Chapter 2

Agnes muttered fearfully: “Do as the lord says, husband.” There was dead silence. The other workmen stood as still as statues, watching. Tom knew that the prudent thing would be to give in. But William had nearly trampled Tom’s little girl, and that made Tom mad, so with a racing heart he said: “You have to pay us.” William pulled on the reins, but Tom held the bridle tight, and the horse was distracted, nuzzling in Tom’s apron pocket for more food. “Apply to my father for your wages!” William said angrily.

Tom heard the carpenter say in a terrified voice: “We’ll do that, my lord, thanking you very much.” Wretched coward, Tom thought, but he was trembling himself. Nevertheless he forced himself to say: “If you want to dismiss us, you must pay us, according to the custom. Your father’s house is two days’ walk from here, and when we arrive he may not be there.” “Men have died for less than this, ” William said. His cheeks reddened with anger.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tom saw the squire drop his hand to the hilt of his sword. He knew he should give up now, and humble himself, but there was an obstinate knot of anger in his belly, and as scared as he was he could not bring himself to release the bridle. “Pay us first, then kill me, ” he said recklessly. “You may hang for it, or you may not; but you’ll die sooner or later, and then I will be in heaven and you will be in hell.”

The sneer froze on William’s face and he paled. Tom was surprised: what had frightened the boy? Not the mention of hanging, surely: it was not really likely that a lord would be hanged for the murder of a craftsman. Was he terrified of hell? They stared at one another for a few moments. Tom watched with amazement and relief as William’s set expression of anger and contempt melted away, to be replaced by a panicky anxiety. At last William took a leather purse from his belt and tossed it to his squire, saying: “Pay them.”

At that point Tom pushed his luck. When William pulled on the reins again, and the horse lifted its strong head and stepped sideways, Tom moved with the horse and held on to the bridle, and said: “A full week’s wages on dismissal, that is the custom.” He heard a sharp intake of breath from Agnes, just behind him, and he knew she thought he was crazy to prolong the confrontation. But he plowed on. “That’s sixpence for the laborer, twelve for the carpenter and each of the masons, and twenty-four pence for me. Sixty-six pence in all.” He could add pennies faster than anyone he knew. The squire was looking inquiringly at

his master. William said angrily: “Very well.” Tom released the bridle and stepped back. William turned the horse and kicked it hard, and it bounded forward onto the path through the wheat field.

Tom sat down suddenly on the woodpile. He wondered what had got into him. It had been mad to defy Lord William like that. He felt lucky to be alive. The hoofbeats of William’s war-horse faded to a distant thunder, and his squire emptied the purse onto a board. Tom felt a surge of triumph as the silver pennies tumbled out into the sunshine. It had been mad, but it had worked: he had secured just payment for himself and the men working under him. “Even lords ought to follow the customs, ” he said, half to himself. Agnes heard him. “Just hope you’re never in want of work from Lord William, ” she said sourly. Tom smiled at her. He understood that she was churlish because she had been frightened. “Don’t frown too much, or you’ll have nothing but curdled milk in your breasts when that baby is born.”

“I won’t be able to feed any of us unless you find work for the winter.” “The winter’s a long way off, ” said Tom. II They stayed at the village through the summer. Later, they came to regard this decision as a terrible mistake, but at the time it seemed sensible enough, for Tom and Agnes and Alfred could each earn a penny a day working in the fields during the harvest. When autumn came, and they had to move on, they had a heavy bag of silver pennies and a fat pig. They spent the first night in the porch of a village church, but on the second they found a country priory and took advantage of monastic hospitality.

On the third day they found themselves in the heart of the Chute Forest, a vast expanse of scrub and rough woodland, on a road not much broader than the width of an ox cart, with the luxuriant growth of summer dying between the oaks on either side. Tom carried his smaller tools in a satchel and slung his hammers from his belt. He had his cloak in a bundle under his left arm and he carried his iron spike in his right hand, using it as a walking stick. He was happy to be on the road again.

His next job might be working on a cathedral. He might become master mason and stay there the rest of his life, and build a church so wonderful it would guarantee that he went to heaven. Agnes had their few household possessions inside the cooking pot which she carried strapped to her back. Alfred carried the tools they would use to make a new home somewhere: an ax, an adz, a saw, a small hammer, a bradawl for making holes in leather and wood, and a spade. Martha was too small to carry anything but her own bowl and eating knife tied

to her belt and her winter cloak strapped to her back. However, she had the duty of driving the pig until they could sell it at a market. Tom kept a close eye on Agnes as they walked through the endless woods. She was more than halfway through her term now, and carrying a considerable weight in her belly as well as the burden on her back. But she seemed tireless.

