then, the king called Percy Marcus to step forward and receive the same honor and award.

The crowd cheered, still raucous but now satiated with copious amounts of wine and good food.

Following the official knighting, the king again called for silence. When the crowd was hushed, the king spoke again. "And to commemorate this day, I bestow upon each of my knights a coin,

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

newly struck in the image of your king. Along with the knighthood and coin, I bequeath to each of these, my knights, a small estate and manor house in a county of their own choosing on the outskirts of London.”

The guests gasped again, this time in joyous surprise. I saw my son staring wide-eyed, and his mouth moved as he whispered in awe, “A *coin*.”

I scanned the crowd and watched as commoners and nobility alike gazed upon the gold coin. Their gazing eyes were not only in celebration of the newly knighted but in envy and greed. My son, too, looked upon the magnificent coin with covetous eyes. All I could think was, how am I going to teach my son to obey the king and still love and obey God? How will I teach him to be a brave warrior but still have honest compassion?

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In the months that followed, Milton frequently begged, “Father, show me the coin,” and I always obliged. But when he took the coin in his hands and stroked the king’s image, I saw an opportunity.

“Milton, my son, I know you love our king, and it is well. However, my son, you must love others.”

“Father, is it wrong to love and obey our king?”

“Nay, son. It is a good thing to honor and obey our sovereign, for it is God who has bestowed upon the king the right to rule the realm. Yet, we must be discerning and wise. Let God lead you, son, and He will lead you well. When you take your place as a knight, be a good and faithful knight. But first, be a good and faithful follower of our God.”

That was the legacy I left to my son: that and the coin.

Chapter Two

My Son, Milton de Burton

1294 - 1356

After I came to terms with obeying our king and being true and faithful to God, both Milton and I counted it an honor to serve Edward, a fearless and honest king, always caring for his people, even as his kingdom grew in different areas and peoples. We had but a year to serve our beloved king, for King Edward died in the year 1307.

I thought it ironic that he had been the son of a weak father, and now himself, the father of a weak and feckless son, Edward II. However, as was my duty, I taught my son to serve our new king—or at least to serve England.

This new morn in 1308, light burst into the spring air with gusto. Milton, now fourteen, was also full of gusto. Today was a special day for him, for my son and I would ride in formation. Even though Milton rode in the rear with the other trainees, including his best friend, Le Roy Purves, I was proud to have him riding in the same militia.

Le Roy was the same years as Milton, although he stood not yet as tall. Le Roy had the ruddy complexion of his father, abundant freckles, and flaming red hair. Large, round-cupped ears flanked the lad's head. "Happy teeth," prominent white teeth with generous spaces, adorned his quick and easy smile; while Lanky arms and legs hung from his body's core, waiting for a spurt of growth to compose a stout, well-formed man. As chucklesome was Le Roy's appearance, his heart and friendship for my son were stout, as was his desire to be a knight.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

On the other hand, Milton was tall like me, and he would reach six feet by his sixteenth year if he continued to grow. His hair was black and wavy and often unruly, following a natural cowlick at the top of his head. Milton's rich brown eyes seemed to burst into a mixture of earthy colors in bright sunlight when the sun reflected the gold flecks hidden among the brown. Milton's lips were thin but stretched into a welcoming smile that revealed his happy nature and offered freely to all he met.

When the early morning call went out for the troops to assemble, young trainees scampered, pushing, shoving, trying to gain an advantage to take their positions. All the while this measured chaos ensued, the field marshal stood astride his prancing warhorse with little emotion. This seasoned leader held his mount steady on the cobblestone parade yard as the white horse strained at the reins, and his muscular neck bowed, eager to march. The well-trained animal's hooves clip-clopped on the stone ground creating their music of eagerness. Then the horse blew dust from his nose in a show of superiority to the other horses but still obeyed his rider's command.

When the units were in place, at last, Field Marshal Alex Baird lifted his sword to his face in a call for attention. His steel blade played with the morning sun's rays and reflected their light. When the blinding beam of sunlight hit my face, I squinted my eyes against the glinting reflection. The field marshal's helmet flashed in the sun, and the red and blue plumes atop his helmet billowed majestically, silently, in the soft spring breeze. Finally, the field marshal commanded, "Company, left face. Company, march."

With so many feet and hooves marching in rhythm in the stone-packed courtyard, dust rose, causing lungs to fight for clean breaths of air. The trainees wanted to cough but would not. As I did when I was a young trainee, they must have thought that it was not becoming of a squire, a knight-in-training. So, they choked back the dry dust that filled their nostrils and marched. Strong lads.

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Joyce Crawford

Milton, Le Roy, and the other young troops rode with stern determination, not knowing our destination and thinking that a battle lay ahead. I longed to comfort my son, but it was not to be, for Milton and I would not ride together until the field marshal called, "Company, ride at will."

From my position in the middle of the knight's brigade, I turned in the saddle and strained to search for Milton. Even though I was unable to spy my son, I felt our spirits mingle as one as we rode. My chest swelled with pride, knowing that Milton watched me and aspired to be a good knight. That was a great responsibility on my shoulders.

"Lord God, help me to train my son in the way that would please You. Give me wisdom to teach him not only military matters but also to love You and to love humanity. God, there is so little of that in this world."

"I am here, Walter. Remember My words I gave to King Solomon: 'Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.'"

"Thank you, Lord God," I whispered.

After a while, I asked my lieutenant for permission to move to the back of the knights' brigade. Being a father himself and a caring man, he winked and gave me leave. I reigned my horse and rode quietly to the back of my brigade, hoping to be within earshot of my son without interrupting their boyish chatter and confidences.

The young squires rode behind the knights, well out of harm's way; and like me, Milton rode more to the front center of the squire brigade. He was making a place for himself among the trainees. With each successive tournament, Milton won every piece of armor except the trousers. He yearned for that steel-plated armor that covered him from his waist to his feet. Milton was proud of each piece of his new steel plates and wore them with dignity. Still, he longed for his trousers that would complete his armor and thus the first step to being a knight.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

Milton's steed, Talisman, stood only twelve hands tall but was muscular and obeyed commands the lad gave with only his knees. Talisman was faithful and true and seemed to have a natural sense to protect my son. For that, I held the young horse in great esteem.

Earlier in the winter months, Milton had told me how he looked forward to the day when he could call Talisman his warhorse. I replied, "Nay, my son. Do not wish your life away nor hurry the passing of time. One day, when God knows you are ready, you and Talisman will both prove yourselves in battle. Then, you can boast and call your steed a destrier."

The brilliant infantry of our battalion marched out of our village while the cavalry rode. Chainmail rattled, equine tack squeaked, and feet pounded the road, providing the townspeople a gallant display of military might.

A glorious morning sun broke over the crest of the hill behind us. I watched in awe as the light slowly moved from the tips of the trees to fully illuminate the bank of trees before us. My soul cried out in silent praise to God as the sun set the tops of pine trees in a blaze of morning wonder.

All troops obeyed orders and marched in silence, except for Le Roy, Milton's friend. I strained my ears to listen to their conversation and chuckled at the young boy's delights.

"Milton, do you know where we ride?"

"Nay, Le Roy," Milton replied with focused eyes facing front.

"I know."

"Shh. We dare not talk while in ranks," Milton replied. But Le Roy would not be denied sharing his exciting news.

"We are going to Cookham."

With the poise of a seasoned knight, my son did not answer but rode with steeled determination.

Joyce Crawford

“Do you know what that means, Milton? Ahead awaits food, wine, women, and song, just like real knights. Truly, our destination will bring us temporal pleasures.” Le Roy puffed up his chest at the thought of being like a real knight.

“Quiet in the ranks!” the lieutenant in charge of the platoon growled.

I muffled my laughter, knowing that Le Roy only parroted words he had heard from older men.

Feeling the sting of the lieutenant’s reprimand, Le Roy was quiet the rest of the march in formation.

Half a league into our march, the field marshal called, “Company, at rest. Company, ride at will.”

The troops separated into small groups and visited as they rode at a leisurely pace. The seasoned knights’ friendly yet inflated bantering and boasting filled the young trainees with excitement and hope. Voices of comrades blended happily with the sound of eager clip-clopping of the warhorses and the squeak of saddle and tack.

Wary and alert eyes peeped through low-growing vegetation as the troops passed by the forest. Then, the king’s deer bounded out of sight. The warmth of the morning sun, dappled shadows, and the happy chirping of songbirds helped create a mellow atmosphere filled with expectancy. This combined orchestra of energy made for a most pleasant journey.

After the parade marshal’s call, Milton needed no further instruction. “Talisman, run. Run horse,” Milton gave his steed the knee and the reigns. “You know where it is I long to go.”

“Milton!” Le Roy shouted to his friend. “Milton, where are you going?” But dust from Milton’s mount billowed, leaving Le Roy in his place in ranks choking on dust. However, with little thought of being left behind, Le Roy turned to his other friends to regale them with his imagined tales of knighthood and maidens.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

Anticipating Milton's coming, I had eased out of my group to give my son access to my side.

As if Talisman understood Milton's desire, the horse exhaled warm dust from his massive black nostrils and galloped, holding nothing back until he came alongside my position. Only then did Talisman bow his neck and prance as if paying homage to my experienced destrier.

"Whoa, there, lad. You take my breath away."

"My apologies, Father. I wanted to speak with you on a matter of grave importance."

"Well, now. What do you want to speak about?"

"Father, I listened as the young squires spoke of the Knights Templar. Some mocked them. Others spoke highly of them. Tell me of the Knights Templar, Father. Are they stout warriors and true to their cause?"

"Aye, lad. They are the best. However, that was more than three hundred years past."

"Where are they now, Father?"

"Anyone who knows the truth of the Templars is not telling. That was a fearful time for those knights and anyone knowing of the Templar's activities."

Golden fingers from the morning sun spread their light through the chilly air illuminating our path. With our backs warm, my son and I rode in silence for a time. The lengthening rays of the sun also warmed our mounts, and the clip-clopping of our horses' hooves created a mesmerizing sound. It was a sound not unlike the beating of a young man's heart when he pondered a mystery.

I watched my son from the corner of my eye and had to cough into my gloved hand to mask my laughter. I could tell Milton was pondering the Knights Templar, their chivalrous and often dangerous deeds, then their disappearance into obscurity.

Finally, Milton confessed, “I wish I could be a Knights Templar, Father.”

“Nay, lad. The Knights Templar has been disbanded and now move in secret.”

My reply caused another pause in our man-to-man conversation. I had never seen Milton so absorbed in a topic before. I noticed that I must tread softly. I wanted to give him truthful answers but not to heighten, then crush the aspirations of a young lad though they are imaginary.

“Why were they disbanded, Father? Why are they now a secret order?”

“They were not in the beginning, my son. It is true that they were well trained and well-appointed, but Templars also took vows of poverty, so they had no wealth of their own. What they did have in abundance was the trust and respect of the people. Those same people admired and appreciated the chivalry and protection the knights provided. Many of the people, common villagers as well as noblemen, gladly gave money and land to help support the Templars.”

“Father, what was the Knights Templar’s mission?”

This question gave me pause, for I had never voiced the answer because of the Knights Templar’s mystique. Even though it happened so long ago, people were still afraid of speaking out in support of the Templars and against the knights’ unfair treatment. Now, however, I must tell my son the truth and, at the same time, protect him from the evil forces of this world that might assault his delicate heart.

“In the beginning, the Order of Solomon’s Temple was a group of poor soldiers of Christ. Later renamed The Knights Templar, they were a Catholic military order charged with protecting Christians on their pilgrimage to the Holy Land.”

Milton’s contemplation shone on his face, and his saddle squeaked as if keeping rhythm with his inner thoughts.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

“I do not understand. Why did Christian pilgrims need protection, Father?”

“The history of Jerusalem is one of centuries of conflict, occupation, and recapture. Do you remember the story of Jesus’s birth and crucifixion?”

“Aye, Father.”

“During that time, the Roman Empire occupied Israel and the Holy City of Jerusalem for nearly 700 years. There was always a Muslim presence in Israel. You may recall that the Muslims sprang from Father Abraham and his wife’s Egyptian maidservant, Hagar. Their son, Ishmael, was Abraham’s and Hagar’s first-born son and heir. Abraham’s wife, Sarah, was barren and resentful of Hagar’s fertility, so, eventually, when Sarah gave birth to a long-promised son, Sarah banished Ishmael and his mother from the land.”

My son’s attention to this history lesson was keen. However, his steed’s leather saddle and tack squeaked as Milton wiggled uncomfortably, so I paused before continuing. “It was Sarah’s disobedience to God and taking her destiny into her own hands that set in place thousands of years of hatred and mistrust between these people. The descendants of Ishmael honored this first son of Abraham as the true heir and later as a prophet. Thus, the conflict between the Jews and the Arabs or Muslims. These two factions fought to protect what they held claim to, and the fight continues.”

“That does not explain why the Knights Templar had to protect the Christians, Father.”

“Well, son, the Muslims in Jerusalem revolted against the Roman Empire and the Catholic Church, and they won control of the land they considered their rightful inheritance. Fear and hatred of anyone who tried to usurp their rule of the Holy Land dominated the government and society. When pilgrims started returning to Jerusalem to the Holy Land, the Muslims feared the beginning of another Roman occupation and fought to protect for what they had longed.

Joyce Crawford

“Bernard of Clairvaux, a Templar himself and Catholic monk, petitioned the King of Spain to commission the Knights Templar to protect Christian pilgrims.”

My son, who always thought through a situation, asked, “Where were the other knights, Father?”

“They rode over the realms of France and Spain. Some Templars were more than warrior knights but monks as well. With faith, training, and motivation, these monks served the orders as spiritual leaders.”

“Did they fight, Father?”

“Indeed, they did. These monk-knights earned the people’s esteem as great spiritual men and protectors of the villagers’ families and as men of great skill in battle. As did all Templars, these monk-knights would rather die in battle than turn back or surrender.”

I glanced into my son’s eyes and saw a twinkle of admiration, pleasurable contemplation, and the desire of a young man eager to emulate great men. So, I further explained the knights’ mission, hoping to give my son true qualities to follow.

“Even the nobility trusted the Knights Templar, and if by chance the noblemen were away from their estates for an extended time, those noblemen entrusted their families and their fortunes to the Order. Thus, some Templar orders became trusted bankers.

“Other Templars served as the treasurers of the Templar order and became experienced and successful in raising money and investing it to fund their Crusades. These treasurers became so successful that the crowned heads of France and Spain petitioned the Templar for loans to finance their kingdoms and wars.”

“So, the Knights Templar were wealthy warriors?”

“Warriors, aye. Wealthy, nay. Each Templar took a vow of poverty. However, the people funded the Templars, and funded them well, so that the order was well equipped.”

“Why did the Templars disband, Father?”

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

“Unfortunately, it is not of their own making. After the King of Spain’s ever-increasing requests for loans from the Templars, the order considered those requests to be bad investments, and refused the king.”

“Did that anger the king, Father?”

“Indeed, it did. In fact, that was the Templar’s downfall. Out of greed, jealousy, hatred, and the desire for greater power, the King of Spain demanded that the Pope arrest the Templars on untrue, vicious, and unspeakably base charges. By means of torturous methods, some Templars confessed, and the Pope convicted those Templars of heresy and the basest relationships between men. After mock trials, the King of Spain viciously killed these Godly knights. Those who escaped went into hiding.”

“How can that be, Father? The Templars are men of God who protected the people.”

“People are not always treated fairly, my son. Hate and greed are ugly adversaries.”

Again, we rode in an extended silence. I stole another look into my son’s eyes and noticed his fallen countenance. This grim history of the Knights Templar was difficult for an adult to comprehend. How much more difficult must it be for a young squire searching for great men for inspiration?

“Lord God, teach my son to be discerning, to trust mankind, but also to be wary of evil.”

“You are doing well, Walter de Burton, My son. Teach your son My words and promises, and it will be well with him. Just remember, I am always with you.”

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Milton was silent, and I could tell he was in serious contemplation. However, my son entreated me after a time, “Father, show me the coin.”

Dispassionately, I reached through my steel plate and into my trousers to retrieve the coin bestowed to me during the ceremony of my knighthood two years ago.

My son took the coin from my gloved hand and turned it over and over in his own. With mesmerizing eyes—eyes shining brighter than the morning sun—Milton watched as the coin sparkled in the now mid-morning light. I could see how my son loved our sovereign as he gazed at the image of our King Edward I. As a young squire, Milton was pleased and honored to serve the king, and he served his monarch well.

When my son returned the coin to me, I surprised him when I replied, “One day, lad, the coin will belong to you.”

Milton, overcome by emotion, could manage only to ask in a gasped surprise, “In truth, Father?”

I chuckled inwardly with pride in my son’s thrill of receiving and my own joy of giving. It was then that I remembered our Lord’s words, recorded by the Apostle Paul in Acts 20:35, “*It is more blessed to give than to receive.*”

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The road we traveled was now hard-packed and dappled in shade from the adjacent forest. Our pace remained easy and slow. However, all members of the parade gleamed with signs of perspiration. The rhythmic clip-clopping of the horses’ hooves was a soft song that nearly hypnotized the young men of the militia. As we traveled closer to Cookham, the air became clean and fresh, unlike the stench of London that burned my nostrils.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

I watched Milton soak in the countryside as a hungry man devours a meal. The trees, dressed in a yellowish green of new growth, seemed to call as we rode. Their song was one of, "*Come hither, lad. Lay your head down in my green grass. Take my daisies in your hand and smell my treasures.*"

Sensing how spring's song beguiled my son, I warned Milton, "Beware, my son. Do not succumb to the spring's wooing, for you must keep your wits about you for what lies in wait in Cookham."

After a short distance, the squire's lieutenant rode up and ordered Milton back to his ranks. Reluctantly, I bid adieu to my son, who then gave Talisman the knee and galloped back to his company.

In short order, the field marshal called, "Parade, resume ranks."

Hundreds of infantry boots marched in synergy with discipline and confidence over the hardpacked dirt. Boots and horses created a rhythmic beat that nearly shook the earth. In harmony, knights and trainees swayed in their saddles, and their freshly oiled equine tack squeaked with the riders' every movement. Chains bounced on armored wagons announcing the advancing militia. Indeed, the sight and sound were impressive.

Coming near the village, the clanging of steel and men's groans wore on the young trainees' nerves. The smell of dust that billowed around hundreds of feet and hooves further created an aura of fear and foreboding.

I turned again to observe Milton. His face held an expression as if he suffered from a burning in his stomach, which only I, as his father, would recognize.

Our company marched closer to Cookham, and Milton's ill expression turned to joy, for there in the courtyard was a grandstand festooned in bright colors and a gay display of standards of all sorts, snapping in the air. Young squires ran in gay abandonment while knights walked and talked with each other, planning strategy. When my son spied a jousting venue and dozens of arenas suitable for swordplay and the like, his face beamed with anticipation.

Joyce Crawford

It was a festival.

In addition to the festive atmosphere, a thick aroma of roast meat and potatoes brought floods of saliva to any man's mouth and rumbling stomach. My heart swelled, for I knew Milton's fear of battle vanished, and his thoughts were of winning his whole armor in competition.

Finally, Milton caught my eye, and I winked. However, being in ranks and under orders to advance with knightly dignity, we had no alternative but to reign in our excitement and follow orders.

"Parade, halt," the field marshal sounded robust, and the lieutenants echoed the command down the columns.

"Parade, at ease."

Again, the lieutenants echoed the order down the lines one by one.

With those words, the field marshal dismounted, handing his mount's reins to his lieutenant, and strode over to the commanders' tent. As the field marshal swaggered, he removed his steel gloves in a display of calm strength. I watched with interest as the commanders from surrounding villages greeted and taunted each other, and it almost looked as if they were engaged in making wagers.

When our field marshal returned, he again mounted his horse and challenged the unit with a stern voice to proceed to the center of the main arena and then stand at attention.

In the arenas, good-natured yet serious hand-to-hand combat, jousting, archery, and of course, an abundance of boasting filled the day. Arrows split through the air and whistled toward their targets. Cheers raised into the air along with the friendly punching of arms. Swords on swords clanged as dust billowed around the swordsmen's feet. Horses galloped, and jousting lances splintered with a loud cracking sound like lightning splitting through a storm. The smell of men's sweat, and horses' manure permeated the spring air. Those earthy smells, the sounds of battle, and the flying standards drew us all into the festive event.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

Milton competed in multiple engagements throughout the day, and my son advanced to the next event with victory, strength, and valor in all competitions. His last competition was four sets of hand-to-hand combat with swords. The competitor he drew by lot was none other than the formidable Chad, Cookham's champion.

Halfway through the set, Chad swung his sword with a champion's fury. Sounds of his steel plate scraped, metal joint against metal joint, as Chad thrust his cold steel blade into Milton's tunic. At the sight of my son's bright red blood oozing and staining the leather shirt his mother had made for him, I stood and gasped in fear at Milton's injury.

With gallantry, Chad stepped back and paused the bout so that Milton could regain his wits. Then the warriors saluted each other. At that moment, Milton caught my eye and winked, and my heart returned to its place in my chest. The competition continued blow for blow. Steel blades rang, and the competitors huffed, grunted, and blew spent breaths with each effort. Adrenaline flowed, as did testosterone. Sweat, mingled with blood, sprayed into the air in all directions around the competitors until Chad lost his balance and fell to the ground, defenseless.

Milton took advantage of his competitor's misfortune and held the tip of his blade at Chad's throat. The moment was tense. Then my son, the victor, lifted his sword in salute for a well-fought fight and reached to Chad, who clasped the extended hand of friendship. I was proud of my son's victory but even more of his gallant sportsmanship.

The day continued, and the cheerful Le Roy won several competitions himself and strutted his victories like a young rooster.

"Thank you, Lord, that no one was severely injured," I whispered my thanks to God for his providence and protection.

Afterward, weary yet elated participants tallied their points and punched each other's arms in congratulations. Everyone was a winner. Then our host invited all competitors and spectators alike into the great hall for a meal of roast mutton, venison, pheasant, potatoes, turnips, and light ale.

Joyce Crawford

A boisterous competition of hearty belches interrupted our eating and laughter as we made friends, and the camaraderie sealed goodwill between the villages.

Once everyone ate their fill, the judges announced the winners of the games. Our company took the most prizes, and Milton won his trousers. It was a perfect day.

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After an exhilarating and exhausting day at tournament, competing, training, eating, and merry making, our unit assembled to journey back to King Edward's castle in London. This march was less formal than the march to tournament, so Milton and I had time to be together and remember the excitement of the day's events.

"Father?"

"Yes, my son?"

Milton did not respond. I could not discern whether my son was ill or just venturing into another man-to-man conversation. These days held many new territories of thought for a young lad.

"Milton, my son, was tournament all that you hoped it might be?"

"Yes, Father," he replied but went no further.

"Did Le Roy's imaginings hold true for him as well?"

"I think not, Father. I think Le Roy was disillusioned with the social events of the day."

"In what way, lad?" I asked, forcing back a chuckle, knowing the answer.

Milton blushed, then cleared his throat before continuing. "On the ride to tournament, Le Roy was excited about wine, women, and temporal pleasures."

There was an uncomfortable pause in the conversation, but after a time, Milton continued. "What are temporal pleasures, Father?"

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

Once again, Milton's comment surprised me, and I caused my horse to misstep. I wiped my mouth with the back of my gloved hand as a delay tactic, searching my mind for the right word to give my growing son the briefest but most truthful answer.

"Well, lad, some men might consider temporal pleasures as something forbidden or unattainable. However, in truth, we have many temporal pleasures all around us."

In my near panic, my ears picked up on the cheerful sound of a songbird.

"Do you hear the songbird calling to his mate? Umm. He is calling to her, telling her it is time for him to, umm, take his bride to his nest where they will enjoy each other's embrace."

"I did not know birds embraced, Father," Milton answered wide-eyed.

"In truth, every living being doth embrace ... in their own way."

"Like you embrace Mother?"

"I doubt that any living being could embrace his mate the way I embrace your mother. That is my greatest temporal pleasure of all."

"When will I find a mate to embrace, Father?"

Our conversation was beginning to get a little intense, so I tried to change the course. However, before I could collect my thoughts and without warning, the tranquility of our journey back to London was interrupted.

I noticed that songbirds and crickets hushed their singing and took wing, giving the hot afternoon a still, eerie quality. Small peering eyes vanished silently, quickly. Then, from the forest cover, a barrage of arrows whistled through the air uncomfortably close to our heads. Many of those arrows lodged in tree trunks on the far side of the road. Then with a blood-curdling battle cry, two hundred warriors with swords drawn crashed their mounts through briars and bush to our left flank. The invading forces did not need to coax their horses into action,

Joyce Crawford

for these warhorses, not shying away from danger, whinnied as if adding their own battle cry.

Each knight and knight-in-training in our company turned in surprise as these mounted warriors crashed through their cover to confront us on the open road. The shock stole the breaths of all in our company. Almost in unison, gasps for air soon energized and revived our nearly paralyzed lungs. As soon as my mind cleared, I drew my sword to answer the presumed threat and quickly turned, hoping to find Milton safe out of harm's way.

"Milton de Burton, draw your sword and fight!" It was Chad of Cookham who delivered the challenge.

Along with Cookham's champion, numerous other new friends from tournament joined in the fray. Swords rang as steel met steel. Chatter, feigned threats, and even cries of pain filled the air.

When I next saw my son, he had raised his sword, and a joyous gleam covered his face. As if a seasoned knight, Milton was quick to evaluate the situation and enjoyed the fake ambush and a continuation of the day's competition and camaraderie. My son's demeanor gave peace to my soul, and as the attack played out, we all enjoyed hearty laughter.

This feigned ambush was the brainchild of the collective commanders from surrounding villages. Commander Urlic Johns, host commander of Cookham's tournament, strode up to Field Marshal Alex Baird and extended a congratulatory hand. "Field Marshal Baird."

"Commander Johns," our field marshal removed his glove and acknowledged Commander Johns' extended hand.

"Sir, I commend you and your troops on their poise and skill in handling this surprise raid. Was this the first tournament for your young squires?"

"Many of them, sir," replied a proud Field Marshal Baird.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

“Well done, sir,” Commander Johns complimented Field Marshal Baird with another hearty handshake, then saluted our troops.

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Today’s tournament is one these young squires will not soon forget. We older knights, too, would long remember but not discuss our embarrassing surprise.

After jolly farewells to all, Field Marshal Baird called, “Parade, attention. Parade, ride at will.”

We rode in an excited hum of conversation, remembering the raid and competition with much laughter and not a little pride.

Then, after the conversation died, Milton turned to me and said, “Father, will you tell me about when you were a lad, and a maiden caught your eye?”

I was stunned, that in all the excitement, my son remembered the thread of our earlier conversation. And yet, I was not surprised, for I was aware that my young son in his early teen years was keen on this topic, so I thought to tread lightly.

“Well, son,” I began with hesitation. “I must have been, oh, about your age, and a young maiden bewitched me.”

Milton’s blushing face betrayed his desire to speak of manly things. He squirmed in his saddle and was quiet as if he were astonished that his old father could know what was on a young man’s mind. I had not considered that my son might be nervous about hearing me speak about meeting maidens.

“This maid was bonnie. She was not as tall as my shoulders and had long brown curls that reached past her tiny waist that was girded with a blue cummerbund. In truth, those curls were the fairest curls my eyes had ever seen.”

“What did you do, Father?”

“I married her, lad,” I roared with laughter. “She is your mother.”

“Oh.” Milton blushed further, hesitating to pry into such personal feelings.

“I am a lucky man,” I replied, looking into the sky as if seeing my beloved’s face in the clouds. “She has been a good wife my life long. Alas, I was only a youth, and never would I have known to woo her, had it not been for Father Benjamin.”

“Father Benjamin?” Again, Milton was shocked. “Father Benjamin must be past thirty years. How would he know what to say to a maiden? He is a priest.”

“Aye. But the good father was not always a priest. We were lads together. When I went into the service of the king and Father Benjamin went into the service for our Lord, the good Father took me into his confidence and secretly read Scripture to me, for he remembered what it was that plagues a young man’s heart.”

“Father, what did Father Benjamin read?”

“The good Father read poems to me from the Scriptures and helped me commit them to memory. He read the Bible to me, and well, we best not speak of those things.”

“Why not, Father?”

“Because, lad, the Church looks down upon anyone other than members of the clergy reading the Scriptures.”

“Pray tell why, Father?” Milton pressed.

“Well, first, lad, most common people cannot read. Second, the Church believes that common people do not know how to interpret the Bible’s words. Many a well-meaning man has found himself with his head cut off because he read the Scriptures to someone in secret.”

“How did you learn to read the Scriptures, Father?”

At that moment, the lieutenant rode past and acknowledged us.

“Hush, lad,” I warned.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

We rode on in silence for a time, and when I perceived it safe, I continued. “Father Benjamin read to me beautiful words found only in the Scriptures.”

“What did he read, Father? Pray, tell me.”

Again, I gazed into the clouds and recited the words I had memorized from the Holy Scriptures:

Behold, you are fair, my love; behold, you are fair; you have doves' eyes within your locks: your hair is as a flock of goats that appear from mount Gilead.

Your teeth are like a flock of sheep that are even shorn, which came up from the washing; whereof every one bear twins, and none is barren among them.

Your lips are like a thread of scarlet, and your speech is comely: your temples are like a piece of a pomegranate within your locks.

Thy neck is like the tower of David built for an armory, whereon there hang a thousand bucklers, all shields of mighty men.

Milton was astounded and asked, “Those words came from the Holy Scriptures? By truth, I have never heard such words.”

“Aye, lad. These and more are words King Solomon shared with his wife, and she with him. They are the most beautiful love letters of all time. I’ll tell you more one day, but not here on the road.”

“I could never say such words to a maid,” Milton whispered in pain.

Milton and I rode on in silence for the next several minutes, but our spirits communed. I wanted to spend time with my son, and he wanted to hear more about wooing a maiden.

Chapter Three

Mother

The late afternoon sun was just at the top of the western tree line and cast a silver glow over the ramparts as our company entered the gates of King Edward's castle in London. When Milton was a small lad, I sensed that that time of day with its long shadows gave my son a melancholy feeling in his heart. I, too, felt a little downhearted and longed for home and my beloved's embrace.

