

CHAPTER THREE

The Steward.

The Steward was a military man or had been when young and vigorous. He had fought in the Welsh Wars during the later years of the previous century, a long, arduous and magnificent campaign when soldiering became a permanent occupation. The part-time conscripts who always wanted to return home to harvest the crops, just when the enemy was at its weakest and most vulnerable, had been unable to dislodge the Welsh fanatics from their treasured land. The mounted knights had the means to fight for most of the year, but a significant force of foot soldiers was needed in that filthy terrain.

He was a very junior member of the landowning class; the third son of a father who was himself the youngest of many. There was simply not enough income from their modest land holdings, so the family had been drawn to the military world for generations. The development of a full-time army had been great boost to people in his situation.

Now he ached painfully after hours in the saddle, and his master would have him visit all of nine estates four times a year and he knew that in three months between visits many things could go wrong; he was always hurrying to another place further along the road. When he did reach the estate, much depended on the memory of the Reeve, who might be assisted by the Priest as cleric, for who else could keep a written record in the village.

He arrived at the big empty house with a small group of riders who led the horses to the rather dilapidated stables, only to discover that no hay had been provided, nor had a fire been lit in the harness room. After a long hard day tempers were frayed, and only after a good deal of shouting, did men appear around the ricks in the yard behind the stable, to cut trusses of hay for the horses.

“This should already have been ready in the loft, you damn fools, God knows you have little enough to do.”

“Nobody told I you were cummin.”

“Well just get on with it, double quick. And we want these saddles and bridles dried out, so someone get the fire going. And the thatch is bad on this roof, so bring some thatching straw tomorrow.”

In the big house the Steward was kicking the table leg discontentedly. An old servant shuffled in with a few sticks.

“Good God, man, have you nothing drier than that? Who looks after this house?”

“Baint bin no one ere fer months.”

Which the Steward knew well, for a lived-in house was a rare luxury. How he missed a woman’s touch on his travels, and not just for a warm fire and a good meal. Smoke rose from a tight bundle of straw and a little flame tickled some small twigs of ash. Dry bark and larger sticks were added and within ten minutes a respectable fire in the open hearth brought some cheer to a November afternoon.

“Who is helping you with the food? And we will need some new bread, and plenty of it,” though they always carried fresh bread, having been caught in this situation before. “That fire should have been in all day.”

“Well, nobody told I you were cummin.”

“Just get on and bring the women. We’ll have nothing for hours as it is. And bring the Reeve as well.”

“E bain’t ere. E be gon to Calne, all day.”

A few hours later, the house has warmed up and a hot meal of ham and beef and bread has cheered everyone. The women raised everyone’s spirits and had eaten well themselves, and now they were being offered as much good beer as they could drink. The steward had caught the eye of a slightly older woman and they chatted comfortably.

“I be a poor widder woman wi no one to look atter I.”

He was sympathetic, “I’ll look out for you if you are good to me.”

“Well, I got to get through a long winter wi not much work about.”

He toyed idly with a silver coin; her hand slid towards his. “When I leave, you can have it.”

“In the mornin?” She sought confirmation.

“No, we are here for a week.”

“Well one in the mornin then, and one at the end of the wik.”

He smiled for the first time, and she looked into his eyes, warily at first then responded, lightly patting the back of his hand.

“Nuther beer, m’lord?”

“Oh aye, and another for you.”

Much later they staggered to a pile of straw covered by a layer of sheepskin and fell into a drunken sleep still wearing their heavy outdoor clothes. Sometime later one disturbed the other, who responded happily and tenderly. Before daybreak they woke again and her arm was around the back of his neck, their wet lips and tongues searching each other hungrily and strenuously without a care who heard them. After twenty minutes he was completely spent and snoring noisily. She eased herself away from him, drew her clothes around herself and went to the fire to bring it back to life.

She started to work the dough, pausing to take some hot ashes from the log fire into the bread oven. Later, when the younger men came in from feeding the horses the smell of new bread put an edge on their appetite.

“Ah, you jist wait. Baint ready yet mind.”