Alfred, too, was all right: he was at the age when boys have more energy than they know what to do with. Only Martha was tiring. Her thin legs were made for the playful scamper, not the long march, and she dropped behind constantly, so that the others had to stop and wait for her and the pig to catch up. As he walked Tom thought about the cathedral he would build one day. He began, as always, by picturing an archway.

It was very simple: two uprights supporting a semicircle. Then he imagined a second, just the same as the first. He pushed the two together, in his mind, to form one deep archway. Then he added another, and another, then a lot more, until he had a whole row of them, all stuck together, forming a tunnel. This was the essence of a building, for it had a roof to keep the rain off and two walls to hold up the roof. A church was just a tunnel, with refinements. A tunnel was dark, so the first refinements were windows.

If the wall was strong enough, it could have holes in it. The holes would be round at the top, with straight sides and a flat sill—the same shape as the original archway. Using similar shapes for arches and windows and doors was one of the things that made a building beautiful. Regularity was another, and Tom visualized twelve identical windows, evenly spaced, along each wall of the tunnel.

Tom tried to visualize the moldings over the windows, but his concentration kept slipping because he had the feeling that he was being watched. It was a foolish notion, he thought, if only because of course he was being observed by the birds, foxes, cats, squirrels, rats, mice, weasels, stoats and voles which thronged the forest. They sat down by a stream at midday. They drank the pure water and ate cold bacon and crab apples which they picked up from the forest floor. In the afternoon Martha was tired. At one point she was a hundred yards behind them.

Standing waiting for her to catch up, Tom remembered Alfred at that age. He had been a beautiful, golden-haired boy, sturdy and bold. Fondness mingled with irritation in Tom as he watched Martha scolding the pig for being so slow. Then a figure stepped out of the undergrowth just ahead of her. What happened next was so quick that Tom could hardly believe it. The man who had appeared so suddenly on the road raised a club over his shoulder. A horrified shout rose in Tom's throat, but before he could utter it the man swung the club at Martha. It struck her full on the side of the head, and Tom heard the sickening sound of the blow connecting.

She fell to the ground like a dropped doll. Tom found himself running back along the road toward them, his feet pounding the hard earth like the hooves of William's war-horse, willing his legs to carry him faster. As he ran, he watched what was happening, and it was like looking at a picture painted high on a church wall, for he could see it but there was nothing he could do to change it. The attacker was undoubtedly an outlaw. He was a short, thickset man in a brown tunic, with bare feet. For an instant he looked straight at Tom, and Tom could see that the man's face was hideously mutilated: his lips had been cut off, presumably as a punishment for a crime involving lying, and his mouth was now a repulsive permanent grin surrounded by twisted scar tissue. The horrid sight would have stopped Tom in his tracks, had it not been for the prone body of Martha lying on the ground.

The outlaw looked away from Tom and fixed his gaze on the pig. In a flash he bent down, picked it up, tucked the squirming animal under his arm and darted back into the tangled undergrowth, taking with him Tom's family's only valuable possession. Then Tom was on his knees beside Martha. He put his broad hand on her tiny chest and felt her heartbeat, steady and strong, and his worst fear subsided; but her eyes were closed and there was bright red blood in her blond hair.

Agnes knelt beside him a moment later. She touched Martha's chest, wrist and forehead, then she gave Tom a hard, level look. "She will live, " she said in a tight voice. "Fetch back that pig." Tom quickly unslung his satchel of tools and dropped it on the ground. With his left hand he took his big iron-headed hammer from his belt. He still had his spike in his right. He could see the trampled bushes where the thief had come and gone, and he could hear the pig squealing in the woods. He plunged into the undergrowth. The trail was easy to follow. The outlaw was a heavily built man, running with a wriggling pig under his arm, and

he cut a wide path through the vegetation, flattening flowers and bushes and young trees alike. Tom charged after him, full of a savage desire to get his hands on the man and beat him senseless.

He crashed through a thicket of birch saplings, hurtled down a slope, and splashed across a patch of bog to a narrow pathway. There he stopped. The thief might have gone left or right, and now there was no crushed vegetation to show the way; but Tom listened, and heard the pig squealing somewhere to his left. He could also hear someone rushing through the forest behind him—Alfred, presumably. He went after the pig. The path led him down into a dip, then turned sharply and began to rise. He could hear the pig clearly now. He ran uphill, breathing hard—the years of inhaling stone dust had weakened his lungs. Suddenly the path leveled and he saw the thief, only twenty or thirty yards away, running as if the devil were behind him.