Once the troops had assembled on the parade grounds, Field Marshal Urlic stood emotionless with his sword drawn to his chin. He ceremonially flipped his sword so that it glinted in the dimming sunlight and called, "Parade, dismissed."

With that order, warriors-in-training yelped and galloped their horses toward the stables. We older knights walked together and laughed, remembering the events of the day and what it was like to be young. However, from spearmen to knights, we all had duties to perform. We had to clean our weapons, stow our gear, feed our animals, and report to our lieutenants before leaving the castle. I observed Milton with a father's watchful eye to ensure that he was diligent in his duties, and I was not disappointed. I was so proud of my son. He removed his steed's saddle and tack with a trained hand, then brushed the animal down, talking to the horse as he would a dear friend. My son did not doddle nor engage in idle boasting but finished his duties with expeditious skill.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

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When Milton and I began our journey home, the sun was well past the trees on the western horizon. By the time we rode a league, a cacophony of chirping crickets hiding in the ditch had become deafening. Fireflies blinked through the now darkening trees bordering the road, making the forest appear alive with millions of fairies.

“Father, the sun has journeyed from its position south and now is setting in the middle of the sky.”

“Aye, lad. You are observant. The seasons have changed. As our Lord God designed it, the sun will set further north. Then summer will be upon us. When the sun makes its journey south again, we will enjoy a hearty fall and winter.”

“How is that, Father?”

“It is one of the many miracles of our Lord God, son. God has given us many wonders and signs so that we might know He is Lord. Always remember, lad, that God is in control of all things and is forever trustworthy.”

We passed William Dowman’s manor, and the aromatic smell of wood and leaves burning—remnants from the winter—filled the morning air and beckoned us to stop and stay a while. The spring evening breeze carried the pleasant aroma through the air so that we could almost taste the essence of what was once a winter fire in the fireplace. We did not tarry, for the joys of home called to us.

“Do you smell the wood burning, lad? Does it give you warm feelings and a deep desire to be home?”

“Yes, Father, and the remembrance of Mother tucking me into a soft, warm bed. Home is good.”

Joyce Crawford

“Aye, son. We are blessed of God to have a fine wife and mother who waits for us. Do you remember to thank the Lord our God for these blessings?”

“I never thought of it afore, Father. You always did the praying for us. When I enjoy these things, does not God know that I am grateful?”

“Aye, lad. But just as I love hearing your words of love, the Lord our God yearns to hear us speak our thanks and love to Him. Always be careful, son, to tell our Lord of your thanks.”

We rode on, enjoying the evening for another hour. As we traveled the road home, the night grew upon us, and we rode with no companion save each other. Milton had my complete attention to himself, and we continued the discussion of the love words King Solomon spoke to his wife. This solitude allowed us to speak freely of the Holy Scriptures.

“Father, what did King Solomon mean with his words, ‘Your teeth are like a flock of sheep that are even shorn, which came up from the washing; whereof every one bear twins, and none is barren among them’?”

“In truth, lad, that lord was admiring his wife’s teeth. Her teeth must have been well-matched, white, and none missing.”

“That does not sound like love words.”

I chuckled softly. “Nay, lad. When you consider how even today, men and damsels alike, have poor teeth, some missing, and unpleasant mouth odor, King Solomon’s words were in truth a great compliment.”

When I glanced at Milton, I witnessed my son exhaling his breath into his gloved hand, checking his own mouth odor. I silently chuckled but followed his example.

I was pleased with how King Solomon’s love letters had whetted my son’s appetite for more words of love from the Holy Scriptures.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

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My heart thrilled when our small manor came into view. The crickets sang a welcome to us, and the whippoorwills called their love to each other just as I longed to speak love to my beloved. I mused how happy our home was. When my son and I entered the door, I was not disappointed. My beloved Elizabeth, Milton's mother, sat in her straight back chair before the warm hearth, knitting. A log popped in the fireplace and fell, sending a bright shower of sparks upward into the firebox. I thought the sparks looked like stars that warmed the hearth and filled my heart with joy.

In the small kitchen, roast duck turned on a spit over the fire and sizzled, and a copper pot filled with cabbage and potatoes hung from a blackened hook. The pot of vegetables bubbled and steamed, throwing savory delights into the room with their tantalizing aromas. My heart burst with joy at the scene of the bounty from my own manor stock and vegetable rows that Elizabeth, my love, had prepared. This bounty and my beloved sitting before the warm fireplace promised a hearty meal for two weary men.

I bent to bestow a kiss on Elizabeth's face, and I remembered the words I had committed to memory from the Holy Scriptures. Indeed, Elizabeth was beautiful. Her gray eyes shone with joy like a pair of silver doves, and her hair, brown and curly, glowed with subtle streaks of gold.

Like me, Elizabeth did not come from the aristocracy. Yet, I still considered her a grand lady. She carried herself with confidence that belied her meek heritage and untold farm skills and talents. Her faith in our God surpassed mine, as did her secret prayer life.

Elizabeth, smiling her beguiling smile meant only for me, put her cheek to my hand and returned my affection. We bathed in our love for a moment, then she turned to our son.

"Come here, my son," she called to Milton.

Joyce Crawford

“Good even, Mother.” Milton greeted his mother and bent to kiss her cheek. She cupped his face in her hands and cherished her only son. In return, he breathed in his mother’s essence of pomegranate, and I watched with amusement as the lad’s eyes gave away the secrets he hid in his heart. Milton recoiled when he considered his mother’s hair like a flock of goats, and I covered my mouth to hide my amusement. He’ll learn, I thought to myself.

Once Milton had recovered from this shock of remembering King Solomon’s words of love to his wife, he removed his plates and tunic and knelt by his mother’s side. “Mother, I have wonderful news.”

“Stand tall, my son, so that I might fit your new tunic.” His mother’s fingers, long and delicate, cradled the lad’s chin, bidding him to stand, then Elizabeth fetched a leather garment from her sewing box and held it up to Milton’s growing body.

Elizabeth’s hands were indeed soft and sweet; she was a loving mother, gentle, but firm. She helped our son pull the fragrant leather tunic over his head and shoulders. I watched, proud yet envious—I was not the only one who longed for more of her caress. But this was Milton’s time to be with his mother, so I packed a new bowl of my pipe, retrieved a glowing stick from the fire, and drew in the warm heat. Immediately, the warm tobacco flavor filled my head and provided a further sensation of tranquility.

Elizabeth adjusted the brown tunic to Milton’s shoulders with nimble, loving fingers. I heard her gasp and then commented on how he had grown in two short years. “You are becoming a grand man, Milton. Soon you will be as broad and tall as your father.”

“Mother, I won my trousers today in tournament,” Milton boasted, then waited for his mother’s approval. Elizabeth just hummed her acknowledgement with pins between her scarlet lips and studied the garment.

“Mother, did you hear my words? I won my trousers today in tournament.”

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

His mother looked up from the brown leather, removed the pins from her ruby lips, and her eyes smiled. “I am not surprised, my son. You might not yet be as broad and tall as your father, but you have his talents. One day, you shall take your place as a knight at your father’s side.”

Again, Milton’s eyes shone at her words, and his chest swelled with pride. I watched as the lad touched the smooth leather tunic his mother made for him. He picked a stray thread from the soft brown garment, then slipped the thread into the pocket of his tunic without thinking. “I thank you for the new tunic, Mother. I love you.”

Elizabeth playfully swatted Milton’s behind as she did when he was but a child and replied, “You are welcome, my son, my own beloved. You will always be my baby boy.”

The following day as Elizabeth and I sat quietly, enjoying our coffee, the lad bounded into the room, placed a glancing kiss in the vicinity of his mother’s cheek, and proclaimed, “Father, may I have two goats?”

Without first considering my son’s motives, I replied, “Nay, lad. Remember, you are still in the service of our king. You are not home long enough to care for the beasts.” No sooner had the words left my mouth than I saw Milton’s countenance fall, and only then did I consider why my son asked for two goats. I felt like an oaf.

My obedient son turned to exit the room with a fallen countenance and slumping shoulders. Only yesterday, when he won his trousers, his shoulders were firm and proud. Seeing my son’s disappointment touched my heart, and I quickly offered an alternative. “You can visit Farmer Gregory Smythe’s farm. It is only five leagues from our manor. There, he has sheep and goats. I will go with you and carry Farmer Smythe a pair of pheasants.”

Immediately, the sparkle returned to my son’s eyes, and he again held his shoulders proudly. When I saw how happy this suggestion made my son, my heart leaped in my chest. Now Milton could observe

Joyce Crawford

Farmer Smythe's flock to discover the intrigue that goats held for King Solomon.

After breakfast the next morning, I called Milton, "My son, come. We will take the dogs out to the forest's edge and bag two pheasants for Farmer Smythe, and we will also bag two for your mother."

The morning mist still lay over the glen and twinkled like so many diamonds. As we walked, our quickened, warm breaths swirled into the morning air, still chilled from the night. I thought of how blessed we were. The walk to the forest edge was but a furlong, and the morning was pleasant. The dogs ran in zig-zag patterns with their noses to the ground and bellowed with glee at their freedom. I, too, felt like a pup as the air blew through my own hair. A chill in the air made the brisk walk invigorating, and of course, talking with my son, man to man, was my greatest joy.

"Quiet, lad. I spy a flock of pheasants in the wood."

I reached into my quiver and placed an arrow in my longbow with trained stealth. Milton watched with bated breath as I aimed and let fly. The arrow whistled through the thin morning air and hit its mark. "One for Farmer Smythe. Dog. Fetch. Now, let see if you can bag a bird for your mother."

Although Milton followed my example with perfection, his arrow missed its mark.

"Try again, lad," I encouraged.

With youthful determination, Milton loaded another arrow, aimed with his tongue wagging between his lips, and this time, he brought down a bird. "One for Mother," he said, grinning up at me.

"Good lad." Fueled by my words of praise, Milton loaded again, aimed, and shot. However, it was not a clean kill, and the arrow merely grazed a bird. "Dog," I called for another pup.

Happy to obey, the pup ran to the bird and gingerly picked up the injured bird in his mouth, then ran with bounding ears back to me. "This is your bird, lad. Do you want to render him dead?"

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

This time, Milton was not quite so eager, but still, he grasped the injured bird and broke its neck with one merciful movement.

“Well done, my lad.”

The last bird was mine, and I made a clean shot. Still, I let the dogs retrieve the bird for the joy of watching them run and jockey for position.

“Four fine pheasants in our bag. Now we go.”

With the pups running ahead, barking at everything that caught their eyes, my son and I walked back to our manor as two skilled hunters and best friends. As we walked together, I prayed silently, “Our Lord, God, how pleasant it is to share the day with my son. Grant me, Lord, that this may be one of many mornings hunting with my son.”

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After delivering the pheasants to his mother, Milton and I tied the remaining two pheasants to my saddle, and we loped the five leagues to Gregory Smythe’s farm.

As we traveled, our horses’ hooves clopped over the hardened road in rhythmic harmony, and our eyes feasted on the tall pines and watched how the gentle breeze played in their needles. The trees, young and flexible, swayed in the breeze and offered me the opportunity to teach my son.

I noticed how Milton gazed at the row of Scotch and Australian pines lining the road and said to him, “Lad, take a lesson from the young pine. Be strong yet flexible. Bend under pressure but do not break. There are many a lesson God provides through His creation. Take heed and learn.”

I could see in his eyes that Milton pondered that lesson, and I knew he would have many an opportunity to return to it again and again.

Joyce Crawford

Before we reached the Smythe farm, the songbirds were awake and flitting from branch to branch, searching for breakfast for their fledglings. I felt a glow in my heart, happy to have Milton by my side as my fledgling. “He is a good lad, Lord, and eager to mimic my every way. Help me, Lord God, to be a good example for my son.”

“You are a good father, Walter, My son, for you follow My words I spoke to the Ephesians, ‘And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.’ You show great love and compassion toward your son.”

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Upon passing along Farmer Smythe’s stone fence row, I marveled at how small the farm was. He had little, but he was always happy and willing to share.

Milton also noticed and asked, “Father, what is it that makes Farmer Smythe so happy?”

“It is God’s love, lad. When we know how God loves us and provides, we can be content in whatever befalls us. So, whether we have much or little, we should live each day with a grateful heart.”

Again, I watched as Milton pondered my words and stored them deep within his heart.

At Farmer Smythe’s, his wife was in the yard feeding the fowl. All around her feet crowded yellow hens and fat hens of black and white speckles. There were also multiple fluffy yellow chicks peeping and dancing around about their mothers. The farm boasted a proud rooster and a flock of ducks. It was a happy scene, one which Milton had never experienced.

Mistress Smythe looked up as we rode into the enclosed yard and shaded her eyes before calling, “Sir de Burton and the young squire. Welcome. Do you come to see my husband?”

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

“Aye, me lady, and to bring you these fine fat birds,” I greeted the mistress and handed her the pheasants.

“I thank you, sir. I will call Mr. Smythe.”

“Look, Father, there is Farmer Smythe’s sheep and goats. May I go?”

“Aye, lad. Beware that they don’t eat your shirt,” I laughed.

It did not take long before Milton found out what I meant by my words. Both sheep and goats, but especially the goats, nibbled at my son’s shirt, pulling his shirttail from his britches. The goats also tugged at his sleeves, leaving the lad in a fit of giggles. I laughed heartily as I watched Milton try to defend his garments from the playful goats. I also watched and marveled as Milton fell to the ground amongst the animals. There, he discovered how soft was the goat’s wool and how gentle their nature. My son’s eyes seemed to warm and glow when he whispered to himself, “I now know of what King Solomon spoke when he sayeth his beloved’s hair was as a flock of goats. But will a proper maid take offense if I speak those words to her?”

Farmer Smythe came from the field and stood by my side, enjoying the comedy of Milton and the goats. After a while, Farmer Smythe and I sauntered back to his thatched cottage, where we sat and shared a bowl of his own home-grown tobacco. Soft clouds of smoke drifted into the late morning air, and we, two men of different classes, communed as friends. It was a special day and a special occasion. Gregory Smythe and his wife shared my love of God, and we spoke freely of our faith and God’s providence as found in the Holy Scriptures.

At noontime, Mistress Smythe served freshly baked bread and leek soup. The bread and soup warmed our stomachs as the good company warmed our hearts.

On the ride home, Milton confessed, “Never before, Father, had I such food.”

Joyce Crawford

“Nay, lad. Your mother provides such food every day. But in truth, working and playing in the farm’s fresh air and visiting with good friends does bring on a keen appetite.”

On our journey home, I mused, remembering the camaraderie my son and I enjoyed and how he discovered the lesson of the goats. There were so many things I wanted to share with my son. God gave us His wonders of nature that tell us of God’s providence and love. God has written his love and care in the clouds, on the gentle breeze or strong wind. The flowers turn their heads to the sun as if waiting for God’s kiss, and He does send his kiss in the form of bees.

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From the corner of my eye, I spied a black wad moving just off the road. I stopped my horse to get a closer look and saw that it was two male black snakes writhing together in a battle for a female.

I took the reins of Milton’s horse to stop the animal and said, “Milton, lad. Behold just off the road. Do you see a black wad moving and writhing?”

“Aye, Father. What is it?”

“It is two male black snakes battling for the right to mate with that female yonder. See where she lay?”

Milton watched in amusement and wonder as the snake ball rolled and changed directions before rolling again.

“Watch closely, my son. Do you see two snakes or just one?”

“I am not certain, Father. First methinks I see two, then I see only one. It is hard to tell which is the entangled and which is the entangler. How long will this battle go on, Father?”

“Until one wins. Which snake do you think will win, Milton?”

“The strongest?”

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

“That is a good guess, but not necessarily so. Take a lesson from the snakes, son. Just like the snakes, a lad does not need be the strongest to win. Watch the snakes. The snake that is most flexible and knows his own body, where his tail is at all times, and where his head is, will be the victor.”

“Look, father! The larger snake is retreating. The smaller snake is moving to claim his prize.”

“Aye, lad. The male and female snakes will mate, and their offspring may not be the strongest but the wisest. So, lad, know your own body and your own talents.

When Milton and I returned home and before the lad reported back to his duties at the castle, my son babbled in joy, sharing his day with his mother.

“Mother, as we traveled, Father and I spoke of manly things, and Father shared wise words. I listened and heard the trees and grasses as if they were calling my name. I understood how Farmer Smythe can have so little and yet be so happy.”

However, the lad did not tell his mother of his experience with the goats.

“Ah. Yes, my son, you had a pleasing day with your father?”

“In truth, Mother, and with Farmer Smythe and his wife.”

“You are growing and leaving behind your little boy ways, my son. You speak like a young boy with a man’s heart.” Elizabeth continued, but with a downcast voice, “soon, I judge, you will be a-hunting for a maid, and you will leave your mother.” Elizabeth paused again, and when she continued, her voice was once again teasing, “I think it be time to have another talk with your father.”

Hearing my wife’s words to our son, I chuckled, for Milton was confused with his mother’s words, “a-hunting for a maid.” It was evident that Milton had never thought of “hunting” for a maid. In fact, the lad had never given much thought to a maid. The mere thought of my son being old enough to be thinking of a maid sent chilling shivers

Joyce Crawford

up and down my spine, and the hair on my arms stood on end. But, I was ready for my son's inevitable questions.

“Father, how doth you go about hunting for a maid? What doth one when one catches a maid? Doth the maid fight back like a wild animal needing a cage, or are they like a gentle kitten that rubs against one's body depositing their scent?”

That's when it happened, and I had to fight to control my smiles. With every three words Milton spoke, his voice jumped and squeaked. He shook his head and tried to clear his throat, and to add to his embarrassment, his mother giggled.

“Yes, it is time,” she repeated, her eyes sparkling and feigning interest in her embroidery.

However, there was no time to engage in another man-to-man talk, for Milton had to return to the castle to relieve Le Roy from duty.

Chapter Four

Maid Claret

Leaving the warm embrace of Mother and Father, I traveled the road to the castle. I mulled over and over what had just transpired and the embarrassment of my voice. Le Roy. Le Roy will know why my voice squeaked like a mouse. So, with a small measure of confidence and anticipation, wondering what Le Roy would have to say, I rode on to the castle in a quick step.

Just as I approached the castle entrance, the guards began to raise the bridge.

“Hail! Hail, there!” I shouted as Talisman galloped toward the closing bridge. I dare not be late. “Hold the bridge. Hold the bridge. It is I, Milton de Burton, son of Sir Walter de Burton. I am come for changing of the squires.”

George, the master keeper of the bridge, heard my call and ordered a halt and reverse.

“Ho, there, Master Milton. To what do we owe this pleasure?” George quipped, grinning to expose angry red gums scantily adorned with yellow teeth and brown tobacco juice running unhindered at the corner of his mouth. “Be on your way, young master, in quick time.”

George swatted Talisman’s hindquarter as I passed. My mount tucked his rump in response to the friendly gesture and galloped to the castle’s side entrance. In a cloud of dust, I reigned in Talisman, jumped from the saddle, and handed the reins to Alber, the groomsman.

Joyce Crawford

Alber, an older man of forty years, wore a well-worn leather apron stained with soot from the fire pit where he cast horseshoes. His hair was mostly white with a hint of what must have been once flaming red hair. His eyes squinted from long hours of work lighted only by the fire from his pit. The ties of his apron hung low under his prominent belly, and he limped painfully as his feet moved.

Inside, Le Roy was waiting at the stairs and looked none too friendly. However, when I grabbed his arm and pulled him back inside and into the corner, his demeanor changed from agitated to surprised. In a split second, however, I pulled him away from that corner by his arm, for it was a communal corner and a most unpleasant place. Still panting from my late arrival, I coaxed my surprised friend into a darkened stairway.

Under the stairway, I whispered, "Le Roy, have you ever gone a-hunting for a maid?"

Le Roy's eyes opened wide, making his prominent ears seem small, and he nearly choked on his own saliva. "Hunting?" he puffed. "For a maid? Nay, not I. Why would I want to hunt for a maid?"

Le Roy's reply confused me further. Why did he speak with such glee about wine, women, song, and other temporal pleasures on tournament day?

"Have words ever come from your mouth in a squeak, like a mouse?"

"A squeak? Nay, never," Le Roy squeaked in denial. "Why do you ask silly questions?"

"Mother laughed when words squeaked from my mouth, and she said that it was time to speak with Father about a-hunting for a maid."

"Oh," was the only sound escaping from Le Roy's gaping mouth. But then he caught his breath and replied, "I must go. I must go. See you on the morrow, Milton de Burton."

I followed Le Roy as he hurried back to the foot of the stairs, where he would take his leave. I stood there alone for some time. In

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

the dim light, a combination of fear and curiosity pounded in my chest.

I turned quickly to report to my lieutenant, then it happened. Directly in front of me stood Maid Claret, a ward of the Crown, and her chaperone. Why was Maid Claret here at the back entrance? My heart thrilled. Was she simply practicing her walking upstairs away from the crowd of young ladies? Or could she be searching for me?

Two years earlier, Maid Claret, the king's niece had come to King Edward's court to be trained as a lady. I remember seeing her about the same time that I started my service to the king; I was twelve, and Maid Claret could have been no more than ten. She was petite and a little on the scrawny side. Her hair was the color of fine Claret wine but was twisted in wild curls instead of flowing like that fine beverage. I watched as a group of maidens in training practiced their awkward walks, swaying and stumbling from room to room. It was a comical sight, and I had to cover my face and turn my head. However, at this moment, bumping into Maid Claret, I found most assuredly that she was no longer scrawny but a soft maiden—soft like baby goats.

With that thought, my head swirled, and vapor distorted my vision. I shook my head.

When I fully recovered from this new revelation, I bowed, doffing my cap, and said, hoping my voice would not squeak, "Maid Claret, how nice to bump into you. I mean. How nice to feel ..." No. No. Not that. I tried again. "How nice to see you again."

Her voice was soft and sweet, like the bleating of baby goats ... No! No! I shook that thought from my head. Her voice was charming when she replied, "Master Milton de Burton, how pleasant to see you. Now, I must be away, for I have a sewing lesson with Lady Barrett."

Like a dunce, I watched as Maid Claret and her chaperone swished up the staircase. The maid held her skirt so that her delicate silk-clad feet peeped out from the layers of silk fabric. My mind, still a blur, could think of only one thing: "soft as baby goat's wool." Like a fool,

Joyce Crawford

I stood staring up at the stairs until my lieutenant called me to attention.

“Master de Burton!”

“Yes, sir,” I whirled around and replied with a stunned salute.

“Why do you stand staring to the ceiling?” Then as Maid Claret turned to ascend the second level of stairs, she smiled down at me, and the lieutenant caught a glimpse of the maid.

“Aye, lad,” the lieutenant smiled knowingly, “you have fair taste. Carry on.”

I turned, fighting to catch my balance, and hurried down that long, familiar corridor leading from the great hall to the king’s living quarters. Many times, as our duties allowed, Le Roy and I rambled noisily together down this same corridor. We studied the tapestries of King George slaying a dragon. With keen imaginations, we acted out those scenes, feigning swordplay down the length of the corridor. As boys will do, we tittered at the painting of the Christ Child suckling at the Blessed Mother’s breast.

Candles set upon crystal sconces, bathed the myriad of familiar paintings that adorned the castle hall. But tonight, I hurried down the hallway, oblivious to the beauty of the magnificent paintings that had once held me spellbound. My eyes darted left, then right, as I scurried nervously past adjoining passageways, hoping that no one would stop me. The passage to the king’s bedchamber seemed twice as long as the night before.

When I was safe behind the doors of the king’s suite, I breathed in relief and vowed that I must speak with Father.

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At last, all the castle was at rest, and the suite was quiet. The night seemed two nights long. I had no company save my thoughts, and

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

they were of the love words King Solomon spoke to his wife. As sleep finally clouded my head, visions of baby goats rubbed against and around my legs. Rows of maidens glided through fields of misty heather, and my body quivered. Maid Claret floated to me, and I smelled her fragrance. Her voice sang my name, and my face became like a sheepdog with shining eyes and a drooling pink tongue.

“Squire! Where is my squire? Are you deaf?”

It was morning. I overslept, and the king was awake and roaring for his squire. Sleep and dreams of baby goats vanished all too quickly, leaving me in a stupor. I arose, pulling at my cloak, and stumbled over the trailing ties. With a loud thud, my cold foot smashed into a stool that I had not put away. Seconds before falling to the stone floor, I caught myself on the end of the bed. Now a little more awake and my foot pulsing in pain, I felt like a fool.

Moving outside for my toilet, my eyes still in a dreamy state, I stared at the frozen water in the washbowl. Icy crystals atop the water created mystical and enchanting patterns of white snowflakes. I thought I saw, shining back at me, the outline of a vision—Maid Claret’s face. As I stood in the dim morning haze, my warm breath clouded the air. I played with the chilly air by breathing out warm breaths just to watch how far the swirls would curl, dancing free, then disappearing into thin air. Reluctantly, my fist broke the beautiful snowflake patterns in the washbowl to gain access to the water below. This time, instead of breathing out, I held my breath in anxious anticipation of the chill that was sure to sting my eyes and nose. As expected, the icy water hit my face with a shock, and it cleared my mind of baby goats and Maid Claret. I had work to do.

After my toilette, I fetched and delivered the king’s bed pot. Then, I stepped out of the bedchamber to provide my sire with privacy. In the stillness of the darkened bulkhead, I gave my mind leave to return to Maid Claret. I closed my eyes as if to memorize the sensation of touching her body when I bumped into her. How soft yet small were her breasts on my chest? How fragrant was her rose petal scent that lingered on my tunic? I pulled the fabric of my shirt to my face and

breathed in, savoring her scent, and my mind floated free into the morning. Unrestrained, my mind reached out for Maid Claret, but the vision of this sweet maid drifted into the air and disappeared. How I wanted to caress her, to feel her body against mine again.

“Squire! Squire!?”

That bellow shook the daydream from my mind and on to my duties that lay ahead.

Fortunately, I only had to retrieve the blue hand-painted porcelain bed pot, cover it, and transport it to the cellar. There, the common oafs emptied the pot and raked the result of the royal constitution into the expanding piles of sewage.

When I returned to the king’s bedchamber with a freshly scoured bed pot, I next lay out the royal attire of the day, combed the king’s hair, and attached a thick bear robe about my sire’s shoulders.

After these duties, I stood by the king, ready to answer his every beck and call. The king’s guards had to call my mind back to my duties several times. It was so easy to let my mind drift to sweeter things.

Once in the great hall, I stood at attention next to the steaming breakfast buffet and ventured an opportunity to speak with Geoffrey, the king’s head steward. Geoffrey was four years my senior, and surely, he would know how to go a-hunting for a maid.

I caught his eye and whispered, “Geoffrey, have you ever gone a-hunting for a maid?”

So caught by surprise, Geoffrey let out a loud, muffled spray of laughter and saliva.

“Why do you want to know, squire? Do you have an eye for a maid?” Geoffrey whispered back.

“I am not certain,” I ventured my reply. “If I knew how to go a-hunting for a maid, then I might know if I have an eye for a one.”

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

“You do have a dilemma, squire. How do you feel when you happen upon a maid?”

“For any maid? I have no feeling. However, for a particular maid, I feel like a clumsy sheepdog.”

“Yes, it is time, then, for you to learn the manly skills. But beware, lad, even with great manly skill, a beguiling maid has a way of turning a confident man into a dunce.”

“Will you teach me, Geoffrey?” I pleaded in a whisper.

“Nay, lad. I cannot teach you about maids, for they all are different, and then they change. But I will share with you what I think I know. Meet me in the garden afore the lunch hour.”

We did not have long for a lesson on hunting for a maid, and when the hour ended, I confessed to Geoffrey that I was more confused than before.

“My apologies, lad. I must be on my way. The king’s lunch hour is nigh. Good luck, Milton de Burton.”

I felt low and alone. What was I to do when next I met Maid Claret?

I went about the rest of my duties as someone walking in a dream. It was a long half day.

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Changing of the squires could not come quickly enough for me. I longed for the safety of Mother’s embrace and Father’s wisdom.

Le Roy. Where was Le Roy? Now I know how he felt when I was late relieving him.

Then I had a happy thought. Perhaps Le Roy has new information about hunting for a maid. Now my anticipation peaked, but I still had

Joyce Crawford

to wait. Waiting with only my thoughts was painful. That's when I heard someone approaching, and I swung around with wide eager eyes, expecting to find Le Roy.

“Oh, my. You startled me, Milton de Burton.”

When I recognized that sweetest of voices, my legs melted like hot lard. I lost my balance and fell directly into Maid Claret's arms. My cap fell from my head, and I thought I would throw up.

Reluctantly, I pulled my trembling body away from the softness of her arms and breasts. I stumbled away from her and snatched my cap from the ground, then plopped it on my head. Remembering my etiquette, I just as quickly doffed my cap to the beautiful maid and her chaperone. “Maid Claret. Lady Barrett,” I choked and bowed. “My apologies,” my voice squeaked.

The sweet maid giggled and dropped her blushing eyes.

Is this the way of manly skills when hunting for a maid? I asked, doubting myself.

Just at that moment, Le Roy appeared and stood, staring with his mouth hanging open at the comical appearance of my antics.

“We must be away, Milton de Burton,” Lady Barrett said.

“Perhaps we shall meet on the morrow,” purred Maid Claret.

My melting legs nearly gave way, leaving me feeling like a heap of old clothes, and I stared as she sashayed away with her chaperone. When she turned to smile, the blood left my head and puddled in my maleness so that I thought I might fall to the stone floor.

Le Roy looked incredulous.

The blush deepened, burning my cheeks.

Finally, when I could find my legs and my voice, I squeaked in embarrassment, “I am a-hunting for a maid.”

“Really?” Le Roy smirked. “It looked to me that you were the prey.”

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

“It matters not, for Maid Claret wants to see me again,” I boasted with proud shoulders and eyes.

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Even before the king awoke, I bounded from my warm bed the following day. With a spring in my step, I went out onto the rampart and breathed in deeply to savor the London air, then choked from its burning stench. Gazing into the morning sky, I could see the form of a woman in the clouds. “Maid Claret,” I whispered. “When next shall we meet?”

My duties occupied my mind for the rest of the morning, albeit with reluctance. As we royal courtiers followed the king to the great hall, one of the senior courtiers had to restrain me so that my feet would not dance ahead of the monarch.

Stationed at my post at the breakfast buffet, I whispered to Geoffrey through the side of my mouth, “Geoffrey. I did it.”