“Well, don’t keep em waiting, we have a long day ahead.” But there was no malice in the Stewards voice. The old servant appeared with logs for the fire.

“I want to see the Reeve, first thing. Where is he?”

“I hant sid im.”

“Well, you better find him and bring him here.”

An hour later, the Reeve came to the big house, and Alice met him outside.

“How be ee?” the Reeve asked.

“Better now eve slep well,” she said with a cheeky grin. The Reeve was too anxious to smile back, but slightly relieved, all the same.

“Oh, ah.”

“They be yer for the wik mind.”

The reeve paused before speaking, “Ah, they’ll do both places from ere then. But you look atter him an maybe I’ll find summat for ee when they be gone.”

Inside the house the Reeve found the Steward with a mouth full of bread and was overcome with a spasm of coughing. The food was hurriedly cleared from the table.

“God, I hope you are not going to die on me. We’ve got a busy week.”

The Reeve nodded and grunted something unintelligible.

The Steward again, “How much wheat have you threshed?”

The Reeve reflected then spread the fingers of one hand, and again and after a slight pause a third time. Then a longer pause, "Eighteen quarters, I reckon."

The Steward, briskly, "I want to get some to Salisbury, there's a good price, they are short of wheat. How many carts and teams do you have?"

A longer pause for calculation, and further coughing. "I shall have to look at the carts but might be dree I reckon."

The Steward, "Well that'll be six quarters then, but I want to get ten there." Turning to the young men, he said "Ride over to Stoke and see if they can make two loads, we can take five carts together and you can ride to Salisbury with them. Well, move then, while you've got a bit of sun."

Out in the yard, the Steward and the Reeve walked past the barn where two men were threshing wheat on the wooden floor. The long flails lifted above their heads were brought down swiftly against a sheaf of wheat. They worked to the same rhythm, one man raising his flail as the other came down to the floor, but at an easy pace that could be sustained all day.

A thatched lean-to shed contained the ox-carts. These were inspected for leaks in the floor which could lose grain all the way to Salisbury.

"Better take some wet clay with you to stop any new leaks. It will go bad for you if you don't get all the wheat there."

The Reeve nodded for it seemed to be a friendly warning. The threshed grain was stored in a guarded room in the main barn and both men now looked at the sample. Later the Reeve supervised the measuring and bagging. The grain was shovelled into a square bucket which held exactly one bushel; two bushels were tipped into each bag with great care. The carts were each loaded with eight bags, making two quarters in total.

The Reeve then chose the men he wanted for the journey, including John, who was excited by the prospect of the journey to Salisbury a fabled city, growing like a mushroom in the meadows around the cathedral.

Later he spoke to Joan, "What? What? Wha-at? You can't possibly leave me with the children and now we've got three cows to milk. How can you go?" John was not completely surprised by her reaction and suggested she get someone to help with her work while he was away. He also pointed out that he would not have to do as much day work at the manor during the weeks after their return. He could then start to extend the house that would give them the extra space they needed to store the increasing quantities of cheese they were making.

Next morning before daybreak, teams of four oxen were hitched to each cart and two more oxen were tied behind one of the carts in case of lameness or injury to the teams. The sacks of corn were carefully placed to balance the two-wheeled carts, then covered with waterproof skins. The carts also contained food, water, tools and heavy staves for each man to deter thieves, together with an old bugle from the Welsh Wars.

As first light the convoy moved off with one of the Steward's men on horseback plus the Reeve riding an old heavy horse that had probably not got into a gallop for years. The Steward's man was armed and three miles down the road they met the other group from Stoke with a second armed guard; memories of the famine years were still fresh.

They reached Calne in less than two hours, the market town now becoming busy. Most people stared at the unusual convoy and wondered where it was bound, and why were they not selling their wheat in Calne at the Friday market, like anyone else. A mile out of town they stopped at the foot of the long steep hill rising to the

Marlborough Downs. The pair of idle oxen were brought to the first cart and hitched up to make a team of six, and they set off one cart at a time. But this was too slow, and they sent a team of four up, allowing them to rest part way up, and the others followed suit, sometimes assisted by men pushing the carts to help the oxen. On level ground on top of downs, they rested for half an hour having the first main meal of the day, enjoying the unusual view of Calne far below.

