

The Hero of Hastings



by
David Ferrers

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Background

My family name has its roots in the Normandy region of France. There we can trace various spellings of our name: Ferriers, Feriers, Ferrierres, Ferrieres. In England Ferrers is now held to be the correct spelling.

In Normandy the Earls de Ferriers could trace their lineage back to the Norse Vikings who came to France with Rollo. My distant ancestor Walchelin de Ferriers is reputed to have been one of the guardians of William, Duke of Normandy during his minority.

Walchelin's son, Henry de Ferriers, came to England with William Duke of Normandy in the year 1066. He fought at the battle of Hastings on the 14th of October of that year. He was one of the commissioners entrusted with drawing up the General Survey of England known as the Domesday Book in 1080. His son Robert, born in 1083, was awarded with much land and many Earldoms in England.

In the year 1038 Robert (de) Ferrers led the men of Derbyshire in the Battle of the Standard where the Northern Barons of England defeated the invading King David of Scotland. For his services Robert was created Earl of Derby. The family continued to hold that title until the 8th Earl was deprived of the title in 1266 for reasons which I have been unable to discover.

By 1299 John (de) Ferrers was using the title Baron Ferrers of Chartley. This title continued until the 14th generation of the family in England when Edmund Ferrers the 5th Baron Ferrers of Chartley had two sons. William became the 6th Baron and the second son John, born about 1414, started the line of the family from which I am descended.

I am indebted for this information to my great uncle Cecil who researched the family history extensively and passed the results of his labours down to the present generation.

This information is not provided to suggest that I have any rights or claims to any titles or lands in England but simply to explain my interest in the last thousand years of English history.

The characters in this series of novels have been created to people stories for readers to enjoy, set during important periods of English history.

The medieval times in which this story is set were times of great turmoil and almost constant war. Many ruthless men sought power by means of bearing arms and the treatment of ordinary people was often cruel and merciless; barbarous by the standards of today.

Chapter 1 - Normandy 1064

The hill was steep and boulder strewn with small patches of wispy grass between the rocks. The young man climbed steadily despite the slipperiness of his wooden soled sandals. He was driven upwards by his restless mind's questioning, searching for a way to decide what he should do with his life. He knew that as the second son of a prosperous tradesman he would not be allowed to stay on in the family business for much longer. His elder brother was showing increasing signs of wanting to marry and start a family which would rely on the business to support their needs. These were bloody times as Duke William sought to maintain his hard-won position as undisputed ruler of Normandy. Neighbouring Dukes and even King Henry of France himself were constantly threatening his territory. What was a young man to do in these uncertain times to carve out a future for himself?

The warmth of the sun on his back and the aching in his legs from the steep climb told young Gunnar deFer that it was time to take a break, to pause and take stock of his surroundings. He chose a level piece of well grassed ground where he could sit comfortably with his back against a rock. He reached into his leather satchel for some dark rye bread and sheep's milk cheese. Munching on the coarse bread he surveyed the valley far below. His sharp eyes could just pick out the Norman horses grazing in the meadows beside the sparkling waters of the river Sarthe snaking its way through the valley, its progress marked by the green lines of young willow trees along its banks.

Although the nineteen year old Gunnar had worked with horses in his fathers smithy since the age of ten he'd never owned a horse of his own. He had learned to ride by testing the newly shod horses on the highways around the smithy, but had always taken care not to over tax his mounts for fear that their owners might be suspicious of their possessions having been misused.

As he munched his bread and took an occasional sip of fresh mountain water from his leather flask his eye travelled down the course of the river. He admired the small wooden castles of the noblemen who owned many of the much prized horses. He noted the positions of the hamlets where the field workers lived. He watched the lazy progress of two wagons, each drawn by a heavy horse, as they made their way over the rutted road towards a ferry crossing. A small party of young noblemen hunting their falcons raced their mounts out of a wood in pursuit of hares.

In his mind the young man plotted the position of each road, ferry crossing, building and hamlet. He estimated the travelling time both on foot and when mounted between places of strategic importance.

At last he tired of studying the shimmering landscape and shifted his body to a comfortable position where he could stretch out his strong limbs and enjoy the warmth of the sun. He soon dozed off into a peaceful sleep.

It felt like a fly crawling near his nose. The tickling sensation as it entered his nostril caused him to raise his hand to swat the nuisance away. Instead of the expected insect his hand met another hand holding the long blade of grass that had interrupted his slumber. He came instantly awake. Alert to potential danger. His eyes flew open wide. His vision was filled by the smiling gaze of the shepherdess lying calmly on her side beside him, her head supported on one hand.

She laughed, delighted at his surprise. A light gust of wind caused dark hair to fall over her face. She swept it aside with the back of her hand: "Hello strange man. What are you doing on my mountain?" She demanded lightly.

The green of her eyes held him spellbound for a moment before he could reply. "I am exploring, learning about the country hereabouts."

She shook her head knowingly. "No, I have seen you before. You are the son of deFer the blacksmith. You were born in the Sarthe valley. You know this country."

Now it was his turn to smile. "Yes, I know it as a place to play, but now I am exploring it as a place where I might have to fight, so I am studying the landscape in a different way."

A puzzled frown crossed her brow, "I thought that according to Duke William's Truce of God fighting is only allowed on a few days of the year; so who do you intend to fight?"

"I have no idea yet, but my father is convinced that there will always be wars wherever Duke William rules." He searched her face, admiring the sunburned cheeks, the full lips the firm chin. "And whom, may I ask are you, who appears to know me so well."

She pulled away from his side slightly before raising her head proudly to announce. "I am Adelaide, daughter of Sir Haldup, Knight of Normandy."

"Ah," he sounded sympathetic, "I heard that your brother was captured during the fighting near Alençon." "So what is the daughter of an important Knight doing up here on this mountain?" He enquired.

"I am tending the sheep on their summer pasture." She noted his puzzled look so she added an explanation. "My father thought it safer for me to be out of the way whilst the fighting is going on, and he knows I love this mountain." She looked down at him defiantly.