However, my joy burst when he responded, “You did what?”

“I went a-hunting for a maid.”

“Did she catch you?” Geoffrey chuckled.

“Yes,” I blurted. “I mean. Yes, I caught her, and she wants us to meet again.”

“Well done, Milton de Burton. But continue to beware, lest your prey becomes the hunter.”

I dismissed Geoffrey’s joke with a nervous laugh. Still, in my solitude, I gave his comment serious thought, but how could I imagine a delicate flower like Maid Claret becoming a stealthful hunter?

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After Le Roy relieved me from my duties in the afternoon, I lingered in the shadows. I watched, thinking my eyes keen like a hunter. I listened with the ears of a fourteen-year-old. I perceived myself as a skillful hunter, except for my racing heart, dry mouth, and sweaty palms. I paced. Watching. Listening. Then, I heard soft footsteps.

Bounding out of the shadows, smiling like a crazed antelope, I stepped right into the path of Lady Barrett. I don't know which of us was the most startled.

"Oh, Lady Barrett, my apologies," I squeaked.

"Milton de Burton. What are you doing in the shadows?"

I doffed my cap, squeezing it in my sweaty palms, and bowed stiffly, blurting out what was in my heart. "I hoped to meet with Maid Claret once again."

"I am sorry, Squire Milton. Maid Claret has taken ill and is recuperating in her room. Perhaps another day." Then Lady Barrett swayed off, trying to stifle her amusement.

Feeling like a downtrodden puppy, I drug my heavy heart to the stables where Talisman waited to take me home.

"Why so glum, Master de Burton?" Alber, the groomsman, asked.

"I had hoped to meet a maid, but she has taken ill."

"You best get used to it, Master de Burton. Young maids are always playing foolish games."

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

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Over the next two years, Le Roy and I vacillated between mature young men and silly boys playing games. Forgetting Father's warning, I shared stories with Le Roy that Father told me about the Knights Templar, and we fancied ourselves stalwart knights. The long corridors of the castle with their tall windows lent themselves as a stage for our theatrics.

Bright sunlight from the eastern arched windows illuminated the hallway, creating measured puddles of light on the black and white marbled floor. Although still untrained, our footwork was in sync as we danced through the patterns of light. We practiced, or rather we played our fencing techniques. Le Roy lunged toward me with his pretend blade, his left arm raised behind him in proper form. Skillfully, I evaded his thrust and countered. We each imagined ourselves to be fearless knights protecting Christian pilgrims as they journeyed to the Holy Land. At intervals, we fancied ourselves to be chivalrous knights, defending the honor of a damsel.

In the courtyard, we continued the pretend fencing. The expansive gardens enabled us to hide and ambush each other or guard and guide a delicate maid from imaginary bands of thieves and criminals. As we lunged and thrust our pretend blades, we became more vocal until a castle guard called to us.

“Hail, good squires, who is it that gives you challenge?”

“Thieves and robbers up to mischief and Muslims attacking Christians in the Holy Land, sir. Will you join us in our crusade?”

“Nay, squire, and I must warn you. There are those hiding in the shadows who would have your head or burn you at the stake. So, take care.”

Le Roy and I bowed in acknowledgment.

“What did he say, Milton? Are we in danger?”

“Nay, friend. At least I don’t think it is a true warning.”

“Then why did he say such words?”

“Father said that in those days, the Knights Templars did have enemies in the Catholic Church who sought to arrest the Templars and execute them.”

“I think I no longer want to play this game. I like my head where it is,” lamented Le Roy.

So, I finally heeded Father’s warning for fear that the Knights Templars and their enemies still existed. I agreed with Le Roy that I liked my head and had no wish to be burned at the stake.

My friend and I abandoned the game of Knights Templar and turned our attention to the young-maidens-in-training who strolled in the rose garden. As the maidens walked, they practiced their curtsies to each other and bystanders. Le Roy giggled, taunting the maidens, while I fixed my gaze on only one maiden, the lovely Claret.

Under cover of a labyrinth of juniper hedges, I covertly studied the beauty and form of the one who captured my heart. However, this covert admiration was futile. Although Father was a king’s knight, I was not of noble rank, and she was a ward of the king. My heart broke under that burden and grief. How could I, not yet a knight, win the hand of this maiden? I must hurry home to speak with Father.

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Father’s advice was wise, although difficult for me to comprehend.

“My son, take heart and follow the Holy Scriptures. God has wise words for us there.”

“What words, Father?” I begged.

“As in the First Book of Timothy from the Apostle Paul, the older, wiser teacher encouraged young Timothy to, ‘Study to show yourself

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

approved unto God, a workman that needs not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”

“Was not Timothy studying to be a priest, Father?”

“Aye, my son. But those words are for anyone striving to obtain a goal. Your goal is to become a knight, is it not?”

“Yes, Father. And to win the hand of a maiden.”

“Then, you must be diligent in training your mind, as well as your body and skills. There is more value to life than simply battle training. There are many other words from the Holy Scripture.”

“More words, Father? Pray, tell me.”

“King Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes, ‘Whatsoever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither you going.’”

“Was this the same King Solomon who wrote love letters to his wife? The same King Solomon who wrote of baby goats?”

“Aye, lad. King Solomon was a man of wisdom from God. As you learn to read from your castle tutor, read and study the books of Ecclesiastes and Proverbs. There you will find wisdom for any situation. Heed the words of Proverbs 18:21. ‘The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.’”

“What do those words mean, Father? I do not understand their riddle.”

“Those words are valuable for all men. Idle talk can help your fellow man or take his life. If you speak ill, then you will reap ill, even death. But, if you speak good, then you will reap good and in abundance. So, my son, study well, train your body and mind, and always be an encouragement to others.”

“I thank you, Father. Will you also teach me how to be a proper lord of a manor?”

“It would be my joy, my son. There is much you will need to know about running a manor. You might not put your hand to a plow, but

you should know how to plow and plant your fields and how to train your servants with kindness and generosity. Methinks you should also speak with your mother, for she has a different perspective of running a manor.”

“Why would I need to know of Mother’s perspective, Father?”

“My son, when you have a wife and manor of your own, you must know what might vex your wife in running your household. You should also be wise in dealing with housemaids and cooks. There is much to know to kindly and successfully run a manor both inside and out.”

“That will take me a lifetime, Father.”

“Aye, lad. And more. Talk to our Lord God always, and He will direct your path. As it says in the Holy Scriptures, ‘Trust in the LORD with all your heart; and lean not unto your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct your paths.’”

“Who said those words, Father?”

“King ...”

I was quick to finish Father’s reply. “King Solomon. Of course.”

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Every day at the castle, I saw Maid Claret and continued to watch her. In my teenage way, I marveled at her pleasing qualities and learned to appreciate her in many ways—ways that had never occurred to me before. She had a pleasant disposition and good humor. She continued to improve her steps so that one could barely detect her feet beneath her gown. When I had an opportunity to steal a glimpse of Maid Claret in the sewing room with the other young ladies, she alone held my attention. I admired her delicate embroidery stitches that painted beautiful pictures. Her stitches, evenly spaced, had no stray threads. When she made delicate tatted lace, the tatting

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

shell flew gracefully in her nimble fingers. She spoke with gentle grace as she shared her lessons in conversation. However, I was still obliged to admire her from afar.

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During my days at home, I enjoyed my time with Father and Mother. There was much to occupy my mind and much still to learn about running a manor.

With a mother's keen eye and compassion, Mother recognized but did not address my mood. Instead, as a mother hen, she gathered her "chick" to her heart and drew from me my secrets.

"My son, I must speak to the peasants about taking better care of our fowl. Will you come with me?"

"Yes, Mother. How are the peasants not caring for the fowl?"

"Oh, they care for the birds well enough, but I wish they used a kinder hand. You see, my son, a kind and gentle hand accomplishes much more than a stern voice ever could. Always speak in a kind voice, my son."

"Yes, mother."

Another time, Mother asked me to take inventory of the larder.

"Milton, my dearest, will you take account of the larder? I must make certain we have enough in supply to feed ourselves and our servants. We must never overlook those in our care."

"Yes, Mother." I paused, then continued. "Where do you get our goods, Mother?"

"Thy father provides, son. He is a wise barterer when it comes time to sell our livestock and harvest. The king also provides military compensation to his knights. Your father is a good steward and provides well for his family and manor workers. When our supplies

Joyce Crawford

run low, I can merely suggest a market day, and together, we go. Your father is a very generous man, one who never insists that I beg, and he never makes me feel guilty. He is a wise and loving husband.”

“He is a wise and loving father, as well,” I beamed.

“Aye, lad. That he is. He is a good example to follow.”

Mother was also a wise and loving wife and mother. I felt better just talking to her. There was much to learn from Mother before I thought further about taking a wife. I was determined to be diligent and learn well. As Father had counseled, I also determined to train my mind and body well to become a trusted knight, a wise lord of a manor, and a loving husband.

One day, some months later, Le Roy came for the daily changing of the squires and relieved me of my duties.

Before I made for home, I ventured another glimpse of Maid Claret in the sewing room. It seemed that my heart pounded faster in my chest as I stole a moment to feast on her every move, her voice, and her hair. Then, I turned to take my leave. As I turned, I was forced to halt my steps before bumping into Maid Claret’s chaperone.

“Mistress Burkett, I beg your pardon,” I whispered, doffing my cap.

“Master de Burton, why do you slink in this part of the castle?”

My face burned hot, and I was certain that Mistress Burkett could see the redness creeping over my face.

“I wanted one last glimpse of Maid Claret before I leave for home,” I confessed in a low voice.

“And does Maid Claret know of your attention?” asked Mistress Burkett with a knowing smile.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

“I fear not,” I replied. “But I am not yet prepared to make my attentions known. I have much to accomplish and learn.”

“Well spoken, Master Milton,” Mistress Burkett said, surprising me with her praise. “Maid Claret, too, has much to learn, but I sense she will welcome your attention.”

My heart soared, and I made my way to the stable, stepping on air.

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“Good even, Alber,” I greeted the stable master.

“Good even, Master de Burton. Time to be going home, is it?”

“Aye, Alber. The thought of home is sweet, but I long to linger at the castle to be near one sweeter.”

“Aye, lad. There comes a time in every young lad’s life when he must make that transition, though it is bittersweet. Best feed Talisman before your trek home.”

“Bittersweet, Alber? How can that be?”

“When a lad finds a mate, no matter how sweet, that lad must leave his mother.”

My mind gasped. I had never considered leaving Mother. “Must I leave my mother, Alber?”

“Aye, lad. For trouble brews deep when there are too many hens in the hen house.”

With heavy feet, I made my way to the barrel of oats in the back of the stable, contemplating Alber’s words. As I dashed the scoop into the bag of oats for Talisman’s feeding, I heard a noise in a darkened corner of the stable.

I saw her claret-colored hair first when she moved into a shaft of soft light. Then I noticed her porcelain skin. She came. She really came to find me. With joy now overflowing, I moved to her, and from

Joyce Crawford

a proper distance, we gazed into each other's eyes. Her gray eyes seemed to engulf my entire being. The sensation was powerful, and my body quivered as I drank in her beauty and naïve sensuality.

“I dare not stay long, Milton. Mistress Burkett thinks I am moving to the library. I wanted to see you again without prying eyes. Alber is ok. We have been friends since I came to the castle.”

“You must not put your reputation in harm's way, Maid Claret. What would your sire, the king, say?”

“He must not know. I heard talk at court that he is searching for a suitor for me. Oh, Milton, would that it were you.”

That declaration rocked me on my heels, for I had no idea of Claret's wishes. To be sure, I was pleased, but at the same time, perplexed. I thought it was the male that would make such a declaration first.

“My dearest, I shall speak with Father. With his knighthood, surely, I would have good standing with the king.”

She gave me her hand from under the delicate lace of her sleeve, and I slowly, gently, and almost worshipfully kissed it. Then with reluctance and a lingering touch of our fingertips, I watched as Maid Claret turned and sashayed away from the stables into the evening light. My heart could have flown home without the aid of my trusty Talisman.

Chapter 5

The Making of a Man

This road home from the castle had always brought me such joy when I was but a lad of eight years. I remembered, albeit faintly now, how Father and I rode together and spoke of the world around us, the Holy Scriptures, his beautiful wife, my mother, and the making of a man. He taught me how to move with stealth, spy on forest animals without frightening them, and then follow their tracks to learn their natural movements. He taught me to listen to songbirds and identify their distinctive morning and evening calls, nests, hunting techniques, and defensive measures. I remembered how I watched as lightning bugs blinked from the forest floor, then swarmed into the treetops. I listened as evening frogs and crickets bested each other, as it were, in a singing and chirping tournament. In years past, I proudly recited to Father the names of trees and their nuts or fruits. The trek home was always pleasant and much too short. Those were magical moments for a young lad with his father.

Tonight, however, although fully opened, my eyes saw no trees. Even though the birds sang their evening songs, I could not hear them. The frogs and crickets were also silent to me. I cared not to name species of animals, nuts, or fruits, and the lightning bugs held no magic for me. Tonight, this road from the castle to our manor seemed longer than I remembered just last night. My longing for Maid Claret consumed my heart and mind. Although I tried to recite what I wanted to ask Father, I could not organize my thoughts into an intelligent conversation.

To my good fortune, Talisman knew the way home without my guiding him. So, I was oblivious when my horse made his way from

Joyce Crawford

the road to our manor grounds. From deep within my warm bowels, a sigh rushed out, creating a cloud of my anxiety into the cool evening air. I knew what I wanted to say when I spoke with Father, but now my thoughts seemed like mud.

In my confused state, I entered our manor and greeted Mother with a kiss as usual. Though I tried to show no concern over what weighed on my mind, I could not convince my wise and understanding mother. Love and concern shown in her eyes as she returned my greeting. Then I saw her cast a questioning glance at Father, and he moved his head surreptitiously to discourage her from intruding. So, in the same loving manner that she cared for me at her knee, she spared me further embarrassment by not asking what was on my heart.

“Come, my son,” Mother beckoned. “Come sit with your father and me and enjoy the warm fire.” She patted the pillow where I had always sat as a child, and I happily, but silently took my place.

For a tortuous moment, we were quiet. It was uncomfortable. Then, Mother broke the tension and spoke, “Walter, my love, how was your day?”

Father spoke, but I did not hear, “My day was well, my dear. I visited Tom, our farm manager, and we created a plan to increase our cattle herd. How was your day, wife?”

“I had a lovely day, too. Margaret, Tom’s wife, and I cleaned out the chicken coop and spread fresh straw for my hens.”

Even though their conversations were forced, they were cheerful as they spoke of pleasant memories.

In contrast, I silently and painfully contemplated my love for Claret and how best to discuss the issue with Father. My thoughts were far from the family scene by the cozy fire.

I sensed Mother and Father looking at me as they exchanged events of the day, but I could not return their gaze. Tongues of fire held my attention. I sat mesmerized. A blue tentacle of fire stretched and arched in a desperate attempt to escape. From the same log, a white flame licked the walls, clawing for position and recognition.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

The competition went on, leaving neither flame free from their prison that was the firebox. How odd it was that these two flames mimicked my thoughts and emotions. Just as the tongues of fire battled in the fireplace, my emotions battled inside me. First, I wanted to cry out my heart ache, but at the same time, I was reluctant to speak and give credence to my turmoil.

“Milton, lad? Milton?”

“Milton, dearest,” Mother crooned. “Your father spoke to you. Would you acknowledge him?”

In my embarrassment, I stammered, “Forgive me, Father.”

“I just asked about your day serving the king. Was it pleasant?” Father inquired.

“Yes. It was a good day, Father.”

“Then what weighs on your mind, son?”

I could not answer, for my mind would not form the words. Instead, I shook my head, stood, and took my leave. However, in my room — that wonderful room where I spent pleasant days as a lad, yet I found no answers. Even my secret place behind the heavy draperies gave me no joy. My secret place was empty—as empty as my heart. There was no peace in my room—no peace from my distress. So, instead of sulking in private, I decided to rejoin the family in the parlor.

There wafted from the spit over the fireplace a pleasant, tantalizing aroma of venison and turnips. When I entered the dining area, Father commented on how delicious smelling was the savory meal Mother had prepared, then bent to kiss her forehead.

“Milton, will you join us for this fine dinner?”

My heavy legs involuntarily dragged my tortured mind and body to my chair at the table to dine with Mother and Father. However, my

Joyce Crawford

anxious heart made my stomach sickened, and I could not eat Mother's delicious dinner.

After the meal, Mother, Father, and I retired to the sitting room. As a family, we always spoke easily on any subject. But, tonight, when I tried to speak with Father, I choked. My dry throat would not release my words, and I coughed, choked, and coughed again.

"Father."

"Yes, lad?"

"I, um ... " I started, then hesitated. Again, I tried. "Father, um ... may I speak with you?"

"Of course, lad. Come. Let's sit by the fire."

"Well, um, Father, may I speak with you in private, man-to-man?"

"Excuse me, Walter, my dearest," Mother said as she rose and brushed out her skirt. "Methinks I have something I must attend to." She kissed me on my head as she left the room, and father touched her hand, feeling the tips of her fingers as she vanished.

I felt as if I had sinned. Was it wrong for me to envy Mother and Father's love for each other? My heart yearned for my own wife who will give me her fingertips, nay, her whole heart.

"Well, now, lad, what is giving you pause?"

"Father, how old were you when you and Mother ..."

"Oh. I perceive you have been a-hunting for a maid, lad."

With great relief, but still startled by Father's insightfulness, I exhaled my long-bated breath.

"How did you fair, my son?" he asked.

After a moment to compose myself, I replied in measured restraint, for I did not want to reveal my true feelings. "Very well, Father."

Father drew two pipes from their place near his chair. He then packed the bowls with sweet tobacco, one more modestly than the other, and handed me the pipe with the more modest bowl. Then,

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

Father reached down to the fire in silence and withdrew a burning twig. He first offered me the lighted stick, and I touched the flame to my bowl of tobacco; it glowed, and I inhaled the warm, sweet smoke. Almost immediately, my burning lungs rebelled, and I coughed and gagged, spewing saliva over my tunic. Then, Father lit his pipe with a skilled hand and exhaled sweet, warm smoke into the air. I felt like an oaf, but still, I took another pull on the pipe. This time, I, too, exhaled warm, pleasant swirls of smoke.

“So, lad, what are your plans?”

I could not contain myself and blurted out the words that I had earlier tried to form.

“Father, she told me the king is searching for a suitor for her. She said, ‘Milton, would that it could be you.’ Is it possible, Father? Could Maid Claret and I wed?”

“Aye. Maid Claret.” Father understood. He paused as if searching for wisdom. “Maid Claret is a ward of the Court, and you are not yet a knight. Do you think she might wait a year or two if we ask the king for her hand?”

All at once, I felt as if a light of hope cracked through my distress, I was overjoyed. Still my heart was like a dark pit. Would Maid Claret wait? And what about me? Could I wait?

Father must have read the conflict of emotions in my face, for he said, “Fret not, my son. I will speak to the king and reveal your intentions. However, there are more things to consider.”

“What things, Father?” I asked in all innocence and ignorance.

“Well, first, where will you live with your bride?”

“Oh.” I sighed. The small light trying to crack through my distress dimmed, and a blue cloud hovered about my head.

“Then, of course, how will you provide for your bride?”

“Oh.” Like the flames in the fireplace, the blue haze of confusion grew denser and spread into my heart.

Joyce Crawford

“But not to worry, lad. First, let us pray to our Lord God. He will guide our steps.”

At that moment, I felt that I did not know how to pray. What would I say? Would our Lord God listen to my babbled prayer?

“What should I say to God, Father?”

“Thou sayeth words to God just as you speak to me. Be honest. Be genuine, and be thankful.”

“Will you stay with me, Father? Then I will try.”

“Of course, my son. Let us in humility kneel before our Lord God.”

I spoke from deep within my soul just as I remembered hearing Father pray, “Father God, accept my thanksgiving for all Your blessings and eternal love. Thank You for Your constant presents and wisdom. Now I beseech You, grant me wisdom and guidance in the things on my heart.”

The tears in my eyes and throat would not allow me to go further, so Father prayed.

“Our Lord, God, hear our prayer and know our hearts. Milton is a young lad, a good lad, filled with lads’ dreams. Grant, we pray, Your wisdom. In Your omnipotence, know our hearts and requests, God, our Father. We ask that You give ear to our prayers according to Your wisdom and will. Give us grace to heed Your wisdom with thankful hearts. Father God, hear our prayers. In the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

Father and I sat in silence for a time, then he said, “Now, my son, methinks it is time for you to speak further to your God.”

“Yes, sir,” I replied with fear and trepidation. Then, I began in a soft voice. “God, You know all things. You are the giver of good gifts. You know that Maid Claret and I wish to wed. Make clear our steps. Amen.”

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

“That was a fine prayer, my son,” Father said, whisking a tear from his cheek.

“Now what do I do, Father?”

“We wait on the Lord God and listen for His answer, lad.”

“How do I know when God gives His answer, Father?”

“You will surely know, my son.”

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As he had promised, Father requested an audience with the king and offered my petition. Being eager to find a suitor for Maid Claret, and knowing me as his squire, the king agreed to the union. However, he first demanded that I serve two years in his cavalry. The king also bequeathed to me a parcel of land near Father’s manor.

“Aye, Sir Walter de Burton. It pleases me to hear of your son’s interest in Maid Claret. I could think of no finer suitor for the maid. However, methinks the lad might need a broader view of the world before he takes on a wife. I have arranged for Sir Mortimer of Kent, Knight Banneret, to take a contingency of knights, knights simple, and squires on a humanitarian mission. Sir Mortimer of Kent is a knight seasoned in battle, but also is a knight valuable to the realm as an administrator. Himself, a baron of the realm, well known in counties of England, is well-equipped to give aid and advice to my barons and earls. It will please me if Master Milton joins this campaign.”

“I thank you, my king,” replied Sir de Burton, bowing his homage.

When Father told me of the king’s demand, I exhaled my bated breath. “Two years is such a long time to wait, Father.”

“Nay, lad. Two years is no more than a blink compared with the rest of your life.”

Joyce Crawford

“What will we do on campaign, Father? What will I learn? Will I have to fight in battle?” My questions filled my heart, but Father answered each one the best he could.

“My son, do not fret so. The king said Sir Mortimer would lead a humanitarian campaign. You will be working to build or rebuild villages, feed the hungry, and give any aid to the king’s subjects as necessary. That will not be so hard to do, will it?”

“I think I would like that, Father. But two years. How can I be away from Maid Claret for so long a time?”

“You will see, son, the time will go quickly because you will be busy. And I am sure Sir Mortimer will be wise and break up the two years into two separate campaigns. That would give you time at home and time to spend with your maid.”

“Thank you, Father. Thank you. You have lifted my spirits. I will tell Maid Claret on the morrow and hope she will agree to wait for me.”

“Don’t you want to talk with your Heavenly Father first, my son?”

“Aye, Father. Will you pray with me?”

“Aye, son. But you no longer need me to help you speak with your God. And, be sure, He already knows what you need to say to Him.”

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I saw Maid Claret every day at the castle. We stole glances, and she blushed. She had agreed to wait for me if it took a lifetime, but still, we had to hide our love until the king announced our betrothal. Even then, we could only share time together and touch each other’s fingertips. To maintain proper social graces and prevent wagging tongues, a chaperone was always with us. I would not take liberties with Maid Claret, for that would displease Father, the king, and our

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

Lord God. So, I put my secret desires away until a more acceptable time.

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Several days later, on the morn, before the king awoke, I escaped to the rampart to talk to God.

“Good morning, Lord God. Thank you for your protection during the night, and for another day. Guide me in the way you want me to go; and in your wisdom, help me make wise decisions.” I stood in quiet contemplation, soaking in the beauty of God’s world, even if it was the stench of London streets. I knew God had more beauty waiting for me in the countryside.

The sun was rising over the tops of trees, and the birds sang. I watched as they flew and hopped from branch to branch, searching for food. My heart recalled words of the Holy Scriptures, “*Behold the birds of the air, for they neither sow, nor do they reap, nor gather into barns: and your heavenly Father feeds them. Are not you of much more value than they?*” The birds’ chirping filled my heart with joy. Were they singing in thanksgiving? Were they singing in praise to God our Father? I decided, yes, and so shall I. A gentle breeze blew over the tops of the trees, ruffling my hair, and I turned my eyes toward Heaven. “Father, God, You know the desire of my heart and my struggles even before I pray. Help me be brave and an obedient worker on this, my first campaign. Protect us from harm, and bring us all home safely. Thank you, Father, God, for hearing my prayer and granting my request. To God be the glory. Amen.”

This time, speaking to my Lord God was easier, and I vowed to continue our times together. I also vowed to introduce my bride to my Lord God, just as Father did for me. With that thought, joy again flooded my entire being.

My musings vanished when I heard King Edward wake from his sleep in his usual boisterous manner. Stepping from the stale and

unpleasant odor that was his bedchamber, the not-so-fresh morning air of the courtyard emanating from the streets of London provided only a modicum of respite. Putrid vapors of his warm breath billowed into the chilled morning air. A sudden northeastern dust devil swept over the rampart, causing the king's nightshirt to cling to his sinewy back and legs, abundant with bodily hair. The wind whipped through the courtyard and played in King Edward's long brown tresses, teasing them with a hint of freedom.

I left my safe place at the rampart and dashed inside to retrieve my sire's robe. When I returned, the king, beginning to chill, beat his arms around his shoulders and chest and bellowed for his Esquire of the Body. Although I did not hold that title, I immediately stepped forward with the thick bear robe draped over my arms. At the king's summons, I bowed my homage, draped the thick robe around my sovereign's shoulders, then waited for another beckon. The king lifted his hand, each finger encrusted with jeweled rings, and I moved to face my sire.

Unfortunately, my cold fingers could not tame the gold braided rope to secure the royal dressing gown. My heart dropped. Then, to my surprise, my lord brushed away my trembling hands and smiled. Pleased with his act of benevolence, the king secured his robe around himself, pulling it closer to savor the weight and warmth of the thick brown fur of the robe's shawl collar.

"Good morrow, squire," the king greeted me, sending me back on my heels. I had no idea that the king knew of my existence. "Was the night well for you?"

"Aye, sire."

With an agile movement for such a large monarch, the king turned abruptly. His bear robe hesitated, then followed obediently as the monarch returned to his bedchamber. There, his dresser awaited with royal apparel fit for the day. The king spun, as he addressed his reluctant ministers, roared, and chattered the whole time the anxious dresser completed his duties.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

When the dresser finally completed the dressing of the boisterous king, the servant breathed a sigh of relief and backed from the room. Then, the king swung again and turned his attention to me, “Squire, your father requested an audience with me to present your petition. Do you know of this?”

“Aye, sire,” I replied, surprised and trembling.

“What is your pleasure, then?”

“I desire with all my heart to wed Maid Claret, sire.”

“Well, then, let it be so. Did your father inform you of my demand of your service?”

“Aye, sire. It will be my pleasure to serve you,” I replied, bowing my homage again.

“Let it be so, then. Bring Maid Claret, and I will make the proclamation. Will you be exchanging vows in the Church before God?”

“Aye, sire.” Although Claret and I had not discussed this matter, I knew it best to say yes to having the wedding in the Church, but I truly wanted Claret and me to say our vows in secret before the Lord our God. “I thank you, my lord,” I said again, bowing my homage before taking my leave. My feet danced on air as I traversed the corridor.

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“Just a blink of a calf’s eye.” Trying his best to encourage me, that’s how Father described my two years of service to the king. In just a blink of a calf’s eye, and Maid Claret and I had much preparation to keep our minds busy.

With her chaperone’s help, Claret made every stitch of her trousseau. In her wedding trunk, a gift from Queen Isabella, Claret lovingly packed delicate linens embroidered with colorful silk threads,

Joyce Crawford

a nightgown, and a dressing gown made of the finest linen, not to be used until our wedding night.

Father instructed me in a man's wedding attire, and Mother lovingly stitched nightshirts and other fine linen underclothes for me. When not riding with the cavalry, I surveyed the grounds around the manor for proper trees and stones for building a house for Claret. Father also engaged peasants to fell trees and turn stones found in the manor forest. In return, Father assigned the peasants tracts of land for their homes. I loved and admired Father for his compassion toward his servants. "Lord, help me to follow Father's example—and You—to be loving and kind.

I watched with keen interest as the peasants wielded their tools with deft precision to complete their tasks, and I peppered them with numerous questions. I had known some of the peasants since I was a boy, and they gladly taught me their skills. Working so closely with the peasants may have been unseemly for true gentlemen, but I knew they would be valuable in years to come.

"Benjamin, show me again, how you sharpen the saw."

"Peter, how deep do you cut the furrows? At what distance do you plant the seeds?"

"Tom, What ails the cow? How will you treat her?"

While the men worked in the forest, the women planted gardens and stocked root cellars with vegetables and fruit. In due season, our manor boasted lush orchards of apples, wild pears, figs, citrus and an assortment of nut trees.

Soon, all would be ready for my bride. Yet, I could not take Maid Claret as my bride until I completed my two years of service. Father comforted me, "Milton, my son, the wait will test your character and sweeten the joy when at last, you can take Claret as your wife.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

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When my service in the cavalry commenced, Father called on Father Benjamin to bless my armor, my steed, and my body. While this was usually reserved for knights, Father Benjamin held the ceremony in secret at Father's manor. With each piece of armor, Father Benjamin read symbolically from the Scriptures The Letter to the Ephesians:

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might.

Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

Wherefore take unto you the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

Next, I donned my steel breastplate and buckled my sword about my body. Then, Father Benjamin read:

Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness.

Father helped me dress in my leggings and secure my trousers, and Father Benjamin read:

And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace.

With tears streaming down his proud face, Father handed me the shield which bore our family crest.

Again, Father Benjamin read:

Joyce Crawford

Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith you shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked.

Father helped me with the last piece of armor, my helmet, as Father Benjamin read:

And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Father Benjamin instructed both Father and me to kneel.

Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints.

Then, Father Benjamin prayed, “Our Gracious God, Father of all creation, we place into Your care this brave soldier, Milton de Burton. Shield him from wickedness. Grant him humility and compassion for all men. Give him the desire to learn all things, most assuredly Your love and mercy.”

Father and I said, “Amen.”