Tom put on a spurt and started to gain. He was bound to catch up, if only he could keep going, for a man with a pig cannot run as fast as a man without one. But now his chest hurt. The thief was fifteen yards away, then twelve. Tom raised the spike above his head like a spear. Just a little closer and he would throw it. Eleven yards, ten— Before the spike left his hand he glimpsed, out of the corner of his eye, a thin face in a green cap emerging from the bushes beside the path. It was too late to swerve. A heavy stick was thrust out in front of him, he stumbled on it as was intended, and he fell to the ground. He had dropped his spike but he still had hold of the hammer. He rolled over and raised himself on one knee.

There were two of them, he saw: the one in the green hat and a bald man with a matted white beard. They ran at Tom. He stepped to one side and swung his hammer at the green hat. The man dodged, but the big iron hammerhead came down hard on his shoulder and he gave a screech of agony and sank to the ground, holding his arm as if it were broken. Tom did not have time to raise the hammer for another crushing blow before the bald man closed with him, so he thrust the iron head at the man's face and split his cheek. Both men backed off clutching their wounds. Tom could see that there was no fight left in either one. He turned around.

The thief was still running away along the path. Tom went after him again, ignoring the pain in his chest. But he had covered only a few yards when he heard a shout from behind in a familiar voice. Alfred. He stopped and looked back. Alfred was fighting them both, using his fists and his feet. He punched the one

in the green hat about the head three or four times, then kicked the bald man's shins. But the two men swarmed him, getting inside his reach so that he could no longer punch or kick hard enough to hurt.

Tom hesitated, torn between chasing the pig and rescuing his son. Then the bald one got his foot behind Alfred's leg and tripped him, and as the boy hit the ground the two men fell on him, raining blows on his face and body. Tom ran back. He charged the bald one bodily, sending the man flying into the bushes, then turned and swung his hammer at the green hat. This man had felt the weight of the hammer once before and was still using only one arm. He dodged the first swing, then turned and dived into the undergrowth before Tom could swing again. Tom turned and saw the bald man running away down the path. He looked in the opposite direction: the thief with the pig was nowhere in sight. He breathed a bitter, blasphemous curse: that pig represented half of what he had saved this summer. He sank to the ground, breathing hard. "We beat three of them!" Alfred said excitedly. Tom looked at him. "But they got our pig, " he said. Anger burned his stomach like sour cider.

They had bought the pig in the spring, as soon as they had saved enough pennies, and they had been fattening it all summer. A fat pig could be sold for sixty pence. With a few cabbages and a sack of grain it could feed a family all winter and make a pair of leather shoes and a purse or two. Its loss was a catastrophe. Tom looked enviously at Alfred, who had already recovered from the chase and the fight, and was waiting impatiently. How long ago was it, Tom thought, when I could run like the wind and hardly feel my heart race? Since I was that age ... twenty years. Twenty years. It seemed like yesterday. He got to his feet. He put his arm around Alfred's broad shoulders as they walked back along the path.

The boy was still shorter than his father by the span of a man's hand, but soon he would catch up, and he might grow even bigger. I hope his wit grows too, Tom thought. He said: "Any fool can get into a fight, but a wise man knows how to stay out of them." Alfred gave him a blank look. They turned off the path, crossed the boggy patch, and began to climb the slope, following in reverse the trail the thief had made. As they pushed through the birch thicket, Tom thought of Martha, and once again rage curdled in his belly. The outlaw had lashed out at her senselessly, for she had been no threat to him. Tom quickened his pace, and a moment later he and Alfred emerged onto the road. Martha lay there in the same place, not having moved.

Her eyes were closed and the blood was drying in her hair. Agnes knelt beside her—and with them, to Tom's surprise, were another woman and a boy. The thought struck him that it was no wonder he had felt watched, earlier in the day, for the forest seemed to be teeming with people. He bent down and rested his hand on Martha's chest again.

She was breathing normally. "She will wake up soon, " said the strange woman in an authoritative voice. "Then she will puke. After that she'll be all right." Tom looked at her curiously. She was kneeling over Martha. She was quite young, perhaps a dozen years younger than Tom. Her short leather tunic revealed lithe brown limbs. She had a pretty face, with dark brown hair that came to a devil's peak on her forehead. Tom felt a pang of desire. Then she raised her glance to look at him, and he gave a start: she had intense, deep-set eyes of an unusual honey-gold color that gave her whole face a magical look, and he felt sure that she knew what he had been thinking. He looked away from her to cover his embarrassment, and he caught Agnes's eye.