He decided to change the subject. "How did you find me here?"

“I have been watching you climb since first light. I am always wake with the larks to make sure the sheep have not strayed during the night. I then look around for any signs of foxes or wolves; that was when I saw you trudging towards the foot of the mountain.”

“How did you get so close without disturbing me?”

She gave her jolly laugh. “That was not hard. I spend my life stalking wolves and foxes to scare them away or kill them with stones from my sling. They are a lot more alert and difficult to approach than a sleeping blacksmith’s son.”

He started to rise up to protest, but she pushed him back playfully. “Don’t move,” she ordered. “I’ve had no-one to talk to for two full moons. You have no idea how fed up one can get with the sound of one’s own voice.”

He smiled, “What do you do with your time up here?”

A mischievous look came into her eyes, “Well, I practice throwing stones with my slingshot until I can hit a pigeon in flight. I train my dogs to round up the sheep. I repair my stone hut. I cook my meals, which means I have to go down to the lower slopes every four or five days to collect firewood. I study the clouds and compose little poems.” Then she blushed. “Well, I do the things that young girls do when they think about handsome young men.” She reached over and placed her hand on his crotch. Then she giggled, “I see he rises like the ram’s when the yew is ready.”

She moved sharply backwards, but not quickly enough to avoid his vicelike grasp. “Don’t start something you cannot finish,” he warned her hoarsely.

She looked steadily into his pale blue eyes. “How do you know I can’t finish it?” She demanded coolly.

He released her arm. “I’m sorry.” He looked confused, “I never had a girl do that to me before. You took me by surprise.”

She lowered her eyes. “To tell the truth I took me by surprise as well. I’ve never done anything like that before either. It’s just that I was feeling playful and you’re so beautiful with your red beard and your red hair and your freckles and your light blue eyes and your strong arms.”

Now it was his turn to blush. “I’ve never been called beautiful before either,” he confessed. He felt a strong surge of energy coursing through his body. He could no longer lie down so he sat upright but made sure he stayed close to her body.

They sat quietly side by side for a few minutes, each feeling the tension. Then she suddenly jumped to her feet. “Would you like to see my hut?” She asked before setting off up the mountain without waiting for a reply.

As he trailed up the hill behind her he could not help but notice how strong she was and how well formed her lower legs were below her short tunic.

The crude stone hut was set on the east side of a shallow, well grassed vale surrounded by a natural ring of protective rocks. There was no door on the entrance opening. The roof was made of turfs laid on rough wooden slats. It commanded views down the Sarthe valley far below. In the dark interior he could just make out a pile of sheepskins which he supposed she used as her bed. Outside the doorway was a small ring of stones for her fireplace; forked sticks at either end made a rough spit for cooking small game.

“Where do you get water?” He asked absently as he glanced around.

“There’s a small upland marsh to the north, just beyond the ring of stones. Fresh water weeps out of the mountain and eventually runs down to the Sarthe. The spring never fails. Or, it never has in my lifetime.”

He left his satchel in the hut when they went out with the dogs to round up the sheep grazing on the hillside. He admired the way she worked the dogs so that they gently brought the sheep to her without the fretting that can so quickly lead to weight loss. All the while they chatted idly about life in the valley and the things they each enjoyed.

As they were wending their way back to the hut a lone pigeon flew over. Quick as a flash she had loaded her sling and sent a stone at the bird.

“You missed,” he chided her.

“Yes, but I get about one in seven. That was the sixth, so the next one will be on my spit.”

He laughed at her confidence and held out his hand for her to show him the sling. The small leather cradle for the stone was in the centre of two braided cords of sheep’s wool. On one end was a loop for her thumb, at the other end was a tab to be held between thumb and forefinger when the sling was loaded ready for a throw. “Can you show me how to use one of these?” He asked.

“Yes, but you’ll have to find your own stones. Mine are round and smooth from the stream near our house; they fly true. I only have a few left to protect my sheep so I can’t afford to waste them.”

She let him load the sling and throw a few rough granite stones gathered from the ground before she started to gently position his body more side on to the line of throw so that he could get more power and accuracy. He had thrown about a score of stones before one hit his target, a large boulder. He turned and grinned at her shyly, pleased with his success.

“You do well,” she complimented him. “Most take much longer before they hit much bigger targets like the side of a house.”

Back in the stone ring around her hut they sat down on a flat rock watching the sheep lazily grazing in the afternoon warmth. He broke the silence by asking, “Do you ever wonder about the future, about what your life will be like?”

She didn’t answer immediately. She just stared down at her foot making patterns in the loose dirt. “I’ve always just assumed I’d be married and have children,” she mused out loud.

“Do you not have any ambitions?” He turned towards her slightly annoyed by her passivity.

She grinned at him, “Well I hope that my husband will be a handsome blacksmith’s son,” she teased.

He turned away to hide his blushes, confused again by her directness. “I don’t know what to do,” he confessed. “I have this feeling inside me that I ought to be doing something so that I can make something of my life. But I have no idea what to do. The only thing I know is smithing and a bit of learning that I got from the monks up at the monastery where my dad sent me one day a week when I was a youngster.”

“Can you read and write?” She asked, sounding impressed.

“Yes, they taught me to read and write in Latin and how to add up, subtract, divide and multiply. They showed us maps of the world and told us a bit about the history of our people. I also read a fair bit about the Roman empire and the deeds of the great emperors and their armies.”

“Would you like to have been a Roman emperor?” She was only half teasing.

“I don’t think I could ever have been an emperor. But I could have been a soldier, or even the governor of a province. If you were good enough you often got chances because the Romans conscripted a lot of people from around the empire into their armies.” He enthused. “And, if you were good enough and showed your loyalty to Rome, you got chances to rise up the hierarchy and gain positions of power.”

“Is that what you want, power?” She asked, a note of slight distaste in her voice.

“Not power just for the sake of power,” he reassured her hastily. “But I want to build something, to do something that is important.” He looked slightly confused. “I don’t really know why I feel like this, but ever since I read about all the things the Romans did I have had a feeling that I would like to do something like they did. It seems such a waste that no-one has built on the foundations they laid. Where are the villas, the paved roads, the public baths that they started to build? All have fallen into disuse. Our roads are all rutted, there are no public baths, no villas, just castles many of which are only built of wood.”