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In the first week of January, following the Feast of the Epiphany, Sir Mortimer of Kent summonsed all knights, knights simple, and squires, to the great hall to prepare for our first campaign. The day was bright yet cold, and the fire in the grand fireplace warmed our bones, as did the hearty meals and generous flagons of ale.

Sir Mortimer mapped out the travels of our brigade and what it was we planned to accomplish.

“Sir knights and squires, our plan is simple. King Edward sent a dispatch to the surrounding counties and their barons inquiring into fiefdoms in need of aid. The barons have agreed to cooperate in this campaign, so there should be no confrontations.”

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

Next, Mortimer turned to Sir Horace Easly and asked, “Good knight, will you explain our supplies and equipment so that our soldiers will be familiar with our tasks?”

“It is my pleasure, sir knight.” Then Sir Easly turned to us, holding our rapt attention, he said, “This week, we shall requisition equipment we might need for this campaign. As Sir Mortimer outlined, we need to be prepared to dig wells, drainage, irrigation, and even privies. The work will be hard but rewarding, for you will be serving your fellow man.”

Upon hearing our agenda, shivers of excitement filled my body, causing the hair on the back of my neck and arms to stand. Never before had I gone on such a mission, let alone carried such supplies and equipment.

On the eighth day before the ides of February, the weather had deteriorated, bringing in freezing rain, gales, and sleet. This treacherous weather prevented us from embarking on our first campaign.

In the great hall fireplace, tongues of flame—yellow, orange, and white—danced. Massive tree trunks on the blackened andirons crackled and fell, sending up galactical sparks into the chimney. Warm ale flowed in abundance, as did laughter and genuine camaraderie. The blowing weather outside and the joyous spirit inside created the perfect atmosphere for charting and planning our campaign.

Sir Easly assigned us tasks of gathering and inventorying equipment, food, medicine, and extra horses.

“Masters Conroy, Edwards, and Foreman,” Sir Easly began, “Each knight will begin the campaign riding his rouncey, and has brought with him an extra mount. Your assignment is to manage the herd of those horses. Round them up to the rear, and give each horse extra rations.”

“Sir?” Master Conroy inquired, “Are not rounceys smaller than coursers and destriers?”

“Aye, Master Conroy. You have a keen mind. Destriers are used in battle. Their training, stout muscles, and stamina are well suited for such engagements. This being a humanitarian campaign, we do not anticipate serious conflict, thus we will need few destriers. Coursers are nimble and swift, perfect for archers in battle or bringing down a deer for the larder. Rounceys can make a long journey with greater ease, thus saving the larger horses for more serious engagements.”

“Milton,” Le Roy whispered, “I desire to ride a destrier. Will you join me? We can steal away when everyone is occupied, and show the beast who is his boss.”

“*Sh sh sh.* Nay, Le Roy. What if we are found out?” I whispered through the side of my lips.

“We will not be found out, if you do not hesitate.”

“Nay. Methinks it is too risky, not to mention against our orders. Besides, the destriers belong to master knights, and I do not care to face off with one of them.”

“Are you afraid, Milton?”

“No, Le Roy, just wise.”

“*Sh sh sh,*” Sir Mortimer warned Le Roy.

Squire Foreman continued asking questions about his task, “Sir? Do we round up stallions and mares?”

“Another fine question, Master Foreman. Yes, we will use both stallions and mares. Mares in heat will be easier to handle and will cause distraction for our enemies who use stallions. Besides, mares have the added benefit of providing milk.”

The young squires grimaced at that thought but noted their tasks.

“Masters Le Roy and de Burton,” Knight Easly spoke startling Le Roy. I felt my friend jump and tense, thinking he had been found out. Then Sir Easly continued, “You are tasked with requisitioning construction timbers, carpentry tools and fasteners, levers and pivots,

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

and various equipment for putting down wells. The storekeeper is waiting for your order.”

Le Roy’s body went limp, and I chuckled at his pain.

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Throughout the great hall, the low voices of young knights simple and squires created a lively yet tranquil scene as we all set about our tasks.

The massive oaken door to the great hall opened, and blustering wind, snow, and ice blew in. As if temporarily submissive, the fire in the enormous fire pit that covered an entire wall, bowed in homage, then flared to dance again.

Whether from curiosity or fatherly protection, Father entered the great hall in the bluster. I had no reason to expect him but, seeing Father enter the great hall dressed in his heavy fur, stomping snow and ice from his boots, gave me a warm feeling in my belly. Le Roy, too, looked up from his work. Fire in the firebox reflected in his eyes, and joy seemed to dance within the reflected flames to see a supporting parent, even if it was not his own.

Again, the heavy door of the great hall flung open, and in a surge of freezing rain and blowing snow, an angry voice thundered, “Who dare requisitioned this equipment in this foul weather?” The storekeeper, familiar to us all since we were small boys, was doing his best to intimidate us, young squires.

“We, sir,” I said snapping to attention, “at the behest of Sir Mortimer of Kent.”

The burly storekeeper squinted, coughed, and grunted, “Aye. Well, here she be. Unload ‘er so I can be on my way.”

Unload? Unload that heavy inventory in this weather? Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Father and Sir Mortimer watching in a coy manner to evaluate my performance.

“Le Roy, don your robe and gloves. We have hearty work to do, my friend,” I barked, trying to sound eager and brave. In truth, I failed at both. Still, with the help of several pairs of my comrades, we got the inventory unloaded from the store keep’s wagons, logged, and re-loaded onto our campaign supply wagons.

“Sir Walter de Burton, what do you think of this weather for a campaign?” Sir Mortimer asked, teasing Father, knowing full well that Father would much prefer having his fledgling safe at home.

“In truth, sir knight, this weather is not fit for man nor beast. But for a well-trained troop of youthful knights keen on proving themselves, this is right fair weather,” Father replied with a quick wink.

“Well said, sir knight,” Sir Mortimer bellowed in laughter. “Did you hear that, lads? This is good weather for a campaign, so look hearty, me lads.”

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The ill weather delayed our departure for another six days. On the seventh, almost as God had ordained it, the weather broke, and the sun shimmered through the silvery fog, promising better weather. We attended church and still prayed for a safe journey and good weather. The next morning, Monday, the ides of February, our brigade of experienced knights, knights simple, and squires, such as myself, stood at attention, waiting for our parade marshal’s command.

Sir Mortimer sat astride his horse, facing the brigade. He snapped his steel sword to his chin and deftly flipped the blade so that a thin shaft of sunlight penetrated the lifting fog. As the beam of light creased my face, I felt a surge of electric excitement course through

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

my veins, as did my steed, but I held my knightly gaze forward. “Easy Talisman. Easy. You will get your chance to prove yourself.”

Sir Mortimer called out, also trying to quell his excitement, “Parade, attention. Parade, turn. Parade, march.”

A gallant parade of knights consisting of thirty master knights, fifteen knights simple, thirty squires, including Le Roy and me, and serfs, experienced and novices alike, marched in step, excited and hopeful.

Seven supply wagons followed, each pulled by a team of six well-matched horses. Two food wagons commanded by Sir Thomas Simms was the lead wagon with twelve serfs close at hand. Acting as company cook, Sir Simms kept a close eye on the serfs, and the food wagons that were generously stocked with food, most of which the knights donated themselves. Masters Conroy and Foreman pulled up the rear of the parade with a herd of ninety stallions and mares.

“Milton de Burton.”

“Sir,” I turned and saluted my superior.

“Master de Burton, did you inventory and organize these food wagons?”

“No, sir,” I replied, standing at attention and saluting in stiff reply.

“Do you know who was responsible?”

“Well, I, er...”

Most of the provisions in the food wagons consisted of significant quantities of beans, potatoes, dried salt pork, but precious little of that, water, and copious amounts of ale, all inventoried and loaded for each day’s use.

“Don’t stammer, lad. Whom shall I commend for a job well done?”

With great relief, I exhaled and replied, “Sir, John Godwin, Ælfric Malvallet, and Burchard Saint-Leger, sir. They are friends of mine and grand workmen.”

Joyce Crawford

“Good lad, Master Milton. I will have a word with these stout men and give my compliments. I shall also give my compliments to Sir Mortimer for your honesty.”

“Thank you, sir,” I breathed and saluted with greater ease.

The third and fourth wagons contained medical provisions for treating the four humours. Physicians identified these four humours as blood, which controlled the heart; phlegm, which controlled issues of the brain; yellow bile governed ailments of the liver; and black bile, the spleen. When these treatments failed, prayer, bloodletting, and compounds to purge the gut were the most effective medicine available. There were also ample quantities of clean bandages and simple splints to treat open wounds or broken bones.

The last three wagons, the utility wagons, carried basic construction and repair equipment. In addition to the hardware we had earlier loaded, Le Roy and I also inventoried and loaded wooden timbers for building structures, levers and winches for lifting, ropes, and an assortment of wheels and cogs for moving stones or other heavy obstacles. Also, on the last wagon, workers loaded food for the animals, equine tack, and liniments.

While Sir Mortimer led the troops, Sir Horace Easily managed the supply wagons, chef mates, and medical corpsmen. This troop was well equipped to lend various types of aid as necessary.

In my quest to learn all I could about the benevolent campaigns of an order of knights, I listened to Sirs Mortimer and Horace as they discussed our travels. I never imagined there was so much involved in advancing a convoy. Will I be ready to assume my own convoy? I needed to learn mapping. There are so many different sections and terrains of England and Britain. Will I be able to stand under the strain? All I could do was to pray, “Lord, God, grant me your wisdom. Search my heart to prove me fit and worthy.”

Once we left the parade grounds of the castle, Sir Mortimer instructed us to ride at ease. Then in a fatherly manner, he spoke to us, training us in the ways, customs, and rules of knighthood.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

“Sir knights and squires,” Sir Mortimer began, “the agenda for our campaign is to explore villages and poor towns and to assess their structural or humanitarian needs. Therefore, because this is a benevolent campaign, we will be in little danger. However, squires, we must always be alert and anticipate any situation. Be vigilant and learn from the knights.”

As Mortimer spoke, I thought of home. Mother, Father, and Claret would be thankful that we will be in little danger. I, too, gave praise to our Lord God for His providence.

We rode for four days and three nights. The ride and work were not difficult but being so far away from Maid Claret was unbearable. At night, I listened to the other soldiers speak of their wives and families, and my heart yearned for Claret. Sleep came, but at times, it was fitful, and the following day my mind and body refused to move. Other nights were pleasurable, for I dreamed of Claret. In my dreams, I reached out to touch her hair and breathed in her scent. When I stroked her curls, visions of baby goats leaped over rocks and appeared to leap in slow motion through the air. I ran my hand over the soft contour of her back and found buttons halting my exploration. When my dreams did yield a touch of her flesh through the delicate fabric of her blouse, my body quivered, rendering me helpless. When I woke, my bedclothes were in disarray. On those occasions, I said nothing to my fellow troopers for fear that I had done the unspeakable.

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The next morning, we resumed our march until sometime in the middle of the day, Sir Mortimer called, “Parade, halt. Parade, at ease.”

Unfamiliar with strenuous marching, we, squires and some knights simple, breathed a collective sigh of relief for a welcome rest.

Then Sir Mortimer addressed the parade, “Troops, with fully loaded wagons, our unit has marched only sixty furlongs. Therefore, I

Joyce Crawford

propose that the wagons lag behind. The leaders know the route. Then, the military units can continue marching and can easily cover two hundred furlongs a day, even with loaded packs.”

Since we had no prescribed agenda, we traveled at that comfortable pace until we came upon any village that would benefit from our assistance.

We had been traveling northeast from London toward the east coast, and arrived at Nor, a hovel of rural land and cottages on the western outskirts of Norwiche near the River Wensum.

“Parade, halt. Parade, stand at ease,” Sir Mortimer called. Then he and Sir Easley sauntered into the village and asked for directions from the village elders.

“Le Roy,” I whispered, “let us watch Sir Mortimer. Methinks we can learn much from his skill and bravery.”

But Le Roy argued, “What for do I need to watch sauntering and strutting?”

“So that, my friend, one day we might lead a company of knights as well as does Sir Mortimer.”

After talking to the elders and assessing the needs of the residents, we began unloading and organizing equipment and human labor. Sir Easley began assigning tasks, and I found ample opportunities to advance my skills and influence.

Mortimer addressed his fellow officer, “Easley,” what do you make of this village?”

Sir Easley surveyed the pitiful village and then replied, “Sir knight, it appears that for some unfortunate reason, this tiny rural community was built outside the larger city’s walls, making it unable to prosper. Further, what remains of its wall is now in disrepair, putting the villagers in grave danger of assault from any opportunists.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

Le Roy's eyes flashed as he surveyed the squalor and inhabitants of this small village. He nearly fell from his horse when he realized how much work we had to do.

"Milton, in truth, I have never seen such a poor village as this. Suppose how it came to be in such ill repair?"

"I know not, Le Roy. I can only tell you what I learned from my history tutor. More than a century ago, Jews seeking asylum from persecution in their homeland, immigrated to the town now known as Norwiche, located in this northeastern region of England. Because these Jewish refugees continued to face hatred and prejudice even in their new land, they still lived in fear. As was recorded, a band of residents falsely accused a few Jewish men of base actions against a young boy. Those Jews were murdered, and other Jewish immigrants fled in fear and were not allowed back inside the town gates. Thus, these immigrants founded the community of Nor."

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Le Roy and I watched as Sir Mortimer spoke with the village elders to learn how many people lived in the village, what need was greatest, and if the villagers would welcome the assistance we offered. I watched with great intent but Le Roy with lesser interest.

At first, the villagers were apprehensive, even frightened. But with Sir Mortimer's gentle manner, the village elders soon agreed to allow our unit to help repair their wall.

Then, Sir Mortimer returned and addressed me, "Milton de Burton."

"Sir." With a snapped salute, I acknowledged Sir Mortimer's beckon.

"Master Milton, gather villagers together to dig up rocks from yonder field and move those same rocks to the tattered wall."

Joyce Crawford

“Yes, sir,” I replied with a snappy salute. Then, with purpose, I turned Talisman and urged my steed forward, eager to exhibit my organizational skills.

Evaluating the villagers, I looked for men with hardy arms and legs. Digging rocks from the fields would not be an easy job and would require strong backs.

“My good sir,” I addressed a sturdy middle-aged man. “What is your name, sir?”

The man bowed his head and with his hat in his worn hands and with downcast eyes, replied, “Thy servant, Eli, my lord.”

“Eli, would you like to work with me digging rocks in this field?”

“If I may be of service, sire.”

“Very well,” I praised my new assistant, then described the task at hand. “Now will you introduce me to other hardy men?”

With each man he introduced, Eli became more secure, even bold.

Led by Eli, the village men quickly comprehended my instructions and chose levers and ropes from the utility wagon. With jovial talk and laughter in a language unknown to me, we set to digging and loading rocks and boulders onto the villager’s carts and wagons.

Sir Mortimer rode by with keen eyes on the work at hand. “Well done, Milton de Burton. You chose well. Continue on.”

My heart swelled with pride, and I saluted Sir Mortimer in acknowledgment and appreciation of his praise. “These are fine, sturdy men and hard workers, Sir Mortimer.” With this bit of praise, the small band of villagers and I worked all the harder and with happy hearts.

By the end of March, my stout band of rock excavators had turned half a field to reveal at least a long ton of boulders, enough to begin building the wall. Along with the Jewish settlers and others in my

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

brigade, we would continue working through April and into the spring.

In the meantime, other brigade friends had the unenviable task of herding children to collect straw. While adults and teenagers dug the earth and toted both earth and stones back to the site where they would make bricks, children ran and giggled, collecting straw. Their happy, playful sounds camouflaged the work they did of fetching numerous pails of water from a nearby stream. No one seemed to mind that the children's buckets were only half full of water by the time they arrived at our workplace.

In mid-June, I reported to Sir Mortimer that we had moved and chipped the edges of thirty long tons of boulders and stockpiled copious amounts of earth and straw.

“Well done, Master Milton. Your efforts have not gone unnoticed.”

Sir Mortimer rewarded the workers with a well-deserved weekend of uninterrupted rest and relaxation and plenteous meals of beans and potatoes. However, the Jewish immigrants declined ale.

After a hearty meal, the immigrants danced and sang. Never had I heard such different rhythms of music and dance. As they celebrated, the immigrants evoked one name I did recognize, that was the name of Yehowah. But understanding little else, I ventured to ask Eli, “What is the meaning of the words your people sing?”

He replied, “These words are from the ninety-first Psalm of David.

“Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High

will rest in the shadow of the Almighty

I will say of the Lord, “He is my refuge and my fortress,

my God, in whom I trust.”

Joyce Crawford

*Surely he will save you
from the fowler's snare
and from the deadly pestilence.
He will cover you with his feathers,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.
You will not fear the terror of night,
nor the arrow that flies by day,
nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness,
nor the plague that destroys at midday.
A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.
You will only observe with your eyes
and see the punishment of the wicked.*

*If you say, "The Lord is my refuge,"
and you make the Most High your dwelling,
no harm will overtake you,
no disaster will come near your tent.
For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways;
they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.
You will tread on the lion and the cobra;
you will trample the great lion and the serpent.*

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

*“Because he[b] loves me,” says the Lord, “I will rescue him;
I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name.
He will call on me, and I will answer him;
I will be with him in trouble,
I will deliver him and honor him.
With long life I will satisfy him
and show him my salvation.”*

When Eli finished sharing the words with me, I could not help but say with profound humility, “They are beautiful words.”

“Yes, beautiful words, and true, for they are the words of the God of our Father Abraham.”

This gentle refugee and I sat for a time by the fire, silently sharing the truth and love of God.

Over the following days, I sat with Eli and his people, listening as they prayed. Enthralled, I made a mental note of the order in which they talked to God. First, they offered prayers of thanksgiving, then praise. Next, they prayed prayers of intercession and supplication. Finally, they offered more prayers of praise. I thought these prayers were most beautiful and vowed to follow these Jewish settlers’ examples, along with Father’s.

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After the rest, and with everyone’s body and spirit refreshed, we started on the next phase of the wall.

Eli and his crew moved the boulders again. This time to create the foundation of the wall. Others stacked rocks of varying sizes and shapes. Then, John Godwin, Ælfric Malvallet, and Burchard Saint-

Joyce Crawford

Leger guided the settlers in the proper mixture of earth, straw, and water, to make mortar for the rocks.

Wet children, drawn to the mud mixture, flung copious amounts of mud at each other. However, to their credit, the children did help pack mud into spaces between the boulders.

“William, how much mud do you wager will make it to the wall?” a laughing Sir Gath asked.

“Half as much as should, I wager,” replied Sir William Fletcher, a seasoned knight.

Fortunately, the weather was warm, so tributaries of the River Wensum soon filled with muddy children. Even adult settlers and soldiers enjoyed frolicking in the water, oblivious to the water’s still chilly temperature. But for their health, they sat in the warm sun to dry.

At the end of that day of work and fun, Sir Thomas Sims provided weary workers with a nourishing meal of potatoes and beans, soaked, and boiled with salt pork. Sir Thomas also surprised children with sweet treats of peppermint sticks.

“Behold, Le Roy,” I pointed out to my friend, “these children gobble beans and potatoes like they had never had such a meal. I am ashamed as I remember the many times when I refused to eat the bounteous meals Mother prepared for our table.”

“Aye,” Le Roy added. “How can children be so thin and dirty, and yet so happy? It is good that we are here to help.”

Le Roy and I counted our blessings. This revelation added to the joyous occasion for us young squires and the villagers, who received a new wall and bragging rights for building it.

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The Royal Order of the Last Coin

After working with the Jewish villagers for nine months and seventeen days, the village wall was still not complete. However, Sir Easly thought it would be prudent to trust the Jewish settlers with finalizing the wall.

“Sir, methinks it best if we trust our Jewish friends with the completion so that we might continue our campaign. We still have villages that need our assistance, and our supplies are running low.”

Sir Mortimer hesitated to leave an unfinished project, but Sir Easly convinced our parade marshal that the Jewish villagers were eager to complete the wall they had helped to start.

“Very well, sir knight,” Sir Mortimer agreed. “I trust your judgment.”

In high spirits, we left Nor, waving our goodbyes and best wishes to our new friends.

As we rode away, our friends sang words from the Psalm in their distinctive Jewish rhythm that I found so worshipful, “*The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and he helps me. My heart leaps for joy, and with my song I praise him.*”

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We marched for five days and covered over 800 furlongs. My saddle had long since lost its comfortable seating, and I squirmed. But I was not the only one. I noticed other squires and even knights moved about, trying to find a comfortable spot. Our warm saddles emitted a sweet essence of leather to our ride, and the squeaking of tack added its own pleasant sounds to the journey. I breathed in to savor the musky smells of horses and tack. In contrast, grasshoppers swarmed and buzzed as they flew among the reeds and bushes growing along the forest banks. Some riders found this buzzing to be annoying; for me, the grasshoppers’ mating call created within me a feeling of melancholy in the hot summer. This march was no

different. Our bodies and even our horses sweated, emitting an assortment of musky odors. As for me, gray riverlets of sweat and dirt dripped from my head and trickled uncomfortably down my back. Hot clouds of dust billowed under our horses feet, mixing with copious amounts of manure, equine testosterone and estrogen.

At the end of the sixth day, as night drew upon us, we arrived at the small, impoverished village of Leicester. An inviting fire crackled in the courtyard to protect the inhabitants and warm the night air. At first blush, the atmosphere was pleasant. It was a silent night, a peaceful night. The fire crackled and blew sparks into the air, and I thought of the angels who heralded the birth of Jesus.

When the entire troop had entered the center of the village, Sir Mortimer raised his hand in a silent order to halt. Leather saddles squeaked, tack and chains rattled, and our horses whinnied. A lone dog barked in the distance. The crackling fire was the only other sound to split the stillness of the evening.

Sir Mortimer scanned the village then turned to Sir Easley and said cautiously, "Easley, there is no one here to greet us or defend this town."

"Aye, Mortimer. There is a pall of silence over the village. I will have a team ride with me to investigate." Sir Easley turned and called, "Sir Clive Custford, Sir John de Kendale, ride with me."

As the three knights investigated, those of us left began unharnessing and feeding our animals. Still, there was no evidence of life in the village.

Without warning, blood-curdling screams of fearsome attack and intimidation erupted from the forest and broke the calm silence. We stood in disbelief for a few precious moments as a band of thieves with painted faces and bodies stormed the village, burning and destroying property.

Sir Mortimer's horse danced, eager to join the fray of battle, but as a professional soldier, the knight restrained his mount and quickly

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

regained his military wits. Then, he sounded the charge without further hesitation. Those knights who had not yet unsaddled turned their mounts and attacked the thieves screaming their best war cries and waving their weapons, while the rest of us pursued the intruders on foot with swords drawn. That combination surprised and startled the thieves so that in less than twenty minutes, we had driven them back to the forest.

Villagers exited from their hiding places with trepidation. Their eyes were wide with fear and sunken from hunger.

After the turmoil quieted and the villagers' fear subsided, Sir Mortimer called, "Good people of Leicester, we come in peace bringing aid and well wishes from your king, Edward. May I speak with your leaders?"

Slowly at first, then with gratitude, the leaders of Leicester came forward.

I watched with eager eyes as Sir Mortimer spoke with the leaders, and learned that their village had been sacked numerous times by bands of thieves, sometimes bands of opposing gangs. At those times, the thieves fought between themselves, vying for the spoils.

Over the next few weeks, Sirs Mortimer and John de Kendale watched the calculating terrorists, not to put the villagers in further danger but to strategize how best to combat the intruders.

Sir John's experience was in civil law and order, so he organized our brigade into guard units. We changed posts every two hours, making certain that we were always alert. However, Sir Mortimer voiced his opinion that the thieves would not return so long as we were on guard.

Sir John explained his plan. "My good knight, I have asked the guards to assume the appearance of villagers so that they will become as inconspicuous as possible. Once the thieves feel confident that the villagers are alone, they will most likely attack again. Then, we will launch a surprise counterattack."

Joyce Crawford

“Excellent plan, Sir John. We shall all follow your lead,” Sir Mortimer praised his fellow knight.

While it was an excellent plan, it took many long hours of waiting. However, Sir Mortimer instructed us to take advantage of opportunities to teach the children and the adults to read and write while we waited.

Sir Clyve Custford, our spiritual leader, and I went door to door, inviting both boys and girls to come and experience learning. And come, they did.

On the first day, ten children came to investigate. The next day, those ten children brought a friend. Altogether, there must have been twenty or so children eager to learn; a safe place to eat beans and potatoes also helped draw more young learners.

“The only book available to me is the Holy Scriptures, but I believe any subject can be taught using the Scriptures, love, and diplomacy,” assured Sir Clive Custford. “The Scriptures are filled with learning opportunities.”

So it was, the patient knight taught children letters and numbers from that precious book. He also instructed his learners the art of writing sentences and complete thoughts. Again, the Scriptures provided perfect instruction for simple, yet powerful sentences like, “*God is Love,*” or “*We love him, because he first loved us.*” That same gentle knight taught Scripture verses that would immediately benefit the villagers. The Scripture verse, from the Psalm, “*What time I am afraid, I will trust in You,*” was one such verse that gave comfort and strength to the people.

“Le Roy,” I confessed, “I never knew the Scriptures held such wonderful knowledge. I hope Sir Clyve will share such Scripture with us.”

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

Although Sir Mortimer had assigned centuries to stand watch about the village, and the protective fire glowed in the courtyard, the nights were long. I tried to sleep, but my ears would not. I listened to the music of the night. The darkness was alive with the sound of crickets chirping, calling to a mate. An army of frogs croaked non-stop in the small stream nearby. Other frogs answered in return, adding to the deafening night sounds. Water tumbled over rocks in the stream like a lullaby. Suddenly, my heart stopped when I heard the heavy, muffled sound of air rushing over muscular wings. A small rodent squeaked his last in the death grip of an owl's talons. The crickets and frogs stopped singing love songs, and the night was silent—as silent as death.

We waited, vigilant, through many long nights. While it was unnerving, it was also a valuable lesson in listening patiently, expectantly, for the Lord our God to speak to us.

Sir John extolled the wisdom of God and our total dependence upon Him. The knight told us the story of how the children of Israel quietly defeated their enemies. Through His prophet Joshua, God told His people:

“March around the city once with all the armed men. Do this for six days. Have seven priests carry trumpets of rams' horns in front of the ark. On the seventh day, march around the city seven times, with the priests blowing the trumpets. When you hear them sound a long blast on the trumpets, have the whole army give a loud shout; then the wall of the city will collapse and the army will go up, everyone straight in.”

Sir John went on to explain, “It is a simple but effective strategy. With a large army marching and trampling around the city, the wall's foundation became weakened. Then, on the seventh day, with the combined vibrations of thousands of stomping feet and loud trumpets, the wall could endure no more.”

Joyce Crawford

After twelve long days and nights, Sir John announced that the time had come. “Good knights, let us make a grand display of bidding farewell to the villagers of Leicester. Once we are out of sight beyond the village, we shall take refuge. There may be limited cover, so, knights, use rocks, ledges, to hide, and even open country if you are imaginative. Then, we wait.”

Late into the night, the thieves and terrorists came screaming into the village, and when they came, Sir Mortimer commanded the trumpeters to sound the attack. “Company! Attack! Villagers, awake and attack!”

Soldiers and villagers waged a frontal war on the thieves while Sir John and his band attacked from the rear. This victory gave the villagers hope and faith in their united strength, as well as in God’s wisdom.

By the end of the siege, Sir Mortimer had captured the leader, and the remanent of thieves fled in fear. Thinking that his life was over, their leader surrendered but remained belligerent.

“He is no more than a lad,” Sir John whispered to Sir Mortimer.

The knight shook his head, silently acknowledging Sir John’s observation.

“What do you think, sir knight?” Mortimer asked John loud enough so that the young thief could hear. “What punishment is appropriate for such a rascal?”

“My good knight, methinks this terrorist would benefit from self-discipline and good character.”

“Well said, sir.” Then Sir Mortimer turned to the leader of the thieves to render sentencing. “Sir miscreant, I hereby sentence you to march with us for the remainder of our campaign, to minister to anyone needing food, medicine, or shelter. You will dig ditches, clear land, feed the hungry, and tend the children. If you fail in this sentence, you will surely be blinded in not one eye but both. What say you to that, sir miscreant?”

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

“Blinded?!” the youth howled.

“Indeed, miscreant. It is the law. Did you not know? Anyone convicted of thievery will be blinded,” Mortimer replied with a wink to Sir John and a silent chuckle to himself. So the thief had no option. What could he say?

“Do you accept our terms, or would you rather be blinded, sir?” asked Sir John with a mischievous grin.

So it was that this thief, Wymond Pruitt, a young sprout of seventeen, joined the knights’ brigade to serve his sentence.

“Very well. Our job is finished here in Leicester. Let’s be away,” announced Sir Mortimer.

Sir John de Kendale, that gentlest of knights, volunteered to remain in the village to establish community civil service, law, and order. Although he had served the required forty days that year in service to the king, this brave and gentle knight decided to make a temporary home in Leicester to serve so long as the people needed him.

His friend, Sir Mortimer, assigned six squires to stay with Sir John in his service. As Sir Mortimer and the knights’ brigade left Leicester, Sir John, his eager young soldiers, and grateful villagers waved farewell to the knights’ regiment.

As the company road away from the village, Sir Mortimer turned in his saddle and called back to John de Kendale, “I will find you upon our return, sir knight, and take you home to London. Be of good cheer.”

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From Lichfield, we continued our campaign goal of reaching the village of Grimsby, only a three-day ride. However, not far into our ride, I noticed how deserted a certain small settlement was.

Joyce Crawford

Sir Mortimer, Sir Horace Easley, and two medical corpsmen dismounted to investigate the circumstances that decimated this settlement. Corpses still covered in their own vomit lay rotting on the ground. Animals lay where they died from starvation. What few settlers left were emaciated and ill themselves.

That rascal, Wymond Pruitt, also dismounted and searched the area with wide eyes. Sir Mortimer watched Wymond with scrutiny to discover this young man's intentions.

Unaware of Sir Mortimer's surveillance, Wymond Pruitt went from corpse to corpse, sniffing and examining the bodies. Then, he turned his attention to the ill and performed the same examinations.