Off again and it was an easy walk on level downland, known to them all since boyhood adventures years ago. Soon the Pewsey Vale came into sight before and below with a clear view of Etchilhampton Tump in thin sunlight. This descent was much less steep than the climb from Calne, but the men needed to be ready to push their staves through the spokes in the large wooden wheels as a primitive brake. There was a risk that the loaded cart might push the oxen forward, a stumble and a fall could easily lead to a broken leg. They all knew this, but it did not stop the reeve shouting a warning several times as they proceeded down the slope into Bishops Cannings.

They made camp before dark below Redhorn Hill so the oxen would be fresh for the climb up to Salisbury Plain. This would be the last watering point for the oxen before Shrewton unless they could find a dewpond holding water near the track. They unhitched the oxen, tethered them for grazing and lit a fire between two rows of carts. Their bread was growing stale now, but tolerable with plenty of beer. The Steward's young men and the reeve sat a little apart from the villagers whose conversation was loud and lubricated as the hours passed. Eventually the reeve took control of the beer barrel, joking that we would need to save some for the next night. Two men stood guard for two hours, minding the cattle and watching out for potential thieves, till relieved by a second pair.

A third pair counted the oxen in the dark, checked all the carts and at the first hint of light to the east, kicked the fire into life, roused the sleepers and prepared a rough breakfast. The oxen had fed well overnight and were taken to water by men chewing dry bread themselves. This would be the last chance of water today. The first team to be watered was sent up the hill, the last major climb on this journey. One by one the carts were brought up on to Salisbury Plain and the convoy eventually went off in close order. This was new country to most of the men though the Reeve had made the journey before with his father. Not a house in sight, nor another traveller passed by, once a flock of sheep was seen being moved away from the track by a reclusive shepherd. It was a grey morning and a raw wind with only a few thorns to break the monotony of the endless grassland. But it was a gentle undulating route and the oxen meandered comfortably at a stately two miles an hour. Late in the afternoon they came down from the hills into Shrewton where water and freshly baked bread would be found.

The remainder of the journey into Salisbury was made along river valleys closely settled and farmed; John now understood that the hills seemed so desolate because all the villages were hidden away in narrow valleys, a strikingly different landscape from the wooded clay country north of Calne. After an overnight rest at Shrewton, the oxen were permitted to stop and feed along the side of the track so they might arrive at Salisbury with a full belly.

The city was busy and noisy and quite smelly for open drains ran down the middle of the streets. New houses and workshops were being built and loads of stone, timber and straw competed for the inadequate roads without order or control. Iron shod cartwheels bounced and clattered on flint and broken stone. The shattering noise from the weaving shops was an almost physical impact, doors and windows were

open to the street to try to ease the torment within. Everything was conducted at the top of the voice in the vicinity of these workshops and the cloth trade was the single largest business throughout the city.

The Reeve seemed to know where he was going and led the convoy by shouting and waving till eventually, they reached the corn market. The carts were unloaded quickly into secure storage and there was just time to return to the outskirts of the city where there was water and grazing for the cattle. No one was to be paid till they returned to White Clyffe, so the young men had no possibility of succumbing to temptation in the city.

But almost 400 feet above all of this mayhem the glorious spire of the cathedral stood serenely, new stonework gleaming, demonstrating the superiority and grandeur of the church. For all the novelty that John had encountered on this journey nothing compared remotely with Salisbury Cathedral whose majesty seemed to reassure his religious belief. His childhood acceptance had been tested during the appalling years of the famine, during years of widespread suffering that were far beyond the ability of anyone to relieve.

The Steward's men had galloped off as soon as the grain had been placed into store and the number of bushels had been recorded. The Reeve returned to the city in the morning to oversee the auction and the convoy made their own way back to north Wiltshire.