“We have many fine abbeys, stone built castles at strategic locations and stone bridges at important crossing points on our large rivers.” She pointed out.

“That is true. But when you think of how much time and energy we spend fighting in order to possess land. It seems to me that we do not spend enough time and energy developing that land.”

“Surely that it up to the lords who rule over the land to decide, not the likes of you. We are just here to do their bidding, to grow their food and provide soldiers for their wars.”

“Are we just slaves then caught up in this feudal system? Nothing more than the tools of our masters?” He sounded angry.

She fell silent, a little scared by his words and his passion, but also excited by his visions.

“It is my belief that a good servant should offer more than just labour to his master. He should offer his master ideas and the ability to bring those ideas into being so that he can make his master more wealthy and powerful.”

“And how wealthy and powerful will the servant become by enriching his master?”

“Perhaps he will become wealthy and powerful, but that is not the vision that excites me. To me it is the building, the making of things that matters.”

“So, where will you start?” She asked quietly.

He kicked a small stone testily, “that is what frustrates me. I don’t know where to begin. No-one in my family has ever been anything other than a smith, as far as I can find out. All we know about is working iron. We are good at what we do. But I will not be able to work in the family forge and anyway that would not be enough for me. I want to travel, to see more, to learn more, to do more.” He fell silent, as if exhausted by his outpouring.

After a long silence he reached out his hand towards her and handed her the sling she had loaned to him and said. "I must be getting along. I have to be off the mountain before sunset for fear of turning an ankle when I descend between the boulders."

She looked down at the ground so that her hair fell across her face hiding her feelings. "I'm sad to see you go, my dreaming blacksmith."

"To tell the truth I am sad to go, I have enjoyed talking with you. In fact you are the first person to whom I have ever spoken about my dreams; but they're expecting me back home by nightfall." He looked coy. "They worry if I'm late."

"Will you come again?" She asked so quietly that he could barely hear the words.

"I will, just as soon as I can be spared from the smithy again." He promised. Then he turned away for fear that he might never leave if he did not get his legs moving.

When he got to the outer ring of stones he turned and looked back. She had not moved. "How long will you remain up here?" He called.

She looked up to where the moon cast a white shadow in the sky. "I will come down at the full moon after next. It will be too cold up here after that."

He turned his back and waved a hand above his head.

As he picked his way down between the boulders he was already planning how to make a sling of his own and how to become proficient at it's use.

The cloudy water flowed around Gunnar's arms as he explored the shale bed of the shallow stream with his hands and bare feet. He was seeking small round stones for his sling. He wished that the local inhabitants didn't discharge all their effluent and rubbish into the stream so that it would be easy to see the stones he sought. But the water was so filthy that he could not even see the bed of the stream only a few inches below the surface. He found wading in the dirty water an unpleasant experience, but considered it a price worth paying because he was determined to master the art of using the sling he had made for himself.

As he found each round stone he placed it in the leather pouch attached to his belt that he had had the saddler make for him as an ammunition holder. He'd prevailed on his mother to plait two lengths of finest sheep's wool for the ropes of his sling. He'd then attached a soft leather pouch between the ropes and the leather thumb loop and tab to the outside ends. So assiduously had he practiced with his new weapon that a mere two weeks since his meeting with Adelaide he could already hit a man sized boulder nine times out of ten from twenty paces. There was still much he could

improve upon, but with diligent practice he felt sure he would master the art of slinging.

His reverie was interrupted by the gruff voice of his elder brother Girart, “what are you doing wading around in that filthy water?” he demanded.

“I’m collecting pebbles for my sling.” Gunnar replied a little self-consciously.

The older brother stared at him thoughtfully. “It seems to me you are a little old to be playing with toys.” He commented.

“It’s more than a toy if you know how to use it well.” Gunnar defended himself. “David killed Goliath with one of these.”

“Humph,” Girart sounded doubtful. “Anyway don’t forget to pick up the charcoal. We’ve a thousand arrowheads to fashion by the end of the month and need a lot of heat for the forge.”

“I haven’t forgotten,” Gunnar reassured him. “I will fetch it this afternoon.”

On his way up to the woods where the charcoal burners lived Gunnar practiced slinging stones at anything that presented a suitable target. He threw at the trees in the meadows, at the decaying stone walls where once small castles had stood. He threw at the large grey boulders in the fields. He practiced throwing longer and throwing straighter, so that his accuracy over distance gradually improved.

The heavy packhorse followed at a safe distance. She was weary of the master’s new habit of throwing stones, so she was happy to mooch along behind, stealing the occasional mouthful of grass. She bore four great baskets woven from willow and young chestnut; these hung either side of a stout yoke made from wood and leather fastened across his back.

The dog Sable occasionally chased the stones as they left the sling. But he was frequently distracted by the flight of a hare that had been disturbed when its hiding place was accidentally hit by a stone. Sable was a valiant chaser but he was bred for hunting vermin and guarding homesteads not for chasing herbivores. Nevertheless he enjoyed the chase and pranced joyfully in the long grass, ears pricked, head forever moving from side to side as his eyes searched for his quarry.

As Gunnar left the sunlit meadow and entered the forest it became noticeably cooler. The dog became more alert, less playful; he started to look out for squirrels and wild piglets to hunt. As they progressed the wood became more dense, the path narrowed. Soon only a few shafts of flickering sunlight penetrated the canopy. An eerie quietness surrounded them.

Suddenly a massive figure appeared on rising ground, blocking the path only a few yards in front of them. His dark colouring and the black stubble on his face spoke of a southern ancestry, not Moorish but definitely south of the Pyrenees mountains. He wore a jerkin of dark leather from which his strong arms protruded like the branches of an oak tree. His feet were spread apart so as to straddle the path. His arms were folded confidently across his chest. This was his domain, he ruled here and he wanted everyone to know it.