"Sir," Wymond Pruitt called to Sir Easley. "Sir, I have seen this afore. This is not normal, but a devastating disease. Behold, sir, the places where the people relieved themselves. The sanitation is poor, thus the water beneath the ground is diseased. These corpses have lain in the sun for a time, so the disease within those bodies is no longer a threat to us. However, where fresh bodies and human discharge lie, they continued to contaminate the ground and carry the disease."

"Well done, Master Pruitt. Is it safe to bury the dead?"

"Aye, sir. But take care."

"Troops," Sir Mortimer called to the brigade, "bring shovels and lime to bury the dead and clean the area."

"Well done, Master Pruitt," Sir Mortimer commended the young former thief. "How did you learn about this disease?"

"Well, er, I, uh ..."

"Speak up, boy, I know well your former life," reassured the knight.

"When my fellows and I raided villages, we found some places in this manner. We had not the heart to rob these poor people but offered to help them. The village leaders told us of their ordeal and how it came to be. We learned how to aid the villagers and care for ourselves so as not to touch fresh corpses or privies."

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

“Has this disease a name, boy?” inquired Sir Easley.

“Aye, sir. It is called typhoid, and is much feared.”

“This is good information to relay back to London,” advised Sir Easley. Sir Mortimer agreed.

The brigade worked for twelve days and nights cleaning cottages, burning them when necessary, along with soiled clothing. While the experienced knights formed burial parties, Sir Easley tasked us, young soldiers, with surveying the surrounding forests for survivors.

Le Roy scouted the village until he found a small open, flatbed wagon, “Milton, look what I found. This wagon will come in handy. Help me clean it. Where is the lime?”

As Le Roy and I doused the wagon with lime to wash away remnants of any disease, Wymond came to lend a hand. Then with Le Roy pushing the wagon, Wymond and I searched the west side of the village for survivors.

“Over here, Le Roy,” Wymond called.

We found women and children, and one elderly man, frightened, huddling in the forest. Sad, wide eyes peered out from the forest grasses. The children were dirty, and their clothing was covered with vomit and untold foul odors. Their stomachs were extended from hunger, and their faces appeared sunken. Eight women and the elderly man also appeared to have been ill. I thought of Mother and Father, and my heart yearned to see them again. I was speechless, and all I could do was to pray, “Lord God, protect Mother and Father and keep them safe.”

My heart fell to my stomach and then rose again in my throat when I found a young maiden, soiled, with sunken eyes. This young maiden looked to be about the same age as my Claret, and I froze in my steps, staring at this young, emaciated face. Wymond shook my arm and spoke, returning me to the task at hand, and I prayed, “Lord, God, protect Maid Claret. I beseech You, do not let her suffer as this young maid has.”

Joyce Crawford

Then I turned my attention to the others.

“Can you walk, ma’am?” I asked one of the older women, reaching out to help her stand.

Wymond shouted in a loud and urgent voice, “No! Don’t touch her!” Then he turned to the woman and in a compassionate voice said, “I am sorry ma’am. I do not mean to be rude, but you know better than anyone how dangerous this disease is. We will help you get cleaned up.”

“I thank you, kind sir. Yes, I know of this disease. I lost my husband and two sons to it. There is no need for you to apologize.”

We were careful as we guided those survivors who could walk. Again, Le Roy scouted the ground and found stones large enough to serve as steps up to the wagon. “Milton, come, help me move these stones.” Although it was difficult to aid the sick without bodily contact, they all found places to sit or stand; and Le Roy, Wymond, and I pushed the survivors back to the village. On the way, Wymond found two forgotten buckets beside the village stream and filled them. Once back at the village, he helped carry water for the villagers baths.

After combing the western forest again and leading the survivors to a safe place, we turned our attention to the hovels where the villagers lived. The lodgings were dark and foreboding and smelled of vomit and feces, but with knightly courage, we covered our faces to protect ourselves from breathing contaminants and ventured inside. We found women, some older but most young, and children still writhing in their filthy beds. When we saw the extent of the sickness, we exited the lodgings. There was little else for us to do but carry these poor souls out, and lay them in the shade to wait for the medical corpsmen, then remove as much of our clothing as we could. As was the custom, purging the gut and bloodletting were the prescribed treatments.

After burying corpses and carrying the ill but living from the infected cottages, we treated our clothing with lime to eliminate the threat of any disease. We washed our bodies in our clean water source.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

While the corpsmen treated and cleaned the survivors, Sir Thomas Sims, the brigade cook, and Wymond Pruitt peeled potatoes and cut them up to make potato soup. Then, Wymond skillfully ladled warm soup down the feverish throats of the ill. He also herded children away from their mothers, washed the tots, and changed their clothes. Then he told the children stories while they greedily ate warm potato soup.

After observing Wymond Pruitt, Sir Mortimer approached Sir Easley and commented, “Easley, make note of the former miscreant, Wymond Pruitt. He is to be commended for his service.”

“Aye, good knight. Mayhaps a reduction in his sentence as well?” replied Sir Easley.

“Aye. If he chooses so.”

After a fortnight, more than a few of the women settlers and their young sons gained their strength, and Sir Mortimer ordered Le Roy and me to unload additional food provisions of beans and potatoes for the immigrants. Raymond Early, who grew up on a farm, James St. James, and Thadius Tilman cut potatoes and showed the women how to dry the cut portions and plant them to cultivate a new crop. Raymond also planted dry beans and erected fallen tree branches in the rows to stake the new plants when they emerged.

Once we had cleaned the earth around the village with lime, which was no easy task, Sir Marcus Townsend organized the hardest master knights and knights simple to dig a new well.

“How will we dig a well with just picks?” James asked incredulously.

“Very carefully,” teased Sir Benjamin Tersely.

“Do not tease the lad, sir knight,” Sir Edward Aims chuckled. “You do not want to frighten him from his duty.”

Benjamin laughed a hearty laugh, trying to ease the boy’s mind. “Four of us dig in rhythm with picks to break the earth. You young soldiers will help by loading the excavated earth in your buckets and

then distribute it in a designated area. Choose the spot well so that the villagers will have the start for a garden.”

Sir Edward continued, “Once the hole is deeper than our tallest knight, two men with their picks continue to dig. We shall erect a tripod and pulley to remove the earth.”

James’ eyes widened at the thought of digging so long and deep. “How long will it take to dig a proper well? How deep will it be?”

“That is a hard question to answer, Master James,” Sir Edward replied. “If we dig in shifts, we can complete the digging in two days. After the digging, and we hit water, then we must build a shaft to keep the sides from caving in. Building the shaft will take another fortnight.”

“It is a hard job and long,” added Benjamin, “but if we can leave the village with clean, pure water, it will be a job well worth doing.”

“I want to help,” exclaimed young James. “I can load and tote earth.”

So, the digging of a new well began, and we all helped tote dirt. Muscles I never knew I had rebelled in pain, but in truth, the reward of seeing needy people drinking their fill of fresh water was a greater feeling, and we young squires learned new skills to pass on to our sons.

Once our work was done, the villagers were grateful for a clean village and a new well.

Before saying our goodbyes, several of the older soldiers, Drake Taylor, Milo Nash, and Wade Forester, agreed to stay in the village since most of the men were victims of typhoid. With that knightly sacrifice, the women had help, and the men made good homes for themselves.

Our company rode out of the settlement, and Le Roy and I discussed the campaign. In a moment, Wymond Pruitt trotted his horse to join us. “Ho, there, good knights.”

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

“Greetings, Wymond. Pray, ride with us, but do not call us knights, for, in truth, we are only squires training to be knights,” I replied.

“Do you ride in glorious battle and rescue damsels in distress?” He did not mean for his words to sound sarcastic, but that is how they came from Wymond’s lips.

I could not help but chuckle. “Nay, friend, although we have competed in tournament and are trained in battle. Sir Mortimer instructed us that there is more to knighthood than waging war.” Then, I shared with Wymond and Le Roy wise words Father spoke to me. ““Although in times past, knights did not do manual labor, there is no shame in working with your hands. It is your God who gives you a strong mind and body. Use those gifts for the Lord.””

So, I continued sharing with Wymond, “This work we have just completed is an example of knightly chivalry and benevolence. We have learned useful skills such as supervising workers, turning rocks, making bricks, securing ropes, and building a wall as we did in Nor. Now we are digging a well. I much prefer this work to battle. This work will benefit us and others over our lifetime, and I will be proud to pass on my newly learned skills to my future sons.”

“Aye,” agreed Le Roy. “But it is not knightly to shy away from battle.”

“In truth, friend,” agreed Wymond, “let us pray that we are not in a position to make that call.”

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Two days into our journey, the brigade heard disturbing noises ahead in the forest. Sir Mortimer called the company to a halt. His mount stood perfectly still while the knight listened. Then our brave commander dismounted, holding his horse’s reins, and advanced in broad steps in plain sight down the road. Sir Robert Gath followed. The rest of the brigade stayed under cover of the forest.

Together, the brave knights strode closer to the noise and silently observed a lynching in progress.

“Hail, there,” Sir Mortimer called out.

We witnessed a posse manhandling a bedraggled man with his hands tied behind his back. The posse attempted to hoist the poor man by the neck with a rope. However, upon Sir Mortimer’s calling out, the members of the questionable law enforcers stopped, turned to reveal fierce eyes intent on death, and drew their swords.

“Who goes there?” the sheriff in charge of the lynching growled.

“Sir Mortimer of Kent and Sir Robert Gath in service of King Edward. What goes here?”

“Sir,” the sheriff growled, spewing his words through curled, hateful lips, “we witnessed this tenant farmer poaching in the king’s forest, which is unlawful and punishable by death.”

“I see. But how is it, Lord Sheriff,” Sir Mortimer asked calmly, “that your presence is so opportune as to witness this isolated poaching?”

“What! Do you accuse me, sir?”

Le Roy, Wymond, and I watched from a safe distance as Mortimer questioned the sheriff, and the frightened farmer struggled in the cruel hands of his accusers. Hungry and weary, his frail body was no match for the sheriff and his posse.

“Le Roy, that tenant farmer is only skin and bones. He hath not the energy to struggle against the posse, much less bring down a deer.”

“Aye, Milton,” Le Roy whispered.

“Let us watch to see how Sir Mortimer meets out justice,” said Wymond knowingly.

We grinned as we watched Sir Mortimer stroll about as if assessing a poaching. He kicked the hind leg of the deer, but the deer did not move. Then Mortimer moved over to the accused and, using his sword, opened the trembling farmer’s tunic.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

Sir Gath bent to inspect the animal's eyes.

The knights moved a distance away so that the sheriff had to strain to hear their whispers. Still exhibiting his aggression and hate, the sheriff paced, slapping his hands behind his back then growled, "What is this? Why do you keep me from my duties? You are wasting my time."

Acting nonplused, Mortimer spoke to Sir Gath, "Sir Knight, did you notice the accused person? He had neither the power nor the will to take down a deer."

"In truth, sir. I also noticed that the deer had been brought down by aristocratic rules and dead longer than it would take a solitary man to carry such a massive animal out of the forest."

"Aye. There is no way this starving farmer could bring down this animal."

Then Mortimer strode back to the eavesdropping sheriff. "Lord Sheriff, pray, how long hence did your posse witness this poaching? Speak in truth, sir."

"Touché," whispered Wymond.

The sheriff, now not quite so sinister and self-assured, stumbled for words, but the knight continued before the dishonest sheriff could muster a defense.

"I do accuse you, sir, you and your questionable posse. I accuse you of poaching our king's deer and laying the blame on this unsuspecting farmer."

"I doth protest, sir knight!"

"No need to protest, Lord Sheriff. The evidence is against you."

With those words, the sheriff and members of his posse challenged the knights with swords drawn and hammers raised. In response, other master knights charged from their hiding places and entered the fray. These knights had the advantage of still being on their horses. Swords clanged, steel against steel. Occasionally, a steel blade sliced through

armor to open flesh. Blood spurted and covered the sparse grass and dirt in the road. Hammers came down upon shields. Men groaned, some in pain, others with sheer force. Hot dust rose from the earth as the horses danced, holding their positions in the battle.

“The sheriff and his men have not a chance,” breathed Le Roy.

“Study the knights’ form and demeanor,” I urged Le Roy. “We can learn much.”

The knights quickly subdued the vile sheriff and his men. Then Sir Gath turned his attention to the tenant farmer and cut free his hands.

“Now, Lord Sheriff,” Mortimer began, “shall I report your wrongdoing to the king, or shall we settle this now?”

The sheriff huffed and shot fearsome darts from his eyes meant for Sir Mortimer.

“As I thought, sir. What price doth you place on this animal? Twenty pounds?”

The sheriff huffed again and turned away. His posse tried to escape, but Sir Gath and other knights blocked their paths, and the cowardly posse slinked back to the center of the discussion.

“Twenty pounds then. But, good Sheriff, this deer is not exactly fresh. I wager it is passed one hour. Therefore, the price should be cut in half. Will ten pounds be adequate?”

From our positions, we witnessed more huffing and fiery darts from the sheriff.

“Ho, there, my good knight,” Sir Gath broke in. “Be this deer the sheriff’s own deer?”

“Good point, sir knight. No. I believe it is not. It is the king’s deer. Correct, Lord Sheriff? Therefore, my sheriff, you owe the king ten pounds. But since there is no proof of ownership, I will pay you two pounds for this used venison.”

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

Le Roy, Wymond, and I snickered as we watched Sir Mortimer hold the sheriff's wrist and count out two pounds as forty shillings, dropping each coin into the sheriff's angry, trembling hand.

Mortimer then turned and addressed the stunned farmer. "Now, my good sir, who accuses you?"

"No one, sir," the farmer replied in halting words.

"Quite true. Be on your way with our blessings."

The farmer turned on trembling legs to depart, but Mortimer stopped him.

"Oh, good farmer, forget not the venison. We will help you transport this meat to your abode. Sir Gath, assign men to construct a litter from oak limbs and branches and tie the deer upon it." With the farmer and Sir Mortimer in the lead, the brigade transported their new friend and his meat to the farmer's nearby village.

"I thank you, good knights. It has been a long while since my village ate anything as nourishing as venison. Surely, this will save lives."

"Live in peace," Sir Mortimer saluted the farmer and the villagers.

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We had planned to travel further north, but Sir Simms and Sir Easley reported that our food, building, and medical supplies were dangerously low.

"Sir Knight," Mortimer addressed Easley, "do you think we should return to London?"

"Aye, kind sir. Without supplies, there is little we can do for our poor."

"Aye, sir, aside from striking a blow against evil or teaching those wanting to learn."

Joyce Crawford

Upon hearing their conversation, I ventured to speak. “Sirs, may I speak?”

“Say on, young de Burton,” Sir Mortimer invited.

“Sir, instead of going forward, might we return the way we came and check on those we have already aided?”

“Good lad, Master Milton,” Sir Mortimer offered encouragement. “Thy father truly has raised a good man with a wise head on his shoulders. Aye, we shall return the way we came to assure that our new friends still be in good health and prosperity. Lead on, Master Milton. Ride by my side.”

“It will be my great honor, sir.”

So it was that our brigade turned and, in keen anticipation, rode back whence we came.

First, we encountered the tenant farmer we had rescued from an unjust lynching. He and other villagers were working manure into the earth, preparing to plant their winter garden.

As soon as the farmer saw the brigade, he dropped the bucket and ran to greet us. When Mortimer and Easley dismounted, the farmer caught Mortimer in his dung-encrusted hands in a hearty Christian embrace. Easley was next and received the same greeting. When the farmer finally ceased hugging and weeping, he coaxed Mortimer and Easley over to a plump woman who carried a basket of chicken feed.

“Good knights, this is my wife, Mrs. Farmer. Wife, this is the good knights who rescued me from the vile sheriff. Bid them welcome.”

“Welcome, kind sirs.” Mrs. Farmer greeted the knights with a broad smile enhanced with scant teeth. Her ample belly shook under her apron as she laughed and embraced the knights. “Your kindness and goodness surely saved my husband and our entire village. Since

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

there is no rain, we have few crops to feed ourselves, and the venison you provided fed the whole of the village for a fortnight.”

When men working in the fields saw the knights speaking with Mr. and Mrs. Farmer, they also dropped their shovels and hoes in the spot where they worked freshly turned soil. Women scooped up toddlers from where the children played in the dirt, and the village tanner stopped from hanging a prize deer hide on a drying frame made from limbs. They rushed over to offer their thanks. Even teenagers sauntered over. Whether out of curiosity or gratitude, I was uncertain.

Sir Mortimer motioned the brigade to advance and participate in the joy. Hugging and crying started over again.

“It is good to see you well and happy, Mr. Farmer. Your village is well maintained and friendly. Is there anything more we can do for you while we are here?” Mortimer offered.

“Yes, if you please, kind sir. Will you and your soldiers show us how to put down a well? It is a considerable way to tote water from the stream. I know the women, especially, will be grateful.”

“Easily, have we the tools and materials needed to put down a well?” Mortimer asked.

“Indeed, sir knight. With such workers as these,” Easily replied, motioning to the farmers, “we can have a well providing clean water within a week.”

“Very well, knight. Brigade, we will be putting down another well. You know what to do. Bring out the picks and shovels.”

Cheers went up from the entire brigade, showing their eagerness to continue their campaign.

“Thank you, kind sirs,” an older man said, grinning through missing teeth, and extending his work-worn hand in friendship.

True to his word, Easily led the brigade in digging the well. In six days, the digging was done, and construction of the supporting walls began. Over the next three days, the villagers celebrated each time

Joyce Crawford

someone drew water from the well. And each time someone drew clear, clean water, hugs and tears engulfed the brigade.

We reluctantly said adieu to this friendly village but promised to stop again should we venture this way.

“God be with you,” Mortimer called over his shoulder as the brigade pulled away from the village.

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“Milton. Milton de Burton. Come ride with me,” Mortimer called to me as we marched down the dusty road.

I pulled Talisman’s reigns, and he whinnied as if offering his support, then my steed galloped up to Sir Mortimer’s side.

“Sir,” I saluted.

“Milton, I am pleased with your initiative. Your suggestion to return by the same route has already proved to be valuable. Our next visit is to the village ravaged by typhoid. Do you have any suggestions as to our strategy in that visit?”

“If you please, sir, I have no suggestion which comes to me at this moment. May I defer to Wymond Pruitt? It was he who first evaluated the situation in that village and suggested a plan of action. Mayhaps he will have ideas.”

Mortimer looked at me in surprise. “Wise words, Milton de Burton, and a true friend. Will you ride back and summons Wymond Pruitt to ride with us?”

“It will be my honor, sir.”

When I arrived back to where Wymond was speaking with Le Roy, I gave Wymond Mortimer’s summons. “Wymond, Sir Mortimer wishes to speak with you. Make haste.”

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

“Why does Sir Mortimer beckon me, Milton? What is it that I have done?”

“Be not afraid, Wymond. Mortimer wants to ask for your ideas for the next visit,” I said, trying to comfort my friend.

With wide eyes and a look of great apprehension, Wymond galloped to where Mortimer waited and saluted the knight.

“Wymond, Milton tells me that you were first to evaluate and identify the typhoid in the next village we visit. Have you any suggestions as to our strategy for this visit?” Mortimer asked, testing Wymond.

“Sir, if my memory serves me, three soldiers, Drake Taylor, Milo Nash, and Wade Forester, remained behind to assist the women in rebuilding the village. Mayhaps these men can give an account of the rebuild. May I also suggest that we inspect the well and privies? Our medical corpsmen should also be able to ascertain the health of the villagers forthwith.”

“Well said, Master Pruitt. You have the makings of a fine soldier.”

“I thank you, sir,” Wymond saluted, trying not to show his obvious pride.

I shared Wymond’s joy and was glad to call him my friend. Just as he suggested, Drake, Milo, and Wade gave a glowing report on the village’s progress. The women were healing well, as were the children, and all were doing their part to rebuild their homes. While eager to return to the brigade, the three soldiers decided to take a leave of absence and stay longer in the village. It became apparent that Drake and Milo had reason to stay since they each had taken one of the younger women and her children as their own. Wade, however, was happy to assume the role of town manager and chose to live in abstinence.

Upon inspection, the well was still clean and provided plenteous water. The privies, too, were clean and well-maintained.

Joyce Crawford

“Well done, soldiers. You have done well by your king and have pleased your commander. If you are satisfied with your situations, we will bid you farewell and good lives.”

“We thank you, sir,” Drake spoke for the other two soldiers. “In truth, we are happy here and plan to make this our homes if it please the king.”

“I will speak with our sire about the matter. I see no reason why he should object. After all, you are spreading prosperity and happiness in his kingdom. Farewell, good soldiers.”

“Go in peace, sir.”

We traveled the short distance to Leicester. As we rode, the knights and squires remembered the accomplishments and successes of our campaign. We were proud of how we helped our fellow man in the king’s name, but there was no boasting nor self-promoting, for we were one unit and of one mind.

I had my personal sense of accomplishment, not for what I had done, but for the skills I had learned, and for Sir Mortimer’s recognition of my initiative.

“Master de Burton,” Sir Mortimer called to me.

“Yes, sir,” I saluted.

“Squire, we will be entering Leicester shortly. Do you have any thoughts for our re-visit?”

“Sir, I recall that Sir John de Kendal stayed in Leicester to establish law and order and civic pride. He also wished to continue teaching the children their letters and numbers. Mayhaps, sir, you should ask Sir de Kendal for an update.

“Well said, Master de Burton. You are a wise counsel for one so young. Is there anything else?”

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

It took my mind some time to develop a reply, and I ventured carefully. “Sir, besides visiting with the settlers to evaluate their safety and comfort, I have no other constructive suggestion ...”

Sir Mortimer noticed my hesitation and inquired, “But?”

I shifted in my saddle, feeling very uncomfortable in my next words. “Well, sir, it is not my place to speak ill of my comrades, but it might be well to ask Wymond to maintain a lower presence at Leicester. The villagers might recoil at his remembrance.”

“Again, well spoken, Master Milton, and a good friend. Do you not think that the villagers would welcome the news of Master Wymond’s change of character?”

“Mayhaps Wymond could best serve by standing guard at the edge of the village. Then, as villagers recognize him as their past harasser, my lord could tell them of Wymond’s successes and change of heart.”

“I see, Master Milton. The knights could joyfully lead the villagers to acknowledge Master Wymond as a true and kind servant of our king.”

“Yes, sir,” I replied with a nervous heart.

“Well done, Master Milton. I shall see to it.”

When we entered the village of Leicester, Sir Mortimer spoke with Sir de Kendal, who gave a glowing account of the village. “The thieves have not returned, sir, and the village remains in your debt.”

“Thank you, John,” replied Mortimer. “I have another favor to ask of you.”

“I am at your service, sir.”

“Will you stand guard with our young miscreant, Wymond Pruitt? He has proven himself worthy of our consideration and of the people’s admiration. Will you help make this happen? I will share details with you at supper.”

“It will be my pleasure, sir, and I think I know just how to handle it. Her name is Madelyn.”

Joyce Crawford

With an approving nod, and a bit of a chuckle, Mortimer gave John de Kendal's arm a squeeze.

Our return visit to Leicester went well, as planned, and Wymond received a hearty welcome, after Maid Madelyn's announcements of his participation in the campaign and of his achievements.

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The subsequent revisit to Nor was where we helped our Jewish friends build or fortify their wall.

Testing my substance once again, Sir Mortimer inquired of me, "Master de Burton, have you words of wisdom regarding our revisit to Nor?"

"Sir, when we were in Nor, the plight of the children there so touched Le Roy that he felt deeply for their safety and wellbeing. May I suggest Le Roy for this return?"

"Well said, Master de Burton. You are a wise counsel for one so young. We shall give young Le Roy his opportunity. Ask him to ride with us."

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This time, it was Le Roy who stammered, wringing nervous hands, searching for words in reply to Sir Mortimer's summons. However, by the time Le Roy and I strode up to our leader, the squire had regained his composure. It was apparent to me that my friend had given the situation great thought.

"Master Le Roy, what do you suggest we do on our revisit to Nor? How would you proceed?"

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

Le Roy started, trying to sound important. “Sir, may I suggest that before we enter the village, our worthy leader deploy a contingency of knights skilled in masonry to circumnavigate the wall and evaluate its worthiness. From this contingency’s evaluation, our leader may very well determine the prosperity and security of the entire village.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw that Sir Mortimer covered his mouth with his gloved hand to hide his amusement. “Well said, Master Purves. You may rejoin your unit.”

Le Roy, full of pride for his suggestion, galloped back to where Wymond waited.

Then, Sir Mortimer turned his attention to Sir Easly, who could no longer hide his laughter. “Knight, what is your opinion of Master Purves’ suggestion?”

“It is a sound suggestion, albeit, pompously delivered, sir.”

“Well said. However, pompous, or not, we shall proceed forthwith.”

“Aye, sir knight. I am at your service.”

“Very well, Easly. Select your best masons and ride with them to survey the wall. Note any defects or weaknesses. When we ride into the village, we can report to our Jewish friends on their job well done.

“Sir,” Easly said, acknowledging this order.

As it turned out, the wall stood firm and trustworthy. Our Jewish friends prospered and were happy. All in all, it was a very positive revisit. So, we ventured on to our home in London.

Once back in London, the afternoon sun hung lower in the sky, throwing a soft early fall light over the parade ground.

Sir Mortimer called the brigade to stand at attention. As was his custom, he drew his sword to his chin and flipped it in his skillful hand so that it caught the last warm rays of the now setting sun. The blade’s beveled steel reflected colorful beams of light over the brigade, then Mortimer called, “Parade, at rest.”

Joyce Crawford

Tired though we were, we waited for our leader's next command before unsaddling, leading our mounts to the stables, and feeding our animals.

“Sir knights and young soldiers, let it be known to everyone, especially to our king, that I am proud of each of you. You have worked hard and diligently. You have served our king and our citizens of England, both rich and poor. I was proud to ride as your commander. Well done, brigade. Dismissed.”

However, after Sir Mortimer's words of praise, no one felt like yelling and galloping wildly to the stables. Instead, we congratulated each other on a grand campaign with gentle comradeship as Sir Mortimer continued to stand before us.

Then, Sir Easly surprised us when he called, “Parade, attention.”

Being of one mind, the troops snapped to attention, albeit with surprised faces.

Again, Sir Easly called, “Parade, salute.”

Needing no further encouragement, our brigade, over seventy strong, raised our weaponry to our chins and saluted Sir Mortimer of Kent, our commander.

It might have been a bit of dust in his eye or the last brilliant ray from the evening sun that caused his eye to weep. Whatever it was, Sir Mortimer stood at attention with a solitary glint in his eye and humbly returned our salutes.

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Following our first campaign, we returned to our homes or castles. Knights returned to tend lands and families. I returned to Father's home and rested in my family's embrace to share Yuletide feasts and goodwill. I also made frequent trips to the king's castle to again

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

resume my duties as squire to my king, and, of course, I searched for Maid Claret.

The yearning in my heart to touch Maid Claret's hand burned, but her chaperone's keen eyes closely observed our visits. At the slightest touch of our hands or secret whispers, the chaperone discretely cleared her throat as a warning.

"Milton, it is such a long wait until we are wed," Claret crooned her whisper.

"Aye, my love. You must do as Father advised me. Find work for your hands to do. Your industry will help the time to pass."

Because my mind was clear of campaign duties, I again dreamed of Maid Claret at night, and my dreams continued to disturb me. Did Maid Claret experience the violation that gave my own body such pleasure? How could I ever face her and her sire again? Would she be greatly offended and request that our wedding be terminated? And if that is so, would she be branded a tarnished damsel. These thoughts tore my heart from my chest, and I sank into despair because of my sin and shame. How I needed to speak to Father. But what would I tell him? That I violated my sweet Claret?

Finally, I approached Father when I could no longer bear the shame.

"Father." My voice broke, and I hesitated.

"Yes, my son. What troubles your heart?"

"How do you know my heart is troubled?"

"Your countenance is low, and your joy has evaporated like the morning dew."

"Yes, Father. I carry great shame, and I can bear this shame no longer."

I watched Father as he struggled with my announcement, then he said gently, "What shame do you bear, my son?" Father spoke his

Joyce Crawford

words in such a kind and loving manner, that I bowed my head and wept.

Once I could speak again, I continued to bear my soul. “Father, I have violated my sweet Claret.”

Father was silent and packed his pipe with fresh tobacco. “When did this happen, lad?” he asked in the voice of a concerned and loving father.

“It has happened numerous times, Father. The first time was while I was on campaign.”

Father exhaled flavorful white smoke from his pipe and then breathed out what sounded like a sigh of relief. “My son, you did not violate your betrothed. You were having pleasurable night-time dreams of her. Our dreams are a gift from God.” Father chuckled, then drew on his pipe again. “If you had not had such pleasant dreams, I would then be worried. Be of good cheer, son. I venture to say that Maid Claret is having the same pleasurable night-time dreams. However, I would counsel you to heed our Lord’s words spoken by St. Paul, the apostle in the book of Romans, ‘There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.’ So, keep your mind on God and He shall direct you and forgive you when you stumble.”

Finally, when I could lift my eyes, I spoke in a still subdued voice but with a lighter load on my heart, “I thank you, Father. You have given me great counsel and comfort.”

We stood, and Father grasped me in his mighty arms. I felt safe and comforted as when I was a child.

Chapter Six

My Second Campaign

Eight months later, King Edward sent out a royal dispatch to all counties, asking them to identify parishes or villages needing repair or assistance. Further, the king required cooperation and support from the county barons for the second campaign. Although some of the barons considered Edward, a feckless ruler, he was still the king, and Sir Mortimer assured us that the barons would not interfere but lend assistance. It was no small matter that Sir Mortimer had superiority over county barons.

With an anxious heart, I waited for the call into active duty. Father, sensing my anxiety, advised me to put my hands to work to ease the passing of time. So, when I was not attending the king as his squire, I studied buildings and structures.

During what seemed to be an interminable and painful wait, I dreamed of the day when Maid Claret and I would wed. I prayed and waited on the Lord's direction. Father and I drew plans for a modest house, then paced out the foundation and cold cellar. The work, while robust, only intensified my longing for my beautiful Maid Claret. As Father and I framed out each space in the house, I secretly dreamed of how Claret, my wife, and I would make love there. By the time we completed the house, in my mind, I had made love to my sweet Claret in every room.