Never taking his eyes from Gunnar's face he shouted out to figures hidden amongst the trees, "It's alright lads. It's the blacksmith's son." Then he asked, "You've come to collect your father's charcoal no doubt?"

"That is why I am here Kemen." He replied confidently. "And I have brought you some new axe heads, chisels to split logs and hammer heads."

"And have you brought us any nails?" The big man demanded gruffly.

"Yes, a cup and a half, as you requested."

The big man turned and led off through the forest. After a while he turned away from the beaten track onto a narrow path that twisted round the side of a hill. The undergrowth was pockmarked with rabbit burrows. Manfred noticed evidence of coppicing and a little tree felling. A short time later they entered a clearing in which stood a massive conical pile of logs stacked on their ends to form a charcoal kiln. This was surrounded by six rude wattle and mud huts all of whose doors faced the central kiln. The ground around the kiln was worn bare of grass or shrubs and littered untidily with the waste of everyday living. Behind each hut was a small pigsty and a post and chain where dogs patrolled at night to keep marauding wolves at bay. A haze of smoke from the charcoal pile hung over the encampment.

Gunnar hobbled the horse and hung a nosebag of feed over her head. Kemen reached into one of the baskets and took out an axe head. He ran a wetted finger along the blade to test its sharpness. He smiled as a small smear of blood oozed from his finger. "That will do," he announced. "Your father is a good smith. He puts a good sharp edge on an axe."

"I made the blades for you this time," Gunnar said mildly.

The big man gave him a look of surprise and admiration. "I thought it took many years of practice to put an edge like this on an axe."

"So it does, but I have been working in the smithy with my father since I was ten years old. I have learned most of the skills of a good worker in iron."

“Um,” Kemen looked thoughtful. “Will you stay and eat with us?” He enquired. “We have a wild boar needs eating.”

“I would like to sup with you. And there’s something I would talk about with you.”

They sat on a rough wooden bench staring quietly into the fire where the boar was being gently turned on a wooden spit by a woman with untidy black hair and a dark red face. Her strong body was covered by the green tunic preferred by most of the forest workers. Occasionally she would stick the blade of a sharp, wooden handled knife into the body of the boar to test how the meat was cooking. When she was satisfied she sliced off some strips of meat and piled them onto a coarse wooden plate which she placed at the feet of the two men.

The meat was tough but tasty and the two men ate hungrily, the juices dripped down their beards. Kemen called for ale to help them down the meal and the woman brought it in wooden mugs with froth flowing down the sides.

When they had finished eating Gunnar cleaned his hands on the sides of his leather tunic. Then he broached the subject that he had been mulling over as he ate. “They say Duke William will be King of England.”

“Is that so? I had not heard.” Kemen replied.

“My dad says that if he goes to England he will take an army with him because he will need loyal supporters to help him claim the kingdom.”

“Yes, I expect he will.” Kemen replied. Then he asked, “Are you considering being one of those supporters?”

“I am thinking on it.” Gunnar replied steadily. “You see I don’t have much future hereabouts. My brother Girart will take over the smithy from our father and there will not be work enough for two smiths. Every other village and town I know of already has a smithy, so what will I do?”

“I suppose there will also be smiths in England.” Kemen commented.

“True, but my thinking is that the Norman knights will prefer to use a Norman smith who can produce what they want in the Norman way.”

The conversation died down for several minutes as the two men considered what had been said. Eventually Kemen asked, “Why are you telling me this?”

Gunnar turned to face him, “Because I was wondering whether you too might like to go to England. It could be an opportunity for you as well.”

Kemen laughed. "People like us will never be accepted by the Normans."

"I hear that Duke William will give positions to anyone who fights bravely by his side and shows loyalty to his cause."

"Why would there be fighting if he is the rightful heir to the throne of England?" Kemen sounded perplexed.

"My dad says there will always be fighting wherever Duke William goes. This is because he is a bastard and others will always find a way to claim that they have precedence over his right to rule."

"I don't know. We're settled here. We live a peaceful life."

"Yes, but you have no opportunity to better yourselves while you are confined to this forest. You will be forever living under this canopy of trees." Gunnar turned and smiled at the older man. He placed his hand on his knee as he rose. "Anyway you think about what I have said. I will be back during the next moon for more charcoal, maybe we can talk some more when I return." He smiled down at the dark face. "Now, will you help me load the charcoal into the panniers on my horse?"

Every day since Gunnar's departure Adelaide had driven her flock by mid morning to a point where she had an uninterrupted view down the side of the mountain. She would scour the lower slopes for any sign that he might be climbing up to see her. With each day that passed she became more despondent. "Would he never come again?" she wondered. "Did his promise mean nothing?" "Did he not feel for her the same spark of friendship and excitement that she had felt for him?"

As she peered hopefully down the slopes she played back from her memory each moment that they had spent together. She sought to recall the feelings that his words and actions had aroused within her. She wondered had her words and actions caused similar feelings within his breast? Sometimes she would cry out so loudly in her frustration and despair that the sheep nearby would jump up and scamper away to a safe distance.

The days seemed to drag by as the sun moved across the sky more slowly than she could ever recall and the heat beat endlessly upon her dark head. She found no longer found joy in composing her poems or in working the dogs to control the direction of the sheep. She felt no excitement when a stone from her sling brought down a sparrow hawk hovering intently over a small rodent.

The small motte and bailey castle of the Count of Laval stood on the south bank of the river Mayenne guarding the ford on the old Roman road that connected the city of Le Mans with the town of Corseul. In truth the castle was little more than a defensive redoubt of earthworks and wooden stakes that surrounded a large building that served the Count as a hall where he and his servants ate and slept. The motte or small earthen mount created by piling up the earth dug from the ditch that surrounded the bailey had long since disintegrated from lack of repair.

It was in this building that the Count sat morosely in his giant wooden chair mourning the capture of Jacques his only surviving son who was being held prisoner by Sir Haldup. The usually morose Count was at his wits end to know how he could mount a rescue attempt whilst at the same time providing the fighting men being demanded by his overlord The Duke of Anjou for his current squabble with William of Normandy.

It was whilst he was mulling over different plans for rescuing his son that his bailiff brought before him two outlaws accused of robbing a jewish merchant travelling on the road from Le Mans. The two miscreants were well known to the Count. They had spent much of their lives in the stocks in various hamlets within his territory. However no form of punishment be it beatings or branding with hot irons seemed to deter them from their criminal ways. Today he was in no mood for being lenient with the miscreants.

The bailiff announced the charge. The Count looked distracted. The two men Achard and Michi fidgeted nervously. Lank, greasy hair surrounded their dirty faces. They clothes were filthy and they smelled as only those who never wash can smell. The bailiff noticeably kept a good distance between himself and his unprepossessing charges.

As soon as the bailiff stopped speaking Achard piped up: "Milord, my friend and I were greatly disturbed to lean that your son is being held prisoner by the evil Sir Haldup."

The count glared maliciously at the criminal.

But before he could utter a word Achard hurried on, "Me and Michi know the whereabouts of squire Haldup's daughter and, if your honour would like we could fetch her here to your lordship's fine castle."

"Why would I want to talk to squire Haldup's daughter?"

Achard suppressed the temptation to sigh in frustration. "Is the man so thick he cannot see the possibilities here?" he wondered silently before hurrying on with an

explanation. “It occurred to us that if you were to hold Sir Haldup’s only daughter he might be prepared to exchange your son for his daughter.”

The count sat a little straighter in his chair. A light of cunning came into his eyes. “Are you suggesting that I release you on the off chance that you might be able to kidnap Sir Haldup’s daughter?” He enquired

“Not release us lord,” the criminal sounded indignant. “We would, of course, pledge you our word that we would return.”

“And what if you simply abscond?” The count enquired.

“Why lord you could drown us both in the river, right here by your castle.”

“Yes, but I would have to catch you in order to ensure that you met your well-deserved end.”

“As your lordship is well aware there are always risks with any venture. But think of the rewards you stand to gain here. You would get your son returned safely.”

“And you would save your skins.” The count added sarcastically.

“Well, yes we would save ourselves from the punishment we so justly deserve and, of course we would benefit from your lordships undoubted generosity in a financial sense I feel sure.”

The counts fist crashed down on the table in front of him with such violence that several goblets and wooden dishes jumped high in the air. “How dare you suggest that I reward you for allowing you to do as you suggest. Your freedom will be reward enough.” He bellowed. “Now go, find this woman and bring her to me with all due haste.”

The two men bowed deeply and scurried from the hall, their feet scattering the freshly strewn straw. They quickly wound their way through the motley mud huts that surrounded the main hall, past the lines where the horses and cattle were tethered and out of the crude main gate. Their pace slowed as they met the rough road that stretched away to the north east across the sparse grassland. As they mooched along they discussed possible plans for kidnapping the knight’s daughter. “She’ll have dogs up there to help with the sheep,” Achard opined moodily. “Yes, and she’ll have a clear view of anyone approaching,” Michi replied scratching the flea bite on his arm.

It took the two men the best part of two days to snare rabbits to feed themselves as they journeyed towards the mountain and to collect the belladonna berries they needed in order to carry out the plan on which they had eventually decided.

They set off from the foot of the mountain as soon as the dusk made it impossible to see them from higher up the mountain. They climbed steadily, taking care not to disturb loose rocks or make any other sounds that might announce their presence. It would be another two or three hours before the rise of the moon would light up the slopes. They reached the outer ring of stones surrounding the hut just before moon up. A low grunt was enough to alert the dogs and start a growling approach towards the rocks where the two men were secreted. When a dog disturbed a small rock they threw the poisoned rabbits in its direction. They then listened with evil grins on their faces as they heard the dogs devouring their lethal meal. It was now just a matter of time before they could make their way towards the hut where their quarry was hopefully sleeping peacefully. They settled down to wait for their opportunity.

The moon had crossed a half the sky when Michi nudged his companion and indicated that the time had come to move forward. Achard, never the most courageous of men, hesitated. "What if she has a crossbow?" he grumbled. Michi grabbed his shirt and pulled his face close, his anger strengthened by his own nervousness. "Are you afraid of a slip of a girl?" He demanded. He pulled his companion to his feet and started forward through the ring of rocks.

They took care to move from the shadow of one rock to the next as they moved stealthily towards the hut. Danger seemed to lurk behind each rock. When the moon disappeared suddenly behind a cloud and plunged the whole area into pitch blackness they cowed down hugging a rock in terror. But when the moonlight lit the landscape again they forced their timid limbs forward until they reached the entrance to the hut.

Michi uncoiled the length of rope he had been carrying over his shoulder, handed one end to his companion and then stretched it out at knee high across the entrance. He then let out a loud wolf howl. Achard quickly followed with a howl of his own. The girl leapt from her bed of sheep fleeces, rushed through the door, tripped over the rope and fell to the ground. The two men dived on top of her, pinned her to the ground and quickly tied her hands behind her back with a length of leather cord.

"Get off me. Who the hell are you? What do you think you are doing?" She screamed angrily.

"Gently my beauty. We don't want to hurt you. We're just going on a little journey. The Count of Laval needs you so's he can do a little trade for his son." Michi told her forcefully.

"That filthy old man!" She exploded. "My father wouldn't deal with him if he was the last man on earth."

"Well. we'll have to see about that, won't we." Michi said evenly. "Now, if you'll just come along with us and not make any trouble life will be easier for all of us."

“I will not leave this mountain.” Adelaide announced forcefully. “Who will look after my sheep.”

“Well now, we don’t want to get rough with a lady like you. But you are not in any position to barter with us. And, if you don’t come peacefully, we will take you by force.” To reinforce his point Michi placed his boot on her head and ground her face into the rocky ground. “Now, which is it to be? Are you coming peacefully or do we have to drag you down the mountain?”

Curbing her fury Adelaide summoned her wits. “I can’t go down the mountain with my hands tied behind my back. If I fall it’s so steep that I won’t be able to stop myself rolling over and smashing into rocks. You will have to release my hands.”