In his wisdom and counsel, Father constantly advised me from the Holy Scriptures, “Trust in the Lord and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways, acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your path.” When I fretted and was low, Father comforted me with our

Joyce Crawford

Lord's words again, "'Rest in the Lord, son.'" At other times, Father counseled, "'Shy away from the appearance of evil.'"

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Finally, in February, I received notice to report for active duty, and my heart soared one moment, then fell as if in a deep cavern the next. I was excited to go on campaign again, but leaving Maid Claret tore at my heart.

Two days before my brigade was to march, I spent precious time with Mother and Father, basking in the joy of our home. I also spent as much time with Maid Claret as was considered appropriate. It was hard to pull myself away from the safety and security of my home, but even more heart-wrenching to say goodbye to my Claret. Her chaperone was always nearby to make sure only our fingertips touched. It was unbearable, for I wanted to swoop my beloved into my arms and hold her close so that I could feel our hearts beating—no, pounding—against each other's chests. But that was not to be.

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"Le Roy," I asked, "did you receive your notice to report for duty?"

"Aye, Milton."

"Did Wymond?"

"I know not."

"Where is Wymond?"

"He was staying at the livery at the castle."

"I must speak with him and with Sir Mortimer."

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

Our second campaign began in April with the same wagons and supplies that Sirs Mortimer and Easly deemed necessary for the campaign. However, this time we carried additional military fortification.

“Troops,” Sir Mortimer addressed our unit, then paused. “Ho, there, Master Wymond. I am glad to see that you ride with us again.”

“I thank you, sir. I hope to complete my sentence and make you proud.”

“Thou completed your sentence last campaign, and you did make me proud. Welcome.”

Then Sir Mortimer continued, “There are reports of unrest between neighboring counties in the south. We must be prepared in case we need to engage in military action. Let us pray to our Lord God that that will not be necessary. Sir Custford, will you lead us in prayer?”

We all bowed our heads, and Sir Clyve Custford stood and offered a prayer for wisdom, protection, and a safe and successful campaign. “Lord, God, Creator of all good things, grant us, we pray, Your guidance and protection as we travel. Remove any obstacles from our paths that we might give aid to those in need. This we pray, in the name of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

The troops added their agreements in unison as we said, “Amen.”

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Our journey took us from London southwest to Surrey. There, Sir Mortimer met with Baron Riles at his manor. It was evident that these two noblemen, whose estates shared a common boundary, were the best of friends. Together, they planned a feast for the tenant farmers and serfs. It was a splendid day of feasting and celebration. I admired these two men for the benevolent manner in which they treated their tenants and serfs. It reminded me of Father, and I vowed to pattern myself after these caring men.

As if reading my mind, Sir Mortimer called me to his side and advised me, “Master de Burton, take note how Baron Riles manages his people and lands. He is an excellent example to follow. See how his tenant farmers and serfs feel at ease in his presence. His workers’ pride in serving him offers Baron Riles their loyalty and thus fine harvests and income.

“Aye, sir. Watching the servants in celebration and thanksgiving is a pleasant and good thing.”

I shared these things with Le Roy and Wymond. “This is another learning experience for us, something we can use the rest of our lives, and we must take heed and learn.”

The feast and celebration lasted for two days, giving guests and workers opportunity to come and share before returning to daily work. While it was true that knights did not engage in manual labor, this was the exception, for we felt at one with the baron, his serfs, and his friend and neighbor, Sir Mortimer. Therefore, we stayed to help restore the grounds and return equipment to the proper places in the manor or storage areas.

At the end of that period, Mortimer again approached Baron Riles, “Baron, sir, how may we serve you and your lands and peoples? It is our pleasure to serve our king by serving you.”

“I thank you, sir knight, and offer my hand in friendship. While my lands are not vast, my servants are faithful and diligent to provide a good income for the estate and for themselves. We have all we need. However, be certain, sir, that I shall call upon you if famine or plague befall us as it has in other counties.”

“Very well, sir. Then the regiment and I will bid you farewell and continued good fortune.”

After saying goodbye, Sir Mortimer called the contingent of knights to order, and we marched out of Surrey and on to Kent, Sir Mortimer’s own estate.

At Kent, happy greetings from the workers in the fields, house servants, and animal husbandmen made us feel welcome. I was

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

impressed with the well-managed lands and houses and the people's esteem for Sir Mortimer. It was another learning experience, one which I took to heart.

With reluctance, Sir Mortimer, that brave and stalwart knight, said his private farewell to his wife and family. Then he organized the brigade for our departure from Kent, and we rode for three days to the manor in Midhurst, Sussex.

Feeling more confident in his presence, I questioned Mortimer about many things regarding the running of his manor. For my courage, Mortimer rewarded me with vast information so that I found need for a record book.

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Upon arriving at the manor in Midhurst, we found it in dreadful disrepair, and the fields were untended. Sirs Mortimer and Easley spoke with a lone serf of the once glorious estate.

"My good man, where is your lord baron?"

"Sir," the serf began with fear and downcast eyes, "Lord Charles James, lord of the manor, died shortly after an epidemic of the spotted fever."

Easley turned and whispered to Sir Mortimer, "Measles, sir."

"Is there no one to assume the manor? No member of Lord James's family?" Mortimer inquired.

"Nay, sire. My lord's oldest child is a mere tot, and his mother is young and has no skills in running a manor. The lord from Hampshire has vowed to take control of the estate, and, in so doing, raided houses and lands, absconding with the animals and bounty. The farmers and servants of this estate fled for a time and took refuge in the forests. They have since returned, having no other place to go. However, we can no longer defend our lord's manor."

Joyce Crawford

With incredible empathy for Lord James's servants and not a little anger toward the baron of Hampshire manor, Mortimer replied, "I shall send a dispatch to the king and request his intervention in this manner. In the meantime, assemble the workers. They shall work in peace as long as we are with you."

"Our humble thanks, sir knight. We are at your service."

It took a fortnight and a half for the dispatcher to return with the king's reply. The king's archivist discovered Odem James, the baron's younger brother living on the northern edge of Sussex County. In return for his service as interim baron, the king promised this brother a small estate annexed from the county of Hampshire.

Sir Mortimer read the king's returned dispatch, "'I reward faithful and loyal subjects well. Let it also be known that I discipline unruly subjects. In annexing an estate from Hampshire, I thus punish the baron for his greed and frightful force against the county of Sussex.'" The dispatch, signed with the seal of King Edward II, this day, 30 April 1318.

With great joy and appreciation, and now in the safety of the king's brigade, the serfs and tenant farmers of the Sussex manor set forth to return the manor to its original glory. They cleared land, fortified the stone wall surrounding the estate, and harvested the crops they could save. With the knights' help and supplies, the serfs dug a second well and irrigation ditches on the west side of the property to irrigate the fields.

Mortimer surveyed the manor, once again restored to its glory, the fortified wall, and the newly furrowed fields, then turned to the tenant foreman, "My good man, your baron's brother, Odem James, will be arriving the day after tomorrow. Is there anything more we can do for you before we take our leave?"

"Nay, good knight. Although we long to have you stay on with us, we are aware that you must be about your campaign. We thank you for your help, support, and safety while we restore the manor. We will

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

gladly welcome Odem James and promise to him our loyalty just as we gave to Lord Charles.”

“Then we bid you farewell and prosperity,” Mortimer said as he clasped the foreman’s hand.

“God speed, sir knight, to you and your brigade.”

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We rode four days from Midhurst in Sussex to the Bassard Manor in Hampshire. There, we encountered Geoffrey Harms, supervisor of the manor. When Sir Mortimer asked to speak directly to the baron, Geoffrey Harms put him off and was, I thought, rather rude. That treatment did not sit well with Mortimer.

“My good sir,” Mortimer said, raising his voice in a way I had never heard before, “I have a dispatch from our king, Edward, that concerns Lord Alfred Bassard. Will you notify the baron that I wish to speak to him on the king’s behalf?”

Geoffrey looked surprised, pleasantly so, I thought. I wonder if he anticipated a gift or proclamation from the king. Geoffrey acknowledged Mortimer’s request and trotted off in an air of happy anticipation to fetch Lord Bassard.

Le Roy, Wymond, and I watched uncomfortably as Sir Mortimer’s annoyance increased during his extended wait for Lord Bassard. At first, the knight dismounted to check his gear. Then he mounted and went through the paces of reviewing the troops. Again, he dismounted and spoke with Easley, making plans for the next visitation. Then, he rechecked his gear.

Finally, a fat little man waddled in his saddle with much flamboyance, waving his oversized feathered hat from halfway down the lane. We snickered as the poor pony struggled under his load. As the comical figure moved closer, we could see that Geoffrey Harms rode at his side. This fat little man was the manor lord. Once he reached

Sir Mortimer, he dismounted and bowed his unsteady homage at the knight's feet. His left hand bent and lay across his heart, while his right hand lifted his hat and pointed it upward in a grand display. We snickered again as the little man nearly toppled over.

“Welcome, sir knight, to my humble manor. Come, come. We will have tea in the shade. Seneschal, refreshments for my guests.”

“My lord baron, I fear I have no time for social niceties, for I have a dispatch from the king, that begs quick attention.”

“Very well. Present your dispatch, sir,” the baron replied with a greedy smile and wringing his hands.

From his white cloak emboldened with a red cross, Mortimer took a parchment tied with a red cord and bearing the king's seal. Then Mortimer handed the parchment unceremoniously to the baron, who looked askance at Mortimer for the knight's lack of pomp, then opened the letter. As the baron read, his fat little lips moved with every word, and his face reddened until I thought his eyes and puffed cheeks would explode.

“What is this? How do I deserve such base treatment?” the baron chirped his anger as he stomped in circles like a belligerent child. “Are not my county and manor one of the best in southern England? How dare you, sir?”

Sir Mortimer replied, “You mean, how dare the king, sir?”

At Mortimer's terse reply, the baron threw the parchment, hitting Mortimer in the chest, and stomped down the lane, shouting, “We shall see about this! We shall see about this,” and leaving his groomsman to tend the pony.

“Stand at ease gentlemen,” Mortimer breathed.

The sound of multiple swords scraping against metal encasements fell on my ears as the knights sheathed their weapons, and a small modicum of peace returned to the brigade as we turned and left.

After riding in silence, I asked, “Sir Mortimer, how does it happen that such a baron owns a manor?”

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

Mortimer chuckled, “You mean, how does a hapless child such as this own a manor? Well, Master de Burton, most likely he inherited it, and obviously knows nothing about running a manor as a proper and benevolent lord.”

“What do you think will happen now?”

“Well, Master Milton, if the baron is smart, which I feel doubtful, he will stew in his own juices then fume out. Should he try to retaliate against Sussex, methinks the king will send his battalion to quell the revolt. Hopefully, boy, we will not be that battalion,” Mortimer confessed.

“But if we be?”

“Then, we fight and fight well. And win,” replied the gentle knight.

I felt my face glow and my chest expand as I thought of fighting well by Sir Mortimer’s side, although I knew my Claret would not wish it. It made me feel like a real knight to ride with such distinguished knights.

Still, I prayed, asking that I am brave and not shirk from conflict, “Lord, God, I beseech You, support me in battle as you did King David. Grant me Your strength and protect our brigade when we face battle. Amen.”

I was amazed at the peace I felt in my heart after my prayer. I rode on beside Sir Mortimer with my head held high.

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We traveled for three days until we came to the southern coast of Dorset. In Hampshire, the roads were lean and filled with rocks, which made our travel more difficult. The air inside the forest hung heavy with the musky smell of fertile peat from centuries of fallen leaves. Birds sang and flitted in the tree canopy devouring seeds and berries

and scattering seeds for next year's banquet. A gentle breeze stirred the musky odor of the peat to give slight relief from the humidity.

On the coast, however, the whole of nature changed. The roads became sandy, and the air, still cool, smelled fresh and of salt. Crisp breezes carried that fertile peat smell into the air until the ocean waves swallowed it.

Just outside the village gate, Sir Mortimer called the brigade to attention and instructed us. "Troops, we are entering the county of Dorset where the baron has agreed to meet us to deliver a list of needs of the coastal towns. Methinks this is another span of hard but pleasant work. We shall rest as soon as the baron meets us." Then, Mortimer called, "Parade, advance."

We squires and knights alike laughed and giggled as we enjoyed the fresh air and longed to ride our mounts through sprays of the silver surf. However, our dreams of frolic must wait.

In short order, the Baron of Dorset, and his entourage of three knights simple and three squires, attired in brown and green cloaks, approached with their yellow banners unfurled in the coastal breeze. These yellow banners, emblazoned with a white insignia, stitched in red, accompanied the baron's coat of arms. This coat of arms in browns, greens, and reds, I thought, was more ornate than other coats of arms. The image was of two brown, winged dragons on either side of a white shield encrusted with three red outstretched dragons. Either on top or behind the shield, I could not tell which, was the design of a castle with three turrets. These banners and coats of arms gave an appearance of a colorful and robust unit. But which? Colorful or robust was yet to be determined.

The Baron of Dorset raised his hand, instructing his entourage to halt, then walked his steed up to Sir Mortimer.

"Hail, good knight. Welcome to the county of Dorset. I received a dispatch from our king requiring my cooperation in your campaign, which I give freely. I, and my companions, are at your service."

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

“Greetings, Lord Baron. As the king’s dispatch said, we are come on a humanitarian campaign and will help your people in any way you wish. We are well supplied with food, construction equipment, and medicine. This also is a training campaign for our young squires and knights simple. Tell us, sir, how may we help you?”

“In truth, sir knight, the coastal towns and villages are in dire need of fresh water. Are you able to construct wells for these villages?”

“Aye, sir. This we have done in several burgs already and will gladly do here. Show us where to work, and we will be at our tasks. Feel free, Lord Baron, to stay and observe or participate.”

“Nay, sir, I must be back at my manor, for my wife is in labor, and her time is at hand.”

“Be away, Lord Baron, and good fortune to you and your family. Oh, Baron, will you need to change your coat of arms to four turrets and dragons?”

I watched the Baron’s reaction and thought he seemed a bit relieved from his stress, and the two new friends laughed together before we commenced our work.

When the baron left us to return to his wife, the brigade explored the coastal towns needing fresh water. Being from London, I was amazed at the southern coast. While the eastern shore had its white cliffs of Dover, tall and majestic, and limited beach line, the south shoreline of Dorset County had a more excellent beach line that was easily accessible.

While we unloaded our wagons to begin work at the first town, Sirs Mortimer and Easley rode along the coast and evaluated the terrain.

“Easley, I estimate that we are in Dorset County two fortnights. Digging wells will take five days in each town.”

“Aye, that will be considerably longer work than in the interior towns.”

Joyce Crawford

“Aye, good knight, harder and deeper. The water is either salt or brackish. We need to dig deeper to hit fresh water,” replied Mortimer.

“At least, it offers our brigade time to play and relax in the surf.”

“Aye, Easily. I could do with a warm fire on the beach under the stars, myself.”

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The June sun warmed the land and our spirits, but the ocean water was cold, and the strong breeze chilled me to my bones. We started the first dig just as the rising sun brightened the sky, and it felt to me that my hands would freeze to my pick handle. However, strenuous work brought warmth, vigor, and surprisingly, much laughter, so we removed what armor we wore and worked in the barest of clothing. I did not duck soon enough several times and received a face full of sand from Le Roy’s sand ball attack. But to be sure, I retaliated with my own. To our surprise, even the knights joined in the fun and competition. These good-natured battles further strengthened our comradery.

With the villagers helping dig and shore up the sides, the work went faster. Then, in the evening, we all welcomed bounteous meals of seafood, beans, and potatoes, followed by a romp in the still chilly surf and a cozy seaside fire. Le Roy made a pillow from cool sand and lay down for a nap. Wymond called to me with a mischievous beckon, and we buried Le Roy’s entire body. Laughter erupted from the whole brigade when the tide came in, and Le Roy struggled to excavate himself.

As our work continued, it seemed that we dug wells down the entire southern coast of England, around the southernmost coast of Devon, and onward to the western shore of Cornwall. However, there was little complaint because the barons and villagers alike welcomed us and appreciated the aid we gave.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

We encountered another hospitable baron in Cornwall whose tenants and servants prepared a most generous feast for us. Just as in Leicester, I had an opportunity to get to know the working people of the county, and I learned much from them that I cherish.

When we completed our work in Cornwall, we turned north and continued to follow the shoreline, the Bristol Channel, to the village of Bristol in Somerset County. The countryside was beautiful and diverse, although it seemed familiar. The clouds, the birds, and the scampering animals I saw were like those at home outside London. The trees were more plentiful and appeared to be different colors of green. I let my mind climb to the tallest tree and sway on its thin top with the songbirds, where I imagined warming my body in the sun. The terrain of Bristol was not as steep as London, making our journey easy. In addition, Bristol was not as wet as the king's town. In short, the July temperature and humidity made for pleasant riding, and I allowed my mind to wander.

First, I thought of Mother and Father, then of my sweet Claret. I dreamed of our wedding day and how it would be when, at last, we moved into our small manor as husband and wife. The bliss was overpowering.

"Milton? Milton, did you hear what I said?" Le Roy interrupted my daydreaming.

"I beg your pardon, friend. Will you say again?"

"What do you suppose will happen when we get back to London? Will we receive a parade with flowers strewn in our paths? Or will we receive awards and commendations from our king?"

"I think we will receive a long night's sleep before continuing with our normal duties."

When I laughed, Le Roy sulked.

When our brigade arrived back in London, the trees, dressed in gold and burgundy leaves, promised that October would soon bring All Hallows Eve and festivals.

It was good to be home.

After returning to the castle, Sirs Mortimer and Easley requested an audience with King Edward in two days' time to report on the combined success of the two campaigns.

"Your majesty," Mortimer and Easley bowed in homage, "we bring you good reports."

"Say on, good sirs."

Easley delighted the king with his oral and written report, accounting for supplies, food, and medicine. Mortimer pleased the king with his report of ten counties served, including six Dorset villages.

"There was only one skirmish against thieves in Leicester County."

The king raised an eyebrow at that report, but Mortimer hurried to explain the successful outcome. "We arrested Master Wymond Pruitt, a boy of seventeen years, for leading the band of thieves."

Again, the king raised his eyebrow and, this time, frowned.

"My lord, Master Pruitt, while riding with us in custody, proved himself to be a skillful, obedient, and loyal soldier eager to learn. I commend him to you, sire."

The king waved his jewel-encrusted fingers and said, "Continue."

"Sir, Master Milton de Burton also proved himself. He was eager to learn from his superiors and from peasants alike. He showed initiative and wise decision-making skills and, when necessary, did not shy away from confrontation. He, too, I commend to you."

Sir Mortimer cited other Knights simple and squires, who performed well. "There is another, sire. Master Milton's friend, Le Roy. This squire, while not as eager to learn as Milton and Wymond, still performed well and was loyal. May I commend him to you?"

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

“Very well, sir knights. This is a job well done. How say you on the commendations?”

“My king, if it please your majesty, Master Wymond Pruitt will make a fine squire, Master Milton de Burton an excellent knight, and Master Le Roy Purcivel, a worthy Knight Simple.”

“Let it be as you say, good knight. Scribe, did you record all that?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the scribe bowed.

“Lord Chamberlain! Where is my chamberlain?”

“Sir,” the chamberlain replied as he hurried into the great hall from his visit to the public corner.

“I charge you with planning the appropriate ceremonies forthwith.”

“Sir,” the chamberlain acknowledged in the affirmative with his fist over his heart.

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Lord Chamberlain once again proved himself more than able to organize the ceremony of welcoming the brigade home from their successful campaigns. The king acknowledged the excellent leadership and mentoring abilities of Sirs Mortimer, Easley, de Kendale, and Clyve Custford. The king also gave special mention to the older soldiers—Drake Taylor, Milo Nash, and Wade Forester—who elected to remain to help the villagers.

“Noblemen and citizens, these are excellent leaders, worthy in battle and in training. I thank you, good knights, and special reward awaits you. To these older soldiers who elected to stay behind to aid the ill and recovering in the town of Leicester, we wish you well in your new adventures, and I shall provide funds and supplies as needed.”

Joyce Crawford

Many participated in the campaigns, worthy of mention or promotion, and the king mentioned each one, making the ceremony longer than expected.

With the wave of the king's hand, the royal trumpeters filled the great hall with their vibrating fanfare.

“And now, my good people, I present to you Knights Simple and Squires, William Fletcher, Dirk Shepherd, Gwain Brickenden, and Milton de Burton. Soldiers, approach.”

My startled legs moved, almost involuntarily, to stand before the king. As we proceeded to face the king for our conferment, I thought to myself, Is this one of the highlights of my life for which I have been waiting? Would the king confer upon me the title of Knight? Is this the first step to claiming the real reward I longed for, Maid Claret's hand in marriage? At least, I hope I thought it to myself and not verbalized it.

Minstrels played softly, and candles flickered their warm light as the Bishop, always in attendance at a ceremony in the great hall, stepped forward to pronounce the liturgy. The Bishop's thick, heavy liturgical vestments of velvet trimmed with silken threads whispered heavily as he passed the king's standard and opened his prayer book. However, a commotion in the corridor outside the great hall interrupted the reading of the Scriptures.

“Who goes there?” a castle guard challenged.

Royal guardsmen snapped to attention, and the sturdy wooden handles of their long axes sounded authoritative thuds on the floor. Then, with another snap, the guardsmen cross their axes across the door in a protective manner.

Another strong voice called out, “Intruders! Halt!”

“Castle guards advance! Stop them!” the Captain of the Guard commanded as his steed pranced.

The unmistakable sound of invading warhorses prancing on the cobblestone floors preceded the shouts and the distinctive ringing of steel on steel. Soldiers' feet shuffled on the cold stone floor in a futile

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

attempt to repel horse and rider. A helmet dropped to the ground, ringing its death dirge.

Inside the great hall, chairs fell backward, echoing their sounds from wall to wall as knights clambered from their seats and military commands usurped the liturgy.

“God save the king!”

“God save the king!”

“God save the king!”

We soldiers-waiting on conferment before the king, jumped to our feet and repeated the cry, “God save the king.” Steel rang the length of our scabbards as we drew our swords then stood arm-in-arm to protect the king from assault.

Another contingency of royal guards surrounded the king, who, shaken and angry, hurried from the great hall to his royal chamber.

A confusion of rushing feet, pushing bodies, swirling silk skirts, and screaming ladies further broke the reverence of the ceremony—the ringing of more weapons leaving their sheaths reverberated up to the ceiling and through the hall.

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The following day, with the skirmish quelled and the ceremony forgotten, clean up began. Milton resumed his duties as squire to the king and waited outside the royal bedchamber. Finally, after a long day and night of anxiety, the king relaxed, and his emotions faded, as it were, into a cup of stout ale and an application of fur from a bear’s ear that lay on the king’s chest.

After a fortnight of discussions of guilt, neglect on the part of royal guards, and accusations of wrongdoings, the captain of the Royal Guard read the verdict. The combined gasps of relief and surprise from the military personnel and guests in the great hall warmed the air.

“If it please Your Majesty, the lords, in unanimous agreement, assert that Lord Alfred Bassard, Baron of Hampshire, did with malevolence, march on the king’s castle to retaliate and recapture property the king ordered annexed and given to Odem James, younger brother of Sir Charles James, deceased Baron of Sussex. We, your faithful lords, do hereby ascribe treason to Lord Alfred Bassard, Baron of Hampshire.”

“Arrest Lord Bassard and bring him before me on the morrow. In chains!” the king commanded through clenched teeth before turning his body with apparent disapproval to leave the hall, his royal robe swirling at his feet.

The king retired to his chambers to consider the verdict and appropriate punishment.

I watched as the king paced first in anger, then in agony. His countenance was severe, and he wrang his hands behind his back. Then, as he reached the opposite side of his chamber, he turned, paced, and wrung his hands in front of his chest. The king repeated his pacing twenty times. My heart broke seeing our king wrestle with his turmoil. Finally, unable to hold my tongue, I spoke.

“Sire?”

“Who’s there?”

“It is I, sire, Milton de Burton, your squire.”

I was surprised when the king waved me forward.

“Sire, may I speak?”

“What have you to speak of, lad?”

“Of your turmoil and decision, my lord.”

My statement appeared to give the king a slight relief from his anxiety, and he gave a subdued belly laugh.

“You, my squire, have words of wisdom for your king?”

“I beg your pardon, my king, but I would offer an option and solace for your anxiety.”

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

“Say on, Master Milton.”

“Sir, it is well known that treason is punishable by death. Would it not give the king peace to present an option that would satisfy the guilty verdict and also present the king as a strong yet benevolent leader of his people?”

The king stopped his pacing and scratched his beard, considering my words.

“You speak truth, Master de Burton. That is well. You also speak compassion. That also is well. But how can your king exhibit both strength and compassion and still rule wisely?”

“Sir, the Holy Scriptures tell us the wisdom and compassion of King Solomon. He is wiser than any king before him or since. I beg the king’s pardon.”

The king waved my comment into the air, and I continued. “The Scriptures also tell us that our Lord Jesus was wise, strong, and benevolent. Who, sire, can compare with our Lord Jesus?”

The king reflected again, but this time with a softer countenance.

“Where heareth about Solomon and Jesus, lad?”

“My tutor, sire, and my father, Sir Walter de Burton. Also, Sir Clive Custford, our spiritual leader on our campaign, shared Scripture and stories with us.”

“Aye,” whispered the king. “Thy father. Sir Walter de Burton. This knight is wise, strong, and yet compassionate. Sir Custford, too, shows forth those same qualities. And I am a king, being taught by a lad.”

“I beg your pardon, my lord. I did not mean to presume ...”

“Presume away, my lad, for you have wise words and a compassionate heart just like your father.”

“My lord,” I bowed in appreciation to my sovereign.

Joyce Crawford

The king, now laughing more, grabbed me by my arms and said, “So, Master de Burton, what wisdom might you further impart to your king?”

“If it please the king, Baron Alfred Bassard is a single man, forgive me, sire, a pompous little man, with great appetite for food and earthly pleasures. If the king seizes the baron’s property, what of that? There is no one to suffer, save himself, and who will remember that a year hence? However, if the king seizes the baron’s title and places the baron in charge of other property, your people will long remember that.”

“Why should my people remember my giving the rascal baron other property?”

“Because, sire, the property Alfred Bassard would reign over would be below the castle, and your people will praise you for sparing his life.”

The king’s eyes gleamed, and a smile creased his face. “Oh, I see, lad. Alfred Bassard would be lord of the muck rakers. Excellent. Walk with me. I shall pronounce sentence in my court.”

I continued to serve the king and stood in good stead with my sire.

Chapter 7

A Royal Wedding – A Disappointment

When not attending my king, I was at home with Father and Mother. I rose early and rode over to Father's London manor, taking in its beauty and tranquility. This property was the small manor King Edward I bestowed upon Father at his knighting. Later, when Father retired, he built our family manor in Staffordshire, his ancestral home.

Then I proceeded to my own modest manor. It was indeed beautiful and well suited for my bride. Grand tapestries displaying pastoral scenes of England, fine furniture in rich wood, and other elegant appointments adorned each room. However, Father warned me to take a lesson from the wren.

"The male wren labors for days building several nests. When his beloved makes her choice of nests, she then sets about to take it apart and change it. So, my son, do not fret when your bride changes your fine arrangements. It does not mean she disapproves; it is just the way of the female." I found those words to be so true.

Just as Father had said, my two years of service to the king was no more than the blink of a calf's eye. Both Maid Claret and I had much preparation to keep our minds busy. With her chaperone's help, Claret made every stitch of her trousseau. In her trousseau trunk, a gift from Queen Isabella, Claret lovingly packed delicate linens embroidered with colorful stitches and a nightgown with a matching dressing gown made of the finest linen for our wedding night.

Joyce Crawford

Father instructed me in a man's wedding attire, and Mother, using fine linen, lovingly fashioned nightshirts and underclothes for me.

As I studied my bride's new home, I remembered how Father and I surveyed the land for the perfect place to build the small but elegant manor. Then, Father engaged peasants to fell trees and turn stones found in his forest. In return for their service beyond what Father's estate required, Father assigned those peasants tracts of land for their own homes. I thought Father was so generous and kind and vowed to follow his example.

In addition to skills that I learned while on campaign, the serfs on Father's manor taught me new skills or more efficient ways to accomplish a project. It was with great admiration that I followed their instructions. Some peasants looked in askance at a gentleman working with his hands doing manual labor, but I knew those skills would be valuable in years to come. Other peasants and servants admired my willingness to work at their sides. Some of them had watched me grow from a babe into the man I have become.

While the men worked in the forest, the women planted gardens and stocked root cellars with vegetables and fruit. Now my land boasted fruit orchards and nut groves. Dairy cattle, goats, and fowl also roamed in the fields. I wanted so much to bring Claret out to the manor and show her the new orchards and groves, but I knew social graces and her vigilant chaperone would not permit that. So, I had to wait and surprise her when she was at last mistress of the manor.

Finally, the day approached, and Mother busied about giving final instructions to Cook and the servants. Father polished his brass again, and I paced.

Earlier in the week, Father had the servants bring out the open cart. Although the simple cart was not of the finest cedar adorned with gold leaf as I imagined a nobleman's carriage would be, I thought it grand. Ample garlands of the greenest ivy and November flowers adorned the freshly oiled oaken sideboards. Large clusters of wild roses with a

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

delicate pink color and fragrance reminded me of Claret's soft skin. Asters in different shades of purples and lavenders blazed in colors that would enhance my Claret's red hair. White saxifrage, equally as delicate as the rose, exhibited strength against November's cold temperatures, strength like Claret's. Interspersed among the blossoms, rosemary and sage added a masculine fragrance that complimented the delicate flowers. I like to think that my own musk complimented Claret's beauty and quiet strength, just like the scents of the flowers and herbs.

As a wedding gift to Claret, Alber, the groomsman, drove the cart. He indeed looked smart in fresh livery, and his broad smile radiated over his now clean, sun-worn face. Claret and Alber had been good friends since childhood when he was groomsman to her father, and Alber cared for Claret like an older brother.

Mother and Father rode in the cart with me to the castle to collect my bride. The ride seemed interminable, but having Mother and Father with me eased my anxiety, even though Mother cried silently. Finally, I whispered my fears to Father. "Father, how did you cope with your doubts? That be, doubts about caring for a wife?"