The two men consulted between themselves about this new turn of events. What she said was obviously true but they were loathe to give her so much freedom because they could see that she was younger and more agile than them, and she knew the terrain better than they. After much muttering to and fro they came up with a solution.

“We will release your hands but we will rope your belt to Achard’s belt to make sure you do not run away.”

Once the knots had been tied they set off. As they passed the ring of boulders that surrounded the hut Adelaide saw one of her dogs. “You killed my dogs, you bastards.” She yelled in pain. “What did you do that for?”

“We couldn’t have the dogs announce our presence now, could we?” Michi sneered.

“Who’s going to look after the sheep when we leave?” She shouted. “The wolves and foxes will kill them all if they are not protected.”

“Act of war,” Michi announced loftily. “Can’t be helped.

As she was about to protest further Achard tugged strongly on the rope that tethered them together. “Come on now. We need to be off the mountain before daylight in case anyone sees us.”

As they scrambled down the steep slope Adelaide kept digging in her right heel. She made long grooves in the loose shale to show anyone who might come looking for her the direction in which she had been taken. She doubted that anyone would come to help her because only her father and that useless blacksmith’s son knew where she was.

Daylight was starting to creep down the mountain as they reached level ground and hurried into the forest. They followed animal trails along which Adelaide broke off branches that slashed at her face with her right hand. Although logic told her that her

situation was hopeless she refused to give up the hope that someone would come to her aid. As they meandered through the forest she occasionally became aware that their passage was being watched by chevreuille deer, or wild boar, even on one occasion by a small herd of wild cows which must have escaped to the forest.

They stopped mid morning by a small beck that crossed their path. They were all tired, thirsty and hungry. They slaked their thirst from the clear water of the stream, but the water seemed to awaken their hunger more strongly.

“When do we eat? Or had you not thought of that?” Adelaide demanded sarcastically.

“We’ll eat when we arrive at the count’s castle.” Michi said sourly.

“And when will that be?”

“About this time tomorrow if we keep up a good pace.”

The slogged on until past noon when they stopped again in a small glade. There they all slumped down, dog tired. “I’ll sleep first while you keep watch on the girl.” Michi announced and promptly laid down and closed his eyes.

“Yes, your honour.” Achard responded. “Thinks he’s Duke William himself.” He muttered as he propped himself against a tree. He tugged hard on the rope to give himself some slack for greater comfort.

Adelaide lay down on the forest floor and turned her back on her evil-smelling captor. It wasn’t long before she found herself worrying about the safety of her unprotected sheep. The more she thought about the poor bewildered creatures the more concerned she became. How would they survive without the protection of a human and the dogs? She was imagining the circling wolves when she became aware of the gentle snores of her guard. She rolled over as carefully as she could in order to study the figure slumped against the base of the tree. Satisfied that he was indeed sleeping she rolled onto her stomach and reached behind her waist to untie the knot in the rope that secured her to her captor.

The rope was coarse and wet from the dew on the ground. She dare not tug too forcefully on the knot for fear of waking Achard. Gradually she managed to ease the threads of rope apart. It took the best part of an hour of constantly worrying at the knot before the strands began to loosen. Once there was some movement it was only a short time more until she had undone the knot. She carefully pulled the end of the rope free of her leather belt. By then her limbs were so stiff from lying in her cramped position that she dare not risk standing. She crawled and slithered away towards the edge of the glade where she pulled herself upright with the aid of a small birch tree. She moved silently into the forest.

Which way should she now go? she wondered. If she headed back the way they had come she would be easy to follow when her captors awoke. But what other way could she go? She was uncertain about her whereabouts, so if she set off in any other direction she might be heading towards trouble of some sort. In the end it was her concern for the safety of her flock that decided her to return on the path on which she'd come.

Once she had made the decision as to what to do she quickly made up her mind to put as much distance between herself and her captors before they should awaken. She started to run through the thick woodland. But she soon realised that she was weak from not having eaten for some time. She slowed to a fast walk and pressed on paying careful attention to the branches that she had broken when she had passed in the opposite direction.

Adelaide was a very determined young lady but she was soon cursing her lack of energy. She had to pause to rest frequently and found that she was gasping for air whenever a slight incline necessitated even slightly greater effort.

After a couple of hours the forest thinned out. There were signs of coppicing, the number of oak and beech trees were fewer. The forest floor was littered with fallen trees, leaves and fern. She came to a small stream where she drank thirstily before sitting on a rock to rest and recuperate. Adelaide could not contain the rumbling in her stomach. She drank deep draughts of the clear water of the stream. She knew that she could not afford to tarry but her tired legs demanded that she rest a little longer, and that was her mistake.

Gunnar toiled up the steep slope of the mountain. He was carrying a large bundle of firewood lashed across his shoulders by a thin rope. The extra burden was irritating and slowed his progress but he contented himself with the thought of how pleased Adelaide would be with the gift he was bringing her. He hoped that she would also be sufficiently impressed by his prowess with the sling that she would forgive his long absence. He had meant to return sooner but he had been kept busy in the smithy and by the long journey he had made to the monastery at Caen to consult with Friar Aelred about his future. He had respected the ageing clergyman ever since he had provided his basic education when he was a boy.

Clarity about his future had flooded into his mind as he talked with Friar Aelred. The young man had been amazed by the effect of the older man's words. It wasn't that he had been told what to do, it was more the case that the Friar's carefully phrased questions had seemed to open up doors in his mind. He was excited by the prospects that he could now see ahead of him and he couldn't wait to share his ideas with Adelaide. He felt sure that she would soon catch his own enthusiasm for the journey on which he was about to embark. He even dared to hope that she would wish to

embark on that journey in his company. He could feel his pulse quicken at the thought of spending more time together with the girl the vision of whom had seemed to fill his every waking moment.

As the mountain started to flatten out on the plateau where she had her shepherds hut he lengthened his stride and pushed himself forward. He had to force himself to slow down in order to catch his breath for fear that he would arrive before her panting like a stray dog. By the time he reached the outer ring of rocks within which the hut was situated he had calmed his breathing and was smiling broadly in expectation of the joy he would feel at the sight of her.