"You pray, lad. Remember, we prayed, asking God our Father to give you wisdom? The same is true now and for the remainder of your life. Pray. Then thank God for His answers and blessings even before they are manifested. Letting God take care of your doubts and fears will surely give you peace."

My mind returned to the evenings I shared prayers with the Jewish settlers in Nor. I was impressed with how they prayed. First, they thanked God, then asked, then thanked God again.

"Thank you, Father. I will. While on campaign, I discovered my own dependence on our Lord and spoke with Him often, just as I speak with you."

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Joyce Crawford

Upon arriving at the castle, Mother and Father joined the minstrels and other guests to walk behind the cart to the Cathedral.

Young maidens, looking like giggling pairs of turtle doves, dressed in the soft lavender tones of November's asters, escorted Maid Claret through the expansive, hand-hewn timbers of the castle's gateway, making my bride appear even more small and delicate.

Claret's chaperone followed close behind, still faithful and vigilant. However, I did not see the chaperone through the same eyes as I had when Claret and I were first betrothed; I did not see her at all. My eyes saw only Claret, my bride.

As Claret had chosen her bridesmaids, I chose a best man. I chose him because he was the best man with a sword to protect and defend my bride. I chose Sir Mortimer of Kent; there was none better to symbolically ride his steed next to my bride as her protector.

Sir Mortimer stood at the foot of the gateway in a chivalrous knightly manner, then walked by Claret's side toward the cart. With skillful hands, the knight protector bid his horse to bob his head up and down as if in approval of the lovely woman who walked beside him.

I thought it a symbolic gesture that a gentle breeze picked up Claret's long silken veil and train and wrapped it around her virgin body. Then an opposite breeze swirled to unwrap and release her. My heart leaped.

"Thank you, my Lord God."

I stumbled up the rocky path to meet my bride halfway. As she drew closer and held out her hand to me, my dry lips whispered, "My sweet Claret," and we gazed into each other's eyes. My heart pounded with excitement and pride and a little fear.

"My dearest Milton. Are your thoughts assured of this?" she asked, reflecting her own anxieties.

"I was never so certain of anything in my life."

When my mind cleared, I held her arms out to admire her wedding dress, the dress she made with her own delicate hands. Yards of white silk, adorned with silvery embroidery threads, caressed her shoulders,

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

those shoulders I longed to kiss and make my own. The beguiling silk that covered her breasts ever so gently flowed to her feet and clung to her hips in a seductive yet tasteful manner to reveal her maidenly form. Claret's deep red hair cascaded in soft curls about her white shoulders and down her back. Her dewy eyes peeped from under long lashes that fluttered amongst claret-colored bangs. I brushed her bangs away from her lashes, and her eyes shouted love to me so that I thought that everyone nearby might hear. Then, again, I remembered King Solomon's words.

“Behold, you are fair, my love; behold, you are fair; you have doves' eyes within your locks: your hair is as a flock of goats that appear from mount Gilead.”

At that moment, I understood perfectly of what King Solomon wrote.

Tantalizing my mind, a burgundy cord braided with gilded strands girded her tiny waist. My body quivered when I thought of those burgundy cords surrendering to my eager yet nervous hands. When we are alone at last, and Claret's silken gown falls to her feet, what will she do? Will she recoil as my eyes feast hungrily upon her soft white body? Or will she welcome the gentle touch of my hands roughened from digging wells on campaign? What of me? I had not given thought to how I might react to her touch, her embrace, her lips on mine. I just knew I craved her touch. Nay, her whole body.

Then my mind froze. Will my sweet Claret remember how I violated her body while I was on campaign? How could she not know? It was so real. My heart dropped to my knees, and my shame returned. This shame gripped my mind and soul with wicked talons, not unlike the thick black talons of a bird of prey. These talons of shame pierced my eyes as if blinding me and pinched my heart with deep hurt.

I prayed. "Oh, Lord, my God. Forgive my doubting your promises. Forgive me for asking again. Remove this shame from my heart. Pray, let not Claret know of my violation and shame."

Joyce Crawford

Then, as a tiny sparrow, strong and loving, protects her nest, God's peace lifted my heart. I remembered. Had not Father assured me that it was in my dreams and that Claret might have her own dreams as well? With that remembrance, I bid my shame flee and tried to push those thoughts from my head.

Again, I prayed, but this time with a clean heart, "I thank You, Lord God for Your peace."

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I took Claret's delicate hand and placed it in the crook of my own arm, strong, eager, but still shaken. We walked together down the path to the cart; fast or slow, I cannot remember. I only remember the thrill of touching Claret's waist as I assisted my beloved into the cart to take her seat opposite mine, as was proper. The minstrels followed the cart, dancing and singing while playing the lute and lyre. With his experienced hands, Alber guided the pair of white horses slowly over the cobblestone street.

At the end of our wedding procession, King Edward and the Archbishop waited at the steps of the Cathedral.

With my mind still in a dreamy state, I thrilled as my trembling hands touched Claret's virgin body, that delicate body guarded by white silk. I breathed in her rose fragrance as I helped her from the cart. This time, it was she who stumbled. I caught her in my arms and held her there, breathing my concern into her lips, "My dear, are you at ease?"

She breathed back in a whisper, "In your arms, I shall always be at ease, my dear Milton."

Gasps from our guests at our open display of affection shook my mind from its euphoria. Then, once recovered from our embarrassment, we walked the last few paces to where the archbishop stood at the Cathedral doors. Our fingertips did not touch as we stood together facing the archbishop. My parents stood by my side. His Royal

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

Highness, King Edward II, and his queen, Isabella, flanked Claret. Our friends and, of course, Claret's chaperone looked on. I heard a gentle weeping as we stood and turned to find the chaperone silently weeping into the hanky Claret had made for her.

The archbishop held the tiny gold wedding band I chose for Claret, opened his prayer book, and asked the customary questions.

"How old is the bride?"

The king replied, "The bride, my niece, is seventeen, Archbishop."

"And the groom?"

Father replied, "The groom is nineteen years, Your Grace."

"Are the bride and groom related to each other by blood?"

"No, sir."

"Doth the bride's father or custodian permit the marriage?"

Just then, the king's prime minister stepped forward and whispered in his sire's ear. The king paused, and my heart stood still.

Then the king replied, "In truth, Archbishop, there is one matter that is of some significance."

"Your Majesty?" the Archbishop asked incredulously.

"May I remind the Archbishop that Maid Claret is my niece of royal blood and is a ward of the court. As her status dictates, she must marry a nobleman of high rank. Master Milton is not."

The archbishop, suspecting the king's sense of humor, played along.

Raising his eyebrows, the archbishop replied, "How unpleasant, sir. What doth the king propose?"

"Sir Archbishop, I propose that, with the Church's permission, we postpone this wedding."

I turned to look into my Claret's eyes, and my gasp must have been audible as all eyes turned in my direction.

"Wise decision, sire," added the archbishop.

Joyce Crawford

With the consent of the Church, the king turned to the guests and worshipers and announced, "My good people, we must postpone this wedding for a season. A short season. Pray, enter the Cathedral as is right."

With great reluctance and extreme anguish, I kissed Claret's hand, then placed that soft, delicate hand into her chaperone's. I quickly turn to avoid my bride's startled eyes.

Father and Mother bid me stay, for it was Sunday, and we must go in and worship.

My lead-filled legs drug over the Cathedral stone floor, and I took my place next to Father and Mother in our family pew. Although I wanted to cradle my head in my hands, I fought back my tears and held my gaze forward. Once, I stole a glance across the aisle at Claret, and she, too, stalwart and true, tried not to cry.

The minstrels began their prelude, and the clergy entered, followed by the choir. I neither saw nor heard either, for my mind felt dead as did my heart.

Then, the trumpeters rose and lifted their trumpets to sound their fanfare. The royal courtiers entered, followed closely by King Edward and Queen Isabella on his arm. Somehow, I bowed my homage.

The archbishop, standing, opened his prayer book to begin the liturgy.

"The Lord be with you."

The parishioners replied, "And also with you." I could not answer.

Then, the archbishop deviated from the liturgy when he said, "My sire, good friends, and citizens. I must ask your indulgence in this deviation, but there is an important matter that begs completion."

The archbishop stepped to the altar, turned, and said simply, "Sire," and motioned to welcome the king to the altar.

Father touched my shoulder, bringing me out of my sorrow, and nodded to the chancel.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

"My queen, Archbishop, friends. When last we were together, our solemn ceremony was interrupted by unpleasantness. Therefore, with delight, I request that Milton de Burton come forward."

Blood drained from my head, and I could not move to acknowledge my king's beckon. After what seemed like an eternity, Father gently took my arm in his own strong hand and guided me to face the king. My legs trembled, and I turned when Father left me standing there, dazed. Then Father returned to his seat with Mother.

The king continued, "Master Milton de Burton, for as much as you have exhibited loyalty to your king and bravery on campaign and in defense of your king, it is my honor to confer upon you the Royal Order of Knighthood. Will you:

"... always defend a lady.

"... speak only the truth.

"... be loyal to your lord, the king.

"... be devoted to the church.

"... be charitable and defend the poor and helpless.

"... be brave."

With my eyes wet with tears and my legs weak from emotion, it took several seconds for my dry mouth to utter the words, "I will."

"Kneel, Master de Burton."

I genuflected before my king and lost my balance. Had it not been for the gentle touch of King Edward's hand on my shoulder, I would have fallen over. Then, the king removed his sword from its scabbard and lay the shining blade on each shoulder in turn.

"Arise, Sir Milton de Burton, knight, guardian of the realm."

Father and Mother rushed to my side. Father embraced me in his strong, but trembling arms, and Mother kissed my cheek with her tear-soaked lips. Then, together, they ushered me outside.

The trumpeters sounded their fanfare, and the king exited from the altar, collected his queen on one arm, and then a still bewildered Claret on the other.

Once the king and his entourage had exited the Cathedral, the archbishop continued. "Dear friends, with joy, let us continue with the wedding. In that we have already deviated from the wedding protocol, we shall continue. Please be seated."

At the archbishop's signal, luthiers played their lutes, and the people's whispers hushed as the bridesmaids almost danced their way to the altar, dropping rose petals.

Someone pushed me forward, and I grabbed Claret's hand, afraid to let go. With another push, my bride and I followed the trail of rose petals to the altar, where the archbishop waited. As God took Eve from Adam's left side, Claret walked on my left. Unlike outside the Cathedral, this time, we walked hand-in-hand.

Father and Mother followed and took their places at my side. Just having them at my side gave me strength.

Another fanfare and the people stood. King Edward and his queen, Isabella, entered the Cathedral with much pomp and joy. The people bowed their homage as the king passed, then together, the king and queen stood at Claret's side.

The archbishop continued, "Doth the bride's father or custodian permit the marriage?"

The king paused in a moment of uncustomary humor, and my heart stood still. "Heartily, sir," the king said, glancing in my direction with mischievous eyes.

"Were the marriage banns appropriately published?"

"Yes, Your Grace. The whole kingdom knows of this wedding."

"Do both the bride and the groom consent freely to enter into marriage?"

"I do," I squeaked.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

"I do," Claret whispered away her anxiety, then giggled at my squeak.

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Standing in front of the archbishop, I wobbled on weak legs, contemplating my duties as a husband and lord of a manor. Doubt and fear, my familiar companions, dug their evil talons into my shoulders, and my stomach nearly heaved while my legs quaked. When it came time for me to answer, my throat held my words prisoner, and I choked.

I truly wanted to plight my troth to my bride. So, remembering Father's words, I prayed. "Lord God, release my captive words and help me to speak." Just as Father said it would happen, a calming peace flowed over my heart.

The archbishop opened the liturgical book to the wedding celebration and prompted me to say the words to my bride. God gave me a clear mind and the strength to say, "I, Milton de Burton, ..."

In the first line, the archbishop interrupted and corrected me. "I, Sir Milton de Burton."

My heart thrilled within my breast, and beaming at my bride, I started over. "I, Sir Milton de Burton, knight and guardian of the realm, do take Claret Gaveston to be my wife. I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love you and honor you all the days of my life."

Following the vows, the archbishop said a prayer of consecration to bless the gold ring, then handed it to me.

From his book of liturgical prayer, the archbishop again prompted me, "Repeat after me, 'Claret Gaveston, with this ring, I you wed and plight you my troth.'"

Joyce Crawford

My voice broke, and I stumbled through the words. Then, with a grateful and devoted heart, I placed the symbol of my eternal love on the third finger of my beloved's delicate hand.

The archbishop pronounced his blessing and said, "By the power which Christ our Lord hath given me, I now pronounce you husband and wife. Sir Milton de Burton, you may kiss your bride."

Gazing deep into Claret's sparkling grey eyes, I bent first to taste, then to devour her lips in the gentlest of kisses. That kiss left me wanting more like a hungry child, but social graces constrained me.

The archbishop then touched our shoulders to turn us to face the worshipers and said, "Your Majesties, friends and citizens, it is with great pleasure that I present to you Sir Milton de Burton and his wife, Lady Claret Gaveston de Burton."

We stood together for the first time as husband and wife, and I presented Claret with a small velvet purse holding thirteen coins. After our wedding ceremony, she would give these coins to the poor, symbolizing her authority to make financial decisions in my name. My name. My name that was now hers.

When we took the first step from the altar in sync, the trumpeters stood and raised their golden trumpets to their lips and sounded a fanfare. Our fanfare. My wife's and mine. I placed my wife's arm in the crook of my own and smiled at her. Beside the king, Claret and I stopped, faced the king and queen, and bowed our homage. I stole a glance at the king, who winked at me. My heart soared again. After two more steps, we again stopped and faced Mother and Father. I kissed Mother's wet cheek and held her to my breast as if it were the last time. Then, I grasped Father's hand, that strong hand that gently guided his child through tender years.

Next, Claret took the most perfect rose from her bouquet, handed it to Mother, and kissed her on the cheek as a daughter would kiss her mother. After which, my wife tiptoed to kiss Father's damp but proud cheek. Then, we took our seats with the de Burton family.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

Moments later, the archbishop stood and stepped behind the altar. Altar candles, previously lit by acolytes for our wedding ceremony, glowed brighter and cast their dancing light about the altar table. The scent of fresh beeswax permeated the nave, along with the combined fragrances of bountiful bouquets of fresh flowers, our wedding flowers, that adorned every inch of the chancel. The archbishop opened his liturgy book to the Sacrament of the Eucharist, that most sacred of celebrations of our Lord's sacrifice, and began, "The Lord be with you."

I looked into Claret's eyes and whispered, "And also with you," and kissed my wife on the cheek.

When the archbishop read the Eucharist, it was as if I was hearing that sacred liturgy for the first time, but now it took on a new meaning for me. Sharing the celebration of our Lord, I felt a new and deeper bond with my wife and thought that no sweeter bond could ever exist. I whispered, "Thanks be to God."

Following the service, the archbishop announced a wedding feast at the home of the bride and groom.

Amid an abundance of food and drink, best wishes, gifts, and gaiety of our reception, the king motioned his royal solicitor to present Claret's dowry. Upon hearing the pronouncement, my eyes glowed with immense surprise. Although I knew Claret was the king's niece, I had no idea that he would grant her so generous a dowry. She glanced at me with gentle, unassuming eyes as if waiting for my approval, which I gave without reservation, yet despite the dowry, I considered myself a blessed man.

After an unending celebration, including a bountiful meal with friends and family, Claret and I slipped away from the party. At last, I took my wife into her manor, where the scents of new wood and stone, herbs and flowers filled the air with the newness of life.

We crept up the winding stairs to the master bedchamber, where the chambermaid had earlier prepared a warm and welcoming fire. The dancing fire in the fireplace, beckoned me to take sweet Claret to bed.

Joyce Crawford

Away from the party, the manor was quiet and still. The November night, though chilly, was mellow.

To my surprise and extreme joy, Claret unashamedly guided my hands to loosen the ribbons of her wedding gown. Her gown fell to her feet. She stood before me, her young body beckoning. My heart pounded in my chest, and blood rushed to my maleness. I breathed in Claret's essence and tasted her lips and neck, down to her breasts, just as I had imagined it. But then, she took my breath away when she kissed my body greedily. I was not prepared for the explosion of euphoria she sent through my veins. Even my dreams paled to the thrill Claret gave me, and I gladly returned the thrill for her as our love exploded in pure joy again and again.

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The next morning, as the sun peeped through the window coverings, I waited for my sire to roar for his squire. But there was no roar. Instead, there was only the gentle breathing of my sweet Claret, my wife. "Thank you, my Lord God. Help me to be her protector, her provider, and her lover."

"You are most welcome, My son. Remember My words to the Ephesians:

'Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it;'

Thus, my life with Claret began. Our Lord God was our leader, and I was her provider, protector, and lover. I was the richest of men.

Chapter 8

New Treasures, Hurts, and Triumphs

In 1315, I was twenty-one, and I cherished my life with Claret. Those were blessed months together. When it seemed that life could get no better, Claret gave me a son; I was the father of a son. Another kind of joy exploded in my heart, and I wanted to embrace my son and my wife each moment God gave me breath. Claret and I named our son John, a fine, stout English name.

“John de Burton,” I whispered as I cuddled my son. “My son.” I smiled to myself each time I said those words.

I strove to be a good father, and in so doing, I reflected on the years I spent with my own father. Those years were precious to me, and I wanted to continue sharing more years with my father and my own son. I wanted to take John hunting and talk with him man to man, training him as my father had done with me. But most of all, I wanted to share God’s love with my son, John, the way Father had shared with me. No lad could have had a better father. Sir Walter de Burton was indeed a true knight. He was brave, gallant, and loyal, everything I strove to be. My life with my infant son and my own father was pure joy.

Then in 1317, my world fell apart when Father died; but he died in battle, as was any knight’s wish. But my question was always, for what did he die?

Although I appreciated King Edward for granting me knighthood and allowing me to marry his niece, I soon discovered the truth about the monarch and resented the wasteful, inattentive king and queen. The king gave orders to his militia, and then he and his queen sailed for Spain or parts unknown to play. Regardless of our monarch’s

Joyce Crawford

disinterest, my militia unit and knights fought for the kingdom with honor, courage, and loyalty. *So, this is what Father died for?* I grumbled to myself.

I shall never forget the day the knights brought Father home. We fought the French, who had invaded England's east coast. Many loyal men died defending the king and their beloved England and were still victorious over the French, but at what cost of time, money, and lives?

Mother and Claret expected our troops home at the end of the siege, but they never imagined that Father would come home mortally wounded.

The day Father died, Mother beckoned to me. "Milton, my son. Your father is calling for you. Pray, go to him, but first put on a brave face."

Trying to please Mother, I did as she had asked. With a brave face, I went into the room where Father lay. The smell of rotting flesh permeated his room, and oozing bodily fluids stained his sheets and nightshirt. His face, once strong and brave, now looked old and worn with sunken temples and blackened eyes. My bravery evaporated into the putrid air, and I knelt beside his bed and wept like a child. I poured out my grief until his nightshirt was wet with my tears and his bodily fluids.

"Nay, my son. Be not downcast," Father said, trying to comfort me. "I have lived life well and have no regrets. You and your mother are my joy, and now God has given me Claret and John, a fair grandson. I thank our God for giving me such a family. Now, son, you must take care of your mother. It should not be a hard task but do it well."

Then Father reached his pale and trembling hand for a pouch where it lay on his side table. Unable to grasp the object, I put the purse in his hand. He fumbled, trying to release the leather ties, but finally had to rely on my help. With exhaustive effort, he removed the contents of the pouch and held it to me.

"The coin," I gasped.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

Father placed the coin in my palm, then clasped his dying hand around mine. “Remember, lad, I once told you that the coin would be thine? Today is that day.”

Another flood of tears ripped my heart, and I held his frail hand to my lips as I sobbed.

When I found my voice again, I whispered, “Nay, Father. I want not the coin. I want only you.”

“My son, I want you to have the coin, not for its worth, but for a remembrance. When you touch the coin, remember the many years we have had together, and share the memories with your own son and tell him of his grandfather’s love.”

“Aye, Father. My children and their children will surely know of your love and of the love of the Lord our God.”

“As for your mother, she is to stay in the Staffordshire manor. It is now your manor, but also her home. When she no longer needs the estate, it will be yours alone. But I pray you, keep it in the family, for land and faith in God are your greatest riches.

I promised Father, kissed him one last time, and we prayed together. Then, he died.

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At Father’s funeral mass, both nobility and knight, tenant farmer and peasant filled the cathedral. Farmer Smythe and his wife greeted me with a holy kiss; that was a great comfort to me.

“Thank you for coming, Farmer Smythe, you and you wife. I warmly remember the many times Father and I visited you. Father enjoyed sharing his faith with you, as did I. Bless you for coming.”

Farmer Smythe, himself consumed by grief and unable to speak more words, wiped away a tear, then started to lead his wife to stand at the back of the cathedral.

Joyce Crawford

“Nay, good farmer. Please, sit here with us. Father would be pleased.”

Claret and Mother greeted Farmer Smythe and his wife and made way for them to sit with us. For that, I loved Lady Claret more deeply.

Led by Sir Mortimer, a company of knights also attended as an honor guard. Even the burly storekeeper who tried to intimidate us as kids came with hat in hand and spoke kind words to me.

Father’s servants and serfs also came to pay their respects. They filled the back of the nave, they and their gifts of flowers and produce. How would I be able to thank them all?

When the mass began, the Bishop stood and greeted the congregation, “The Lord be with you.”

The congregation’s reply echoed through the cavernous cathedral stones, “And also with you.”

Then the Bishop continued, “First, a reading from King Solomon’s Book of Ecclesiastes, chapter three.

Again, the congregation replied, “Thanks be to God.”

‘To everything, there is a season and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;

A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.”

“The Word of the Lord.”

“Glory to You, Lord Christ.”

Then, the archbishop continued, “Although this is Walter de Burton’s time to die, let us also make this our time to rejoice in the magnificent life of Sir Walter de Burton, knight of the realm and child of God.”

A reading from King Solomon’s Book of Ecclesiastes, Chapter forty-four verses one through fifteen.”

“Thanks be to God,” the congregation replied again.

I bowed my head, and my heart convulsed with grief. Claret grasped my hand in hers. Her hand was soft and warm, and it was a great comfort to me. With Claret’s comfort, I remembered how often Father encouraged me, “My son, be of good cheer.” Again, Father’s words lifted my heart, and I listened to God’s Word as the bishop read:

“Let us now praise famous men and our fathers that begat us.

The Lord hath wrought great glory by them through his great power from the beginning.

Such as did bear rule in their kingdoms, men renowned for their power, giving counsel by their understanding, and declaring prophecies:

Leaders of the people, by their counsels and by their knowledge of learning, meet for the people; wise and eloquent are their instructions:

Such as found musical tunes and recited verses in writing:

Joyce Crawford

Rich men furnished with ability, living peaceably in their habitations:

All these were honored in their generations and were the glory of their times.

There be of them that have left a name behind them, that their praises might be reported.

And some there be, which have no memorial; who are perished, as though they had never been; and have become as though they had never been born; and their children after them.

But these were merciful men, whose righteousness hath not been forgotten.

Their seed shall continually remain a good inheritance, and their children are within the covenant.

Their seed stands fast, and their children for their sakes.

Their seed shall remain forever, and their glory shall not be blotted out.

Their bodies are buried in peace, but their name lives forevermore.

The people will tell of their wisdom, and the congregation will show forth their praise.”

When the Bishop finished reading, he reverently closed the gold-clad book, lifted it, and said, “The Word of the Lord.”

Through my tears and feeble breath, I answered, “Glory to You, Lord Christ.”

Then the Bishop added, “Let us not forget Sir Walter de Burton, but let us treasure his memory in our hearts forever.”

I thought those words of Scripture a most fitting passage for such a man as Father.

The mass continued in solemnity as my family, Mother, my sweet Claret with my son, John, and I, made our way to the altar, and we shared Communion. The congregation followed, and this, too, gave me

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

great peace. Again, I remembered the words Father recited to me from Paul's letter to the Hebrews.

“Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which does so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us.”

As my breaking heart remembered Father, those words meant even more to me, for Father was among that great cloud of witnesses watching and cheering me on.

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Father was thirty-nine, and I was just twenty-three. Losing Father left a wide gap in the royal order of knights and an even wider one in my heart. I had to fight the base emotion of hate when I thought of the meaningless loss of Father. But then the Holy Scriptures came to me, bubbling like a spring of refreshing water into my heart.

“Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord.”
Romans 12:18.

Again, I remembered the blessed words my parent and friend shared with me.

“Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!”
Matthew 18:9.

I did not want to be the man who caused offenses. So, I buried my hate and continued to serve England, if not her monarch.

It took ten long years, but the Lord, our God, did indeed have His vengeance, for Queen Isabella and her lover, Roger Mortimer of France, conspired together and murdered King Edward II. At the death of Edward II, Isabella became regent of England on behalf of her son,

Joyce Crawford

Edward III, known as Edward of Windsor. However, Edward III, now eighteen, ousted and banished his mother and executed Mortimer.

King Edward III was as ambitious as his sire was gutless. This monarch was an eager ruler, seeking to conquer Scotland and France, and he reigned well and true for fifty years, and I was pleased to serve him.

My beloved Claret supported me in my service to the king. She was a faithful wife and lover and cared for my mother and our son. In the fulness of time, my Claret gave me yet a second son, Oliver, and a bonnie daughter, Rose. My responsibility as a Christian father grew, and I rose to meet the challenge. I wanted my children to know and love their grandfather, our brave ancestors, and our Lord God.

As I continued in prayer on behalf of my family, God's answers and blessings shone forth.

Claret, too, continued to share in my faith but did not limit her good deeds to our manor alone. Instead, just as she gave coins to the poor on our wedding day, Claret continued giving to the poor. She did not only give occasional coins but food, clothing, and shelter.

As our manor grew with our expanding family, it also extended to accommodate the poor and needy. Indeed, Lady Claret put her heart and hands to the words of our Lord God, "And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." Matthew 25:40.

My sons, John and Oliver, grew into manhood and followed in my love and faith in the Lord our God. Sadly, however, as my sweet Rose grew to be a young maiden, she fell prey to the charms of one of the older men who took refuge in our home. He was a man of the world and of dubious parentage.

However, my work and prayers for my daughter seemed to be for naught. That scoundrel absconded with my Rose in the cover of night. My wrath burned in my belly, and I swore an oath to find my daughter and do away with this wretched man. Then reaching into the depths of

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

my heart, I remembered words from our Lord God that I had learned at Father's knee, and I took no vengeance. I also remembered the prayers of the Jewish refugees in Nor when I was on campaign. These Jews praised God, offered their petitions, then praised God for his greatness and answers. I remember how I had vowed to follow their example. As I prayed and sang Psalms, my heart received peace.

A song of praise. Psalm 145:3

I will extol you, my God, O king; and I will bless your name for ever and ever.

Every day will I bless you; and I will praise your name for ever and ever.

Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; and his greatness is unsearchable.

One generation shall praise your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts.

I will speak of the glorious honour of your majesty, and of your wondrous works.

And men shall speak of the might of your terrible acts: and I will declare your greatness.

Songs of supplication

Psalm 5:3

My voice shalt thou hear in the morning, O Lord; In the morning will I direct my prayer unto you, and will look up. Hear my prayer, O God; give ear to the words of my mouth.

Psalms 86:1

Bow down Your ear, O LORD, hear me: for I am poor and needy.

Joyce Crawford

Psalms 61:1

Hear my cry, O God; attend unto my prayer.

A song of praise and thanksgiving.

Psalm 104:31-35

The glory of the LORD shall endure for ever: the LORD shall rejoice in his works.

He looketh on the earth, and it trembleth: he toucheth the hills, and they smoke.

I will sing unto the LORD as long as I live: I will sing praise to my God while I have my being.

My meditation of him shall be sweet: I will be glad in the LORD.

Let the sinners be consumed out of the earth, and let the wicked be no more. Bless you the LORD, O my soul. Praise ye the LORD.

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It was two years before I saw sweet Rose again. When I happened upon her in London, I found her hiding in the darkest and filthiest places. Her emaciated body spoke of her hunger. Her skin and breath cried out her secrets of abuse. She hid from the man who beat her and fathered her child out of wedlock. She hid her shame in the dark and dank streets that she roamed. When our eyes met, she tried to run, but the bundle she carried hindered her, and my mount was swifter. My daughter could not escape. When she finally gave way to my pursuit, I swiftly dismounted from my steed with no thought save that of enfolding my sweet Rose and her son in my arms. I held her warmly, tenderly, and wept.

“Daughter, come home.”

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

With those words, my daughter relinquished her defensive spirit and fell a volunteer captive in my arms.

“Thank You, Lord God. Thank You. My Rose is found.”

“You have been a good and faithful father and servant. Remember My Words, My son. ‘Train up a child in the way he (or she) should go, and when she is old, she will not depart from it.’ Now take your daughter and your grandson to your home and call him your own, for he is one of Mine.”

With encouragement from the Lord my God, I obeyed His words and took my grandson to my manor. I refused to let people call him a bastard, for he was as they, a child of the one true King. When my spirit fell and I had unkind words in my heart, I again remembered the words of Our God,

“And Jesus, perceiving the thought of their heart, took a child, and set him by him, and said unto them, Whosoever shall receive this child in my name receiveth me: and whosoever shall receive me receiveth him that sent me: for he that is least among you all, the same shall be great.” Luke 9:47-49

Therefore, I named my grandson Luke, and he became a mighty defender of England and a warrior for our God. Praise be to God.

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In the year 1330, I was thirty-six. That decade seemed to be a waterfall of devastation. In 1338, severe drought swept England, resulting in multiple years of lean harvests precipitating a devastating death toll and dire economic consequences. England languished in famine and poverty. Perhaps that is why, in 1347, King Edward III, a wise and diligent ruler, established The Most Noble Order of the Garter. A new spirit sprang up in England, and chivalry flourished. My sons, John, Oliver, and my grandson, Luke, being of noble birth from

Claret, their mother, were knighted in that year. Luke, the youngest, was only sixteen.

In addition to entering the knighthood, John, my eldest, gave me a robust grandson, Adam, and two beautiful granddaughters, Sylvie and Rebecca.

Adam was a squirmy babe, always wanting to explore his world. As he grew, he seemingly remembered the stories I told him of his great-grandfather and my own stories of life lessons and faith. Later in his life, Adam was a diligent teacher of his own children, remembering the scripture verse with which I counseled his father throughout his life, “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.” Proverbs 22:6. For this, I praise our God.