He was not prepared for the mayhem that greeted him. Dead, half eaten sheep lay all around. Crows were feasting on the already putrid carcasses. He threw his bundle of wood to the ground. The sight of the stiff bodies of the two dogs sickened him especially. "What had caused this carnage?" he wondered. "How could she have allowed this to happen?" Anger arose in his breast before an awful fear started to creep through his body. "Where is she?" he was frozen by the thought that evil had befallen her. He forced himself forward towards the hut. There were some signs of a scuffle having taken place in the entrance, but there were similar signs all over the area where the desperate sheep had attempted to flee from the invading wolves and foxes that had wilfully slaughtered the defenceless animals.

As anger arose and mingled with his fear he started to search the area more closely for some signs that might give him a clue as to what had happened. He cold bloodily examined each carcass and the ground around it. He worked his way around the ring of rocks in ever broadening circles until he reached the outer edge of the rocks. On the steeper south side of the mountain the deep scars in the shale made it obvious that the surface had recently been disturbed.

He paused and thought for a moment aware that once he started down the steep slope it would take him a considerable time to regain the height at which he now stood. Then he made his decision to investigate further. He started forward sliding quickly over the moving surface. He noticed that there was a clear narrow scar running down beside him. When he got the chance to slow his descent he carefully examined the groove in the shale. He placed his foot in the channel to get some idea of what might have caused the scar. It was narrower than his foot, perhaps it was some animal. But an idea was already forming in his mind.

At the foot of the mountain he noticed that the small bushes had been trampled. More than one person had obviously passed this way recently. But how many? Had she been kidnapped? And, if so, who and how many were her assailants? Should he summon help? He decided that her situation must be desperate and immediate assistance might be of greater value than anything he might gain by increasing his power. He pushed forward into the trees.

The sudden crack of a twig snapping brought Adelaide quickly out of her reverie. Her head flew up sharply, she was instantly alert to the danger. Was it an animal or were her captors on her trail? No time to tarry, she jumped to her feet and splashed across the narrow stream. She scrambled up the opposite bank and threw herself into the thicket of young hazel trees at the top of the rise. Then out into the more open forest whose floor was covered in a carpet of dead leaves and fallen branches. There were many young trees dispersed amongst the larger mature oaks, beeches and ash trees which dominated wherever she looked.

She was just passing a huge old oak when Michi stepped out into her path. She tried to dodge around the tree only to run into Achard's waiting arms. "There you are my beauty; we thought we'd lost you." He grinned at her through his broken teeth. She struggled frantically, trying to free herself, but only succeeded in causing them both to fall heavily to the ground where she continued to struggle to free herself.

"You shouldn't struggle so my beauty you're arousing a man's lust." He was panting heavily as he pulled back to look at her. "Come to think of it, now might be a good time to give you the servicing that's been on my mind for the past few hours."

He had started to raise himself to enable the release of his trouser belt when he suddenly froze at the sound of a voice saying; "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

Achard peered into the forest ahead of him, trying to see where the voice had come from. Michi appeared at his side searching the forest. Lust got the better of Achard. "You sort it out Michi. I've business to attend to here." He reached a hand into his trousers. The round stone struck him in his left eye. He screamed with pain. His hands flew up to his face. Michi's mouth was still open in shocked surprise when a second larger stone struck him in the chest. He staggered back reaching into his belt for his dagger.

Gunnar ran forward from his hiding place drawing the short sword from his belt as he rushed into the fray omitting a blood-curling cry. That was enough for Michi, he turned and ran into the forest. Gunnar paused to help Adelaide to her feet. "Kill him," she shrieked pointing down at the unfortunate Achard. The blacksmith raised his sword to strike and then, he paused for a second before replacing it firmly in its sheath at his belt. "Get going scum," he ordered, enforcing his command with a kick. "Give me that sword," she demanded. "If you haven't the guts to rid the world of this bastard I will do it."

He took her in his arms and held her close to calm her. "A wise old friar once told me that the satisfaction of revenge is a feeling that lasts but a few minutes, whereas compassion can ultimately make you happy." He said the words gently.

She sobbed loudly. “You have no idea what they did to me and to my dogs!”

“I know what they did. I have seen the carnage. But killing one vagabond will not bring them back to life.” He placed his hand behind her head and pulled her face to his neck where he could rest his head on her head. He waited patiently for her sobbing to subside, all the while holding her body close to his and stroking her hair and her back gently to sooth her feelings.

After a while he took her hand and led her gently forward, back towards the mountain. “Come, we must see what we can salvage from the carnage up at your camp.”

Even though she was exhausted by the steep climb she was still horrified by the sight that greeted her. The sightless eyes of her poor dogs covered in flies, the twisted bodies of her wantonly slaughtered sheep, the stench of decay, the crows gorging themselves and fighting over the sheep carcasses. She wondered, dazed, through the scene unable to believe what she was seeing. Was this the same place where she had experienced so much peace during the early summer months; where she had fantasised about the new young man that had come into her life?

Movement in the interior of her hut caught her eye. She approached the entrance cautiously. The smell of sheep was strong. She peered inside waiting for her eyes to become accustomed to the gloom within. Then she moved forward more quickly. Could it be? Inside the small hut the sheep were crammed together, panting in the heat, too terrified to move. She grabbed one by the ear and led it outside into the sunshine. It stood still, bewildered, not knowing what to do.

He helped her to shepherd more and more of the traumatised animals out into the open air.

“We must get them up to the spring,” she announced forcefully. “The poor things must be terribly thirsty.” She grabbed the nearest sheep by the ear and started to walk it up the slight incline. The animal baulked at the sight of it’s dead sisters all around. She had to drag it past the carcasses until eventually it seemed to be relieved to have someone tell it what to do.

Gunnar watched what she was doing before grabbing two sheep by their ears and forcing them to follow their shepherdess. There were nineteen sheep left alive out of a flock of more than sixty. They managed to get them all up to the marshy ground to drink and once they had slaked their thirst they wondered off to graze contentedly nearby as if nothing untoward had happened.