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This new face of knighthood established by Edward III was a great honor and not only of military strength as in days before. My sons were among the knights who performed merciful and benevolent missions among the people. England once again enjoyed safety, prosperity, and camaraderie. I was proud of my sons. My work as a knight, however, was done. My job now was to stay home and pray for my family. I reveled in joy as I watched Mother and Claret teach and train the girls. I was not ashamed to admit that I doted on my granddaughters. Sylvie, age ten, reminded me of Claret at that age. Her auburn locks bounced and swirled around her shoulders as she ran through the manor fields chasing her pets. Rebecca, two years younger, was the perfect lady and preferred to sit with her grandmother doing needlework. At age six, Oliver’s daughter, Chelsie, was just beginning to read and write her numbers. I could think of nothing better than to sit beside a cozy fire with her on my knee and watch her trace her numbers.

When not running, sewing, or writing numbers, my girls memorized scripture from my telling. As I remembered Father imparting this treasure to me, I breathed a prayer of thanksgiving, “Thank you, God,

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

for my father's teaching. Thank you, Father, for sharing God's love with me. Grant me, Lord, that I might share your love and words with my family."

However, my joy was interrupted when the Black Death cursed England, spreading death and misery.

First Mother, now aged and frail, quickly succumbed to the plague. My beloved Claret cared for her mother-in-law throughout my mother's illness.

Then, a year later, when only fifty-five, Claret fell victim herself to this most horrible disease. As I watched my beautiful wife, this gentlest of souls, suffer from a raging fever, it was as if someone clawed into my chest and wrenched out my heart. Before the fever abated, she writhed in pain and humiliation with bloody issues from every part of her tender body. Her suffering continued for four grueling days. Parts of her body turned black, biting flies filled the room and nested in her lesions. The room where she lay soon filled with a putrid odor of rotting flesh. Nevertheless, throughout her suffering, my sweet Claret sang hymns and prayed, and my heart broke.

"O sacred Head, now wounded, with grief and shame weighed down,

Now scornfully surrounded with thorns, Your only crown;

O sacred Head, what glory, what bliss till now was Thine!

Yet, though despised and gory, I joy to call You mine."

How I yearned to swoop my Lady Claret up in my arms and cradle and comfort her. But I could only pray and try to sing through my tears as I listened to her fleeting breath.

"What You, my Lord, hast suffered was all for sinners' gain;

Mine, mine was the transgression, but Yours the deadly pain.

Lo, here I fall, my Savior!' Tis I deserve Your place;

Joyce Crawford

Look on me with Your favor, vouchsafe to me, Your grace.”

No stoic thought, no amount of prayer, no remembrance of Scripture could hold back my tears when she sang. Although her strained and whispered words now failed and faded from my hearing, I remembered how her strong, young voice once sang each word to the Lord with a joyful song.

“Be You my consolation, my shield when I must die;
Remind me of Your passion when my last hour draws nigh.
My eyes shall then behold You, upon Your cross shall dwell,
My heart by faith enfolds You. Who dies thus, dies well.
My heart by faith enfolds You. Who dies thus,”

When death, at last, gave her peace, it took all the strength the Lord our God provided me to place her once beautiful body on a pyre and watch as my love vanished into swirls of smoke as if taking Claret to Heaven. I battled depression for weeks, although God, in His love, continued to beckon me with open arms.

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For the next six months, I watched and listened as criers spread the news of Spanish ships being denied mooring in London’s ports. As this most terrible disease spread, so did the rumor that priests returning from Spain brought the disease to England. Unbeknownst to these priests, their thick fur coats harbored colonies of flees. The king ordered English ports closed, but by that time, death, blood, and human stench ravaged England, killing millions of people. Fear gripped England, and fear does wicked things to people.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

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English ships ablaze with St. George's cross on distinctive red and yellow bars guarded the English coastline. Majestic hulls of cedar beams and white masts fully unfurled created a formidable first impression for ships coming across the channel.

Spanish ships entered English waters requesting permission to moor. However, the English admirals bitterly denied the Spanish requests.

"Ahoy there! Heave to!" the ship's admiral shouted his authoritative voice across the protection of the ship's massive beams. "Turn your ship about. Spanish ships are no longer permitted to enter England!"

"Under what authority, sir?" the Spanish admiral retorted.

"Under the authority of King Edward III, King of England."

"Why this inhospitable stance? Spain has always enjoyed friendly commerce with England, sir."

"Not as long as Spanish ships carry the plague, sir!"

The Spanish admiral must have been incensed and deliberately moored in unprotected ports.

In London, the town criers hammered their parchments to public houses for people to see, and minstrels helped to spread the news.

"Hear, thou, my story, and I will tell it thrilling. If you like my story, then toss me a shilling.

Plague-laden ships from Spain came a-sailing, so the story goes.

Bringing England more plague, death, and woes.

The loyal subjects of England fought the invaders back and refused to endure another Spanish attack.

Amid waving English sticks and bricks, torches and swords, the travelers could only flee from our homeland, not towards."

In their brewing fear and anger, English citizens pulled these Spanish refugees from the ships as they tried to disembark. These innocents, victims themselves, received undeserved beatings and burnings. In retaliation, Spanish soldiers battled back the English people, and the violence continued in a vicious circle of hate, fear, and destruction, further straining the relations between our two countries.

Sadly, before England had fully recovered from this plague, I witnessed the wicked red fangs of the Black Death once again feast on the people of England, veraciously sucking out their very life. Our constant companions, death and despair, imprisoned people in quarantine and misery, both gentry and peasant, until the face of England was again black and bloody. This misery was yet another cruel reminder of my sweet Claret's suffering and my yearning to join her soon.

However, as was the character of the Lord our God to be faithful, He rescued me. On my knees, I clung to His promises.

There hath no temptation taken you, but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it. 1 Corinthians 10:13

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When the plague subsided for a time, I eagerly followed the people's gossip and criers' parchments spreading their words through the streets of London once more. This time, their news was of a young priest and scholar, John Wycliffe, and I sought out this young man.

"My good sir, have you any news of the young man John Wycliffe?"

"Aye, Sir Milton. He is either crazy or truly from God."

"How so, sir?"

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

“Gossip is spreading that John Wycliffe, a young priest, is writing at Cambridge. His writings defy the Pope’s authority and defends the right of the common man to read and interpret God’s word for himself.”

“Writing at Cambridge, you say? Is that why the introductory banner is blue?”

“Aye, Sir Milton. John Wycliffe is a scholar at Cambridge University. Methinks that the school’s colors are blue, as in the symbolic color for the Virgin Mary.”

“Have you read any of John Wycliffe’s writings? Are they in Latin?”

“Aye. I hath read his writing, for it is in our language, not in Latin. This brave young man is translating the Bible for the common man.”

“This John Wycliffe must need our prayers,” I proclaimed, “for if the Pope learns of this, John Wycliffe will surely die. My good man, peradventure you speak to John Wycliffe, pray, tell him I have lodgings for him, food, and safety in which to write.”

I could not offer my opinion of John Wycliffe. With my age, I had developed a cowardly streak. Anyone who agreed with John Wycliffe risked death as assuredly as this young man. Although I could not offer my opinion, I could provide this young man a place to live and safety in which to write. So, I invited John Wycliffe to my manor. Father would have been proud and held this scholar captive in conversation.

The Church continued to harass and condemn this young scholar for his writings on the reformation of the Church. However, because Wycliffe enjoyed the favor of Parliament, the Church could do him no harm.

In the days to come, when Wycliffe traveled back to London, I read a parchment announcing the arrest of this brave scholar and priest again; this time, his arrest was for his strong words against Pope Gregory XI. In these writings, Wycliffe’s statements on the ideal of poverty contradicted the Pope’s actions, bringing Wycliffe in direct conflict with the Church.

Joyce Crawford

The battle for Church reformation raged on. Even after his death, The Church convicted Wycliffe for heresy against the Church. His body was dug up and burned. Still, I applauded the faith and convictions of this young priest and scholar. His victory for the common man and his influence on church reformation was undeniable.

My mind traveled back to when Father and I rode together to tournament, and he chided me for asking questions about the Holy Scriptures. “The good Father read poems to me from the Scriptures and helped me commit them to memory. He read the Bible to me, and ... well, we best not speak of those things.”

“Why not, Father?”

“Because, lad, the Church looks down upon anyone other than members of the clergy reading the Scriptures.”

Now, however, through the work of John Wycliffe and other brave men, my children can openly read God’s Word and decide what its meaning is for themselves. Father would be pleased.

Not only did God’s word spread, but His beauty as well. Brilliant minds imprisoned by lengthy quarantine due to the plague were set free. Thus literature, art, music, and learning bloomed. Through the arts, all people witnessed or shared God’s glory.

My Rose, having met a worthy gentleman, also blossomed, giving credence to her name, and created beautiful paintings depicting a loving God. Her play with color and light touched my heart. The image that lingered in my heart was the face of God veiled, yet glowing, hovering over a troubled sea of humanity. Its dark colors of blacks and browns, reds and rusts haunted me. Yet it was not disheartening, for shining out of the thick darkness was the loving face of God. Rose painted God’s benevolent face in shades of whitest whites and alabaster, making even His veiled face shine in power. Rose also played beautiful music to calm and soothe the distressed bodies and souls of all who entered our manor. In love, Rose continued the work of her mother, my Claret.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

And I? To God be the Glory, I am going Home, ten years after my beloved Claret. Will she come to find me as she did that day in the stable?

“I am coming, Claret. I, Milton, your beloved is coming. Lord God, I beseech You, accept this your humble servant into Your own.”

Chapter 9

New Generations

Sir John de Burton, Knight, The Most Noble Order of the Garter
1632 – 1690

An obnoxious, unlocked shutter banged all night. A goose-down pillow over my head did nothing to block the sound. So, I lay there, unable to sleep.

Through thin slits for eyes, I cast a vindictive glance at the window where now silver shafts of light streamed through, illuminating the dancing particles of dust. The night wind that tantalized the shutters to our manor was, at last, dying down.

The English morning sun spread her light over Staffordshire manor, promising a bright warm day, but I still had to force my eyes to remain open. I tried to push away the thoughts of riding the forty leagues to London to prepare for yet another battle with France. However, like a knight in The Most Noble Order of the Garter, I must do my duty.

Still enfolded under a fur blanket, I lay in the warm bed made of lambs' wool, where I was born in the year 1315. My thoughts turned to the fireplace, and I thought if I were to wish hard enough, the fire would magically come to life. I felt sure the chambermaid would come, not interrupting our privacy, but seeing to our comfort. So, unwilling to break the beautiful morning spell, I lingered. I turned my head, and there lay a vision of my contentment and love. Maude, my wife, cuddled Adam, now just a few days old, suckling at her breast. I turned, grabbed the warm fur, embraced my family to my heart, and basked in their warmth and contented movement.

Still plump from bearing my son, Maude was warm and sighed as I pulled her and the baby into my arms. Adam squirmed but clung to

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

Maude's ample breasts. I listened. Maude's soft breathing in and out seemed in sync with Adam's sucking lips, now foamy with milk. My heart nearly exploded in my chest from joy and pride. My family was my gift from God.

"I thank You, Lord, God, for such a bounteous gift. Help me, Lord, to be worthy. Help me to love, protect, and defend my family to the Glory of Your name."

In my euphoria, I released my mind to wander where it willed. I remembered stories told to me by my father, Sir Milton de Burton, of Grandfather Walter de Burton. I never knew Grandfather, but Father made sure I learned of this great knight's faith and courage.

I continued in my thanksgiving prayer. "I give thanks to You, O Lord, my God, for the Christian heritage You have blessed me with. Give me strength and wisdom to continue in the faith that taught me so well of You."

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When King Edward III established The Most Noble Order of the Garter in 1347, Father saw to it that Oliver, Luke, and I received our commissions. In those days, knighthood was no longer dedicated to only military activities, although there were plenty of opportunities during England's years of turmoil. Instead, chivalry flourished, and a new spirit sprang up in England. This new spirit was kinder, gentler.

My brother, Oliver, and I, knights to King Edward III, took part in numerous benevolent campaigns, of which there was no shortage. Famine, death, and severe economic conditions made sure of that. We did not limit our benevolence to London but sometimes traveled considerable distances to minister to the needy.

When the Edwardian War broke out between England and France, the king called us to active military duty. For centuries, England and

Joyce Crawford

France had constantly been fighting to gain power over the crowns, but I thought this war was the climax; I was wrong.

When Oliver and I went into battle, something inside my gut clawed at me, telling me that killing innocent people was not what God wanted me to do. I believed that killing was clearly a contradiction between my imaginings as a small boy. And I came to learn that I shared Grandfather Walter's battle between his moral conflicts of duty and faith.

I remembered that Father told me how William the Conqueror invaded England from northwestern France. Later, from my tutors, I learned that William was a descendant of the Vikings, which further intrigued me. As a small boy, I trotted around the manor grounds on my stick horse with my Viking cape, a scrap of cloth, flying about my shoulders. To me, Vikings were the manliest of men. However, I learned that it was the Vikings who terrorized England.

I had always considered William the Conqueror, a great ruler who arranged for England's governance before returning to France. Now, almost three centuries later, my brothers and I are still fighting for England for the right to rule France. Will this struggle for dominance never end?

To rally the troops, a small boy ran from town to town, calling us out to assemble. From distant villages in England, knights, clad in shining steel plates, knights simple and serfs with little more than leggings, woolen shirts, and capes, rallied to London to receive orders.

We pushed our steeds four days from our manor in Staffordshire, changing horses whenever available.

"Ho, there, good knight. Steady, horse," Captain of the Guard called.

"Greetings, Captain. We received the rallying call. Are we too late?"

"Nay, sir. You are only the second of our troops to arrive."

"Do you know what our orders are, sir?" I inquired.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

“Aye, sir. A small flotilla of French ships has taken one of our own. The loss of men, ship, and cargo was substantial, sir.”

“And what of the French ships?”

“The French ships have anchored offshore, sir. You are to report to the port at London where your orders await.”

“Come, Oliver, we needs make haste.”

At the crowded port, men’s muscular and straining bodies bounced off each other as they carried military supplies. Horses whinnied and shook their heads in protest as grooms forced the animals backward to board the ship. Cannons thudded over the gangplank and balked at the ship’s threshold. Burly men, sweating despite the chill, pushed and coaxed the heavy cannons onto the ship and into their places.

“John! John de Burton!”

Sitting astride my mount, I searched over the mass of bodies for the one who called my name. Then shading my eyes from the bright morning sun that reflected off the channel’s chilly water, I saw that it was Derick Purves, my childhood friend, who called my name.

Derick’s father, LeRoy Perves, was my father’s boyhood friend. Now Derick, Oliver, and I were mates.

“Derick, how grand to see you again,” I greeted my old friend. “What are your orders?”

Derick returned my greeting with his strong hands on my shoulders. “My cavalry unit is loading our horses, armor, tack, and feed. Hector, my steed, is his ornery self. And thou? What will you be doing?”

“My brother, Oliver, and I just arrived, so we have not received orders yet. We best be off to find our marshal. God speed, Derick. Try to stay out of trouble.”

With those words, we embraced each other and chuckled into each other’s ear, remembering times when Derick was a rascal, often in trouble with the law and his company commander.

Joyce Crawford

Derick waved a gloved hand as the other gave a heave to his steed's withers.

Upon finding our marshal, Oliver and I dismounted and saluted our field marshal.

"Ah, John de Burton. Glad to have you and Oliver de Burton on board."

"Sir," I saluted.

Standing beside me, Oliver also saluted in knightly fashion.

"Men, a French flotilla sits just off our coast waiting like a wolf waits for his prey. However, we are like a fox. When night falls, our ships will move north out of spyglass range of the French, then make haste for the French coast as weather permits. There, we will take our revenge."

"How many ships are ready, sir?"

"Three. Just three galleys are ready, but we have the element of surprise. I feel confident in the grand company of knights to lead the troops."

"I thank you, sir" I acknowledged the compliment, then continued. "A Galley?" I asked with surprise. "How many troops can each ship carry?"

"Each galley holds 500 metric tons, so there is plenty of room for three companies on the galley we board. I understand your friend Derick Purves is on board."

"Sir. We spoke briefly when he was loading his steed onto the cavalry ship."

"Very well. Welcome aboard. Find your quarters and lead."

The marshal's explanation of the plan was correct. We set sail at the narrow-most point on the English coast, sailing for France at the dark of the moon. The weather was favorable, and the winds were seven knots.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

After sailing twenty minutes through the dark waters, a call came from the eagle's nest, "Land, ho." Every man on board hurried to their positions.

In short order, our galley slipped through the water of the English Channel and silently anchored off the French coast. I could not help but watch Oliver. He fixed his gaze on our objective. His jaw muscles jerked and released, jerked and released. Then, with a green face, he bent over the wooden rails and puked.

"Feel better, lad?" I laughed, not making fun but in empathy, knowing how he felt.

"Aye. As long as my stomach stays where God placed it."

The night was still dark when the ship weighed anchor. Soon, however, the light on the eastern horizon was like a thin gold thread. I knew we had to act quickly and quietly to take the victory.

Seasoned sailors lowered the ship's dinghies, and as many as could fit boarded. Other soldiers swam the chilly waters until they could wade to shore. But once onshore, they fell to the sand, trying to regain strength and body warmth.

After the troops reassembled, our field marshals gave their agreed-upon commands, and the invasion began.

Now it was I who had a churning stomach, for the moral conflict common to my ancestors returned. I prayed as God's people prayed long ago when they feared for the destruction of Jerusalem, "LORD, be gracious to us; we long for you. Be our strength every morning, our salvation in time of distress." Then, I moved forward.

Our march into France was non-eventful until we reached the village.

"What is our objective, sir?" I asked my marshal. "I see nothing save gentle townspeople."

"We need not harm the gentle people but march to the government seat and take hostages. They will lead us to the castle's ammunitions

stockyard. There, we will destroy their military holdings and the castle itself. Pass the word.”

We waited with minds filled with anxiety and stomachs overrun with sour bile. The morning was silent except for the occasional wrenching, cursing, and muffling of nervous laughter. The morning light over the village had the beginnings of an orange tint as shopkeepers wiped sleep from their eyes and fumbled with keys to unlock their shop doors.

We waited and watched in silence as the thin golden threads at the horizon turned into pink and orange fingers of light as if heralding the sun. The growing pink sky threatened rain.

Field marshals gave their orders, “Company, attention. Silent in ranks. Company, march.”

As our three companies marched, our collective chainmail sang their songs of triumph, the king’s red standards snapped in the swirling wind, and horses whinnied and pranced, clip-clopping across the cobblestone streets. Except for the wind coming off the Channel, the atmosphere had an ominous and eerie feel.

Then, I heard behind me a woman’s scream. I turned in my saddle. Muscles in my neck clenched, as did my legs. My eyes searched, and I spied by the lights coming from a pub. As if my head was on a swivel, my eyes searched again, hoping to see a drunken French patron trying to accost a barmaid but getting the worst end of that deal.

Then a surge of dust and grievous activity demanded my attention. My field marshal turned his mount and trotted to the company behind mine. Having the highest rank after my field marshal, I left my position and followed, thinking I could lend my assistance. Yet, as soon as I dismounted near the cloud of dust, I froze. My feet refused to move. My throat was dry and burned so that I could not swallow. My voice could not call out—only my eyes could see.

“Move back! Move back, I say,” the second battalion field marshal shouted.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

When the crowd parted, my mind confirmed what my eyes saw. “Derick! Derick!”

In dreaded terror, I ran to where my friend lay. By this time, Derick was lying in his own life’s blood. Black blood, yellow bile, and other bodily fluids oozed out, filling the packed sand between the cobblestones. A dagger protruded from Derick’s gut, exposing his bloody entrails. Still, Derick tried to rise to his feet. The knight wiped blood from his mouth with the back of his glove, then spat. Hate and confusion shone from his reddening eyes, and he stumbled into my arms.

“Derick, what ...?” I gasped in terror and disbelief.

“The wench attacked me,” Derick’s words gurgled through his death rattle.

Just then, Derick’s field marshal strode up. His countenance was stern, and his hand grasped his saber. “Captain of the Guard, what goes here?”

The Captain of the Guard swallowed hard. “Sir, eyewitnesses reported that as a young barmaid exited her place of employment, this soldier, Derick Purves, grasped her about her waist and tried to force his kiss upon her. Another witness reported seeing the soldier trying to assault the maid under her skirts while she struggled.”

“Purves, you read the rules of conduct. You have not acted chivalrous and thus are an insult to your knighthood. These actions cannot be tolerated, and I cannot afford conduct such as this in my troops. I deem your actions punishable by death.”

Gasps reverberated through the ranks. Indeed the field marshal could not mean such a punishment. But this was a time of war, and even more imperative, a time when rules must be followed. Then, with one glance, the field marshal, unknown to me, pointed and shouted, “End this!”

Those words sent me reeling back on my heels. Blood rose from my stomach to my throat, then to my eyes. I was blinded.

“You must follow orders, son. It is hard, but you must,” my kind field marshal whispered his encouragement.

My mind was frozen, and my eyes saw only blackness. My legs were immovable. I could only pray as my Lord once prayed in a garden, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me.” Yet, with my next thought, I continued, “Yet not my will, but Yours be done.”

Slowly, I approached Derick. His eyes no longer burned in anger but clouded over. When I reached my friend, I embraced his sweating neck with my left hand, kissed him, and cried, “I’m sorry, Derick.” I used my own body to obscure my friend from prying eyes. I felt Derick shudder in my arms, and his last breath escaped from his cracked lips. Obeying the field marshal’s command, I thrust my dagger into Derick’s lifeless belly with my right hand.

Then the field marshal barked to others in his unit, “Bury him!”

My heavy legs drug my even heavier heart back to my unit, and we marched on. I shall never forget that day. It was a hard but valuable lesson.

Over the next few months, I contemplated my duty as a knight, and I concluded that military service was neither in accordance with The Royal Order of the Garter, my love for my fellow man, nor my faith in God. So, I resigned my command and returned home and to my family. Staffordshire offered all I wanted or needed. I worked the soil and praised God each day for the day’s labor and bounty.

I was surprised when I received a summons from the king, ordering me to court. With an anxious heart and trembling knees, I attended and knelt.

“Sir John de Burton, son of Sir Milton de Burton and grandson of Sir Walter de Burton, that distinguished knight, it is my honor, nay, my duty to provide you with an annual pension of twenty pounds. This is little enough to repay the centuries of loyal service of your family.”

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The Royal Order of the Last Coin

Over the next generations, God blessed my family with brave men and women. War, conflict, and vengeance raked over England, and my son, Adam, fought as a gallant and chivalrous knight. In turn, his son, Victor, served as a worthy grocer to the king. Victor's son, Robert, served as a banker. Robert's son, Edward, served as a solicitor. All the while, these brave men worshipped and trusted God to lead them. And lead them, He did. But that is another story.

Joyce Crawford

THE NEW WORLD – JAMESTOWN

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The New World – Jamestown

An excerpt

Staffordshire, England, November 25, 1605

In silent agony, I tossed and turned all night. With the rising sun, my anxiety reluctantly loosed her grip on my heart, and I stumbled down the stairs to breakfast. My sleep-deprived eyes squinted when I walked into the manor's dining room, and I chided my pounding head for robbing me of the beauty of this English morning.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

Golden rays of sun glistened through a bank of east-facing arched windows. Masterfully crafted mahogany and cast-iron casings embraced two-hundred beveled glass windowpanes. As the morning rays penetrated the beveled glass, rainbows of light danced throughout the alcove, and kissed the mahogany paneling of the grand dining room.

Standing faithfully and majestically next to the bank of windows was a centuries-old mahogany buffet; there Gracie, our housekeeper, placed a crystal vase of yellow roses and blue hydrangeas from our garden. On the matching sideboard, Cook had displayed an array of breakfast foods on Mother's Ming Dynasty blue and white chinaware. Warm and savory herb muffins, sausage links, and sugary cinnamon fruit pies still hot from the kitchen oven filled the sideboard. Next to Mother's silver tea service, Gracie had placed the simple white China tea pot. Father had brought the blue and white Ming Dynasty Chinaware and the white tea pot from one of his voyages to China. He had often sailed to Asia in search of spices for the king's palace, and never forgot to bring Mother a love gift.

I had long admired the Ming Dynasty chinaware and hoped that one day I would inherit it along with the fourteenth century de Burton manor in Staffordshire. Now, however, that was not to be.

Although rainbows of light danced through the windows, and aromas from Cook's tantalizing warm sweet and savory treats filled the dining room, the atmosphere at breakfast was somber.

A Grande Baroque silver teaspoon tinkled against his porcelain China teacup as Father stirred sugar into his tea. The spoon played a musical note as only silver can, when Father lay his tiny teaspoon on the saucer. He took a pensive sip before asking, "What time dost thou sail, son?"

"Eight-o'clock ten days hence, sir."

Mother muffled her sobs into her lace-trimmed linen dinner napkin.

"Mother," Father whispered, "we spoke of this many times. Methought thou wast ready to let the lad try his wings."

Joyce Crawford

Mother could not answer. She dabbed her eyes with the linen napkin, inhaled a stoic British breath, then shook her perfectly coiffured head.

I was relieved when no one at breakfast spoke of my disastrous two-year training for the knighthood. It had been my long dream to be a knight like so many of my de Burton ancestors and serve King James. My desire was ready; I wanted to serve the king and his people. My mind was keen; had I not learned well the combat skills? It was my body. My coordination would not allow me to move and function with stealth as the other trainees did. During hand-to-hand combat, I often stumbled and fell. At jousting competition, sometimes I completely missed the stirrups on my mount's saddle. To make matters worse, my heart was weak, and I could not catch my breath. Both hampered my training.

During my first real campaign, even though it was a practice event, I fell under the sword of Leigh Allso, champion of Burton County. Although Leigh tried not to harm me, his sword penetrated my armor. I was out of the tournament. When the doctor reported my physical liabilities to the Lieutenant, my superior had no alternative but to discharge me and send me home.

The Royal Order of the Last Coin

Joyce Crawford

The Royal Order of the Last Coin is a work of fiction based on the Burton family genealogy and historical events.

Our oral family history told that our ancestry included a Native American line, specifically, Black Foot. In my quest to find answers, I received a surprise. My journey took me to 14th century Medieval England.



Mama and Daddy, Victor and Vivien Burton

A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

God has blessed me with three generations of Godly men and women that I remember. These strong men and women endured poverty, not enough to eat, hardship, sickness, World War I, the death of a twin, the loss of a home and the death of a father by fire, The Great Depression, and the loss of a limb and near loss of life in World War II. However, as Bill and Gloria Gaither's gospel song tells us, "Through it all, I've learned to trust in Jesus, I've learned to trust in God."

All families have gone through trials and tribulations throughout their years. They may or may not be the same trials, but what makes them special is the families whose they are. And what make struggles memorable is how we grow and overcome. Even as a four-year-old I marveled at the strength and courage of my family and their stalwart faith in God. They showed me how to depend on God for all things.

At an early age, I learned of God's love and the love of Christian hymns at my Grandma's knee. I learned humility, inner strength, and love from Grandpa's example. I memorized Bible verses and saw evidence of a stalwart spirit from Granny B. I treasured the survival, dedication, and devotion of Mama and Daddy.

In my quest for my Burton family's American Native Indian heritage, I stumbled over our ancestry dating back to fourteenth-century England. This new information gave rise to the story of the English de Burton's and the New World Burton's courage, obedience, and faith in God.

This faith in God, not my ancestry, is my heritage.

To God be the glory.

Joyce Burton Crawford

Joyce Crawford

A young John Milton Burton - ca 1871



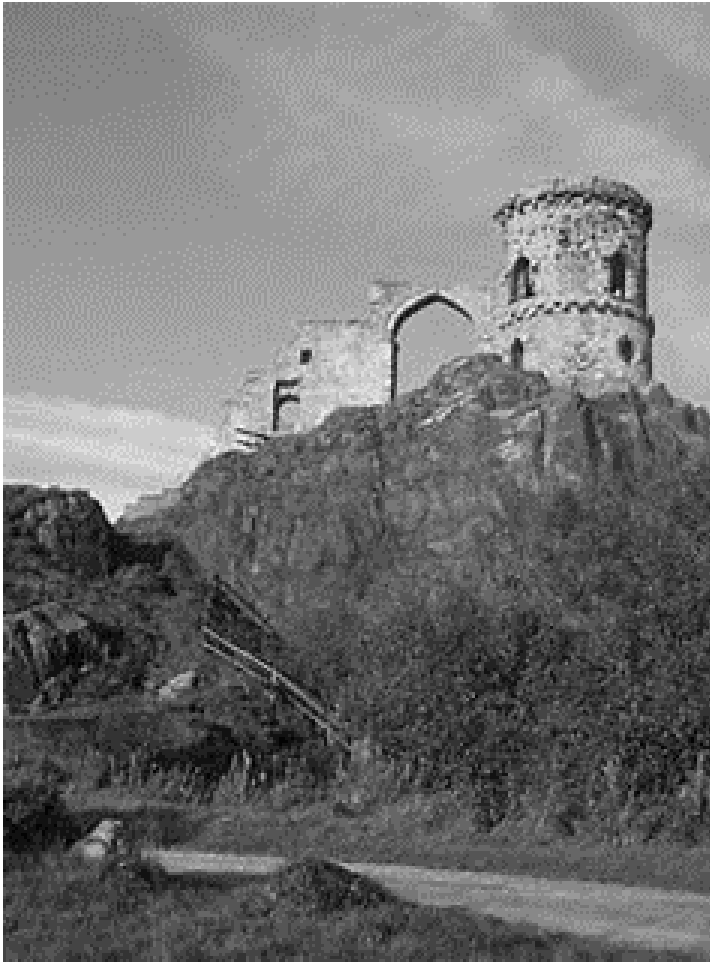
Back Row: Maude, Jessie, **John Milton**
Middle Row: Frankie, Luigea, Wesley
Front Row: James Burton, Ada, Susan

John Milton Burton and wife Nellie



Grandpa and Grandma (Granny B)Burton
Me and cousin, Marc
1952

The Royal Order of the Last Coin



Staffordshire Castle, Staffordshire, England

Joyce Crawford