She seemed content to sit on a boulder watching her sheep so Gunnar went back to the hut and built a fire. He found a carcass that was not too damaged, scraped it free

of offal and skin, skewered it and placed it on a spit over the fire to cook. He then sat quietly turning the meat waiting for it to be ready to eat.

The meal was nearly ready when she came and sat beside him. "Is the only thing you can think about your stomach?" She asked testily.

"No, I have much to occupy my mind. But you have not eaten for a long while and you must regain your strength after your ordeal." He said quietly. Then he turned to face her with a gentle smile. "And I also am hungry."

She stared with glazed eyes into the flames before announcing, "I'm not sure I can eat mutton now. Or perhaps ever again after what I have seen here."

When the meat was cooked he simply sliced off a piece for himself and started to eat. He was on his third slice when she asked tentatively, "could I try a small piece, please?" Once she started to eat she realised how hungry she was and eventually ate her fill.

After they had eaten they spent a couple of hours creating a funeral pyre for the carcasses of the sheep and the dogs. Once the fire was going they gathered the rest of the sheep into the circle around the hut. All night long they took it in turns to attend to the fires, pacify the nervous sheep and catch a few hours sleep in the hut.

Dawn found them bleary eyed and tired, but after a quick breakfast they drove the sheep up to the marsh for a last drink before setting off down the mountain towards Sir Haldup's castle.

The three days that they drove the sheep down the mountain and through the meadows along the river bank allowed them time to recover somewhat from their traumatic experiences and to relax. Towards the end of the second day their conversation became more natural and they were able to start to enjoy each other's company once more.

Adelaide was worried about what her father would say when he learned about the the loss of so many of his sheep. She felt guilty that she had let him down. Gunnar tried to reassure her that he felt sure his feelings of relief at the safe return of his daughter would outweigh his annoyance at the loss of his sheep. "You don't know my father," she told him pointedly. "He is very possessive about his livestock. He invests all his wealth in his new castle and his livestock."

"We will get to your father's castle tomorrow. Then we will know how he feels about everything." He tried to calm her. Then, by way of a distraction he held out his hand to receive hers. "In the meantime we had better make sure you look your best for your homecoming." He dragged her towards the river. On the bank he paused only long enough to remove his tunic and underwear before he plunged into the river.

She stood on the bank, hesitating. “Are you too modest to undress before a humble blacksmith?” He chided her. That was it. She reached down for the hem of her smock and drew it up over her head. The sight of her naked body took his breath away. She was beside him, pulling his head beneath the surface before he had time to recover his wits. They gambolled and splashed each other. They laughed and shouted challenges across the water. They kicked their feet in the air and splashed joyously. Occasionally one would wade quickly to the bank, climb up, wait until the other was nearly close and then dive back into the water.

It was after once such episode that he found himself out of his depth and struggling. He felt a surge of alarm. “Help me. I can’t swim,” he shouted desperately, before sinking below the surface.

At first she thought he was joking, after all they’d been in the water for many minutes. But when his head didn’t reappear she became alarmed and quickly set out for the spot where she’d last seen his head. She searched around frantically, but the surface of the river was still. She dived and swam in ever widening circles, peering anxiously through the murky brown water. She was on her third circle when she bumped into his body. She explored his body quickly to find his head which she seized in both hands and dragged to the surface. He appeared limp and lifeless. She placed both hands under his chin and dragged him to shallow water. He remained still on the surface of the water. Frantically she pulled him to the bank. Once his head and chest were out of the water she lay him on his front and pushed down hard on his back. A stream of water gushed out of his mouth. She pushed again, more water. Then he took a gurgling breath. She pushed again, he breathed again. She exhaled deeply and rested her head in her hands. Then she started to sob uncontrollably.

After a while he sat up and placed an arm around her shoulders. She shook him off irritably. “Why didn’t you tell me you couldn’t swim?” She demanded, before adding, “you bloody idiot!”

He felt mortified by her anger. “I just never learned.” He said lamely. “The streams around us are not deep enough to swim in. I didn’t think this river would be any different.” He hung his head.

“I thought I’d lost you.” She sobbed. “I was terrified.” She reached out and took him in her arms. “I’m sorry. I should not have been angry. It was just that I was so scared. And then I felt so relieved when you coughed up the water. I got confused by all the different feelings rushing around inside of me.”

They lay back and held each other’s naked, wet bodies closely. The sun warmed and dried them. Soon they each became aware of the other’s body. Hands started to explore. Then lips started to explore. Passion started to arise. It gushed like a flood

rushing thought their veins until it overwhelmed them, urging them ever closer until their bodies united.

They lay back, spent by the expression of their passion and allowed the sun to dry the perspiration of their ardour.

P.S. Two years after the events described above a one-eyed vagabond presented himself at the door of the friary near to the town of Lisieux and asked to speak with the prior. For several hours the vagabond spoke with the prior about compassion, how he had been thinking about it constantly since the event where he lost his eye, and how he wished to contemplate on it further and eventually perhaps teach others about the subject. At the end of their conversation the prior led the vagabond to the community bath where he made him disrobe and wash himself clean with tallow soap. The prior then burned the vagabond's filthy clothes and dressed him in the robes of a postulate. The new member of the community took the name of Paul. In time he would become an important teacher and healer whose fame spread throughout Normandy.

Chapter 2 - The Castle

Sir Haldup was taller than the average man. He sat his charger with a straight back which made him appear even taller. Strong forearms emerged from the sleeves of his chainmail hauberk which he wore for short periods each day to keep up the strength that would be needed to wear the heavy armour in battle. His stern face was scarred on the left cheek where another knight's lance had pierced the flesh. His fair hair flowed out long behind him as he trotted across the meadow towards his daughter, her companion and their small flock of sheep.

“Where are the rest of my sheep?” He demanded without preamble. “And why are you back so early?” He continued without waiting for an answer. “And who is this?” He glared at Gunnar.

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