She was looking resentful. She said: "Where's the pig?" "There were two more outlaws, " Tom said. Alfred said: "We beat them, but the one with the pig got away." Agnes looked grim, but said nothing more. The strange woman said: "We could move the girl into the shade, if we're gentle." She stood up, and Tom realized that she was quite small, at least a foot shorter than he. He bent down and picked Martha up carefully. Her childish body was almost weightless in his arms. He carried her a few yards along the road and put her down on a patch of grass in the shadow of an old oak.

She was still quite limp. Alfred was picking up the tools that had been scattered on the road during the fracas. The strange woman's boy was watching, his eyes wide and his mouth open, not speaking. He was about three years younger than Alfred, and a peculiar-looking child, Tom observed, with none of his mother's sensual beauty. He had very pale skin, orange-red hair, and blue eyes that bulged slightly.

He had the alertly stupid look of a dullard, Tom thought; the kind of child that either dies young or grows up to be the village idiot. Alfred was visibly uncomfortable under his stare. As Tom watched, the child snatched the saw from Alfred's hand, without saying anything, and examined it as if it were something amazing. Alfred, offended by the discourtesy, snatched it back, and the child let it go with indifference. The mother said: "Jack! Behave yourself." She seemed embarrassed. Tom looked at her. The boy did not resemble her at all. "Are you

his mother?" Tom asked. "Yes. My name is Ellen." "Where's your husband?" "Dead." Tom was surprised. "You're traveling alone?" he said incredulously. The forest was dangerous enough for a man such as he: a woman alone could hardly hope to survive. "We're not traveling, " said Ellen. "We live in the forest." Tom was shocked.

"You mean you're—" He stopped, not wanting to offend her. "Outlaws, " she said. "Yes. Did you think that all outlaws were like Faramond Openmouth, who stole your pig?" "Yes, " said Tom, although what he wanted to say was I never thought an outlaw might be a beautiful woman. Unable to restrain his curiosity, he asked: "What was your crime?" "I cursed a priest, " she said, and looked away. It did not sound like much of a crime to Tom, but perhaps the priest had been very powerful, or very touchy; or perhaps Ellen just did not want to tell the truth. He looked at Martha. A moment later she opened her eyes. She was confused and a little frightened. Agnes knelt beside her. "You're safe, " she said. "Everything's all right." Martha sat upright and vomited. Agnes hugged her until the spasms passed. Tom was impressed: Ellen's prediction had come true. She had also said that Martha would be all right, and presumably that was reliable too. Relief washed over him, and he was a little surprised at the strength of his own emotion. I couldn't bear to lose my little girl, he thought; and he had to fight back tears.

He caught a look of sympathy from Ellen, and once again he felt that her pale gold eyes could see into his heart. He broke off an oak twig, stripped its leaves, and used them to wipe Martha's face. She still looked pale. "She needs to rest, " said Ellen. "Let her lie down for as long as it takes a man to walk three miles." Tom glanced at the sun. There was plenty of daylight left. He settled down to wait. Agnes rocked Martha gently in her arms. The boy Jack now switched his attention to Martha, and stared at her with the same idiot intensity. Tom wanted to know more about Ellen. He wondered whether she might be persuaded to tell her story. He did not want her to go away.

"How did it all come about?" he asked her vaguely. She looked into his eyes again, and then she began to talk. Her father had been a knight, she told them; a big, strong, violent man who wanted sons with whom he could ride and hunt and wrestle, companions to drink and carouse into the night with him. In these matters he was as unlucky as a man could be, for he got Ellen, and then his wife died; and he married again, but his second wife was barren. He came to despise Ellen's stepmother, and eventually sent her away. He must have been a

cruel man, but he never seemed so to Ellen, who adored him and shared his scorn for his second wife.

When the stepmother left, Ellen stayed, and grew up in what was almost an all-male household. She cut her hair short and carried a dagger, and learned not to play with kittens or care for blind old dogs. By the time she was Martha's age she could spit on the ground and eat apple cores and kick a horse in the belly so hard that it would draw in its breath, allowing her to tighten its girth one more notch. She knew that all men who were not part of her father's band were called cocksuckers and all women who would not go with them were called pigfuckers, although she was not quite sure—and did not much care —what these insults really meant.

Listening to her voice in the mild air of an autumn afternoon, Tom closed his eyes and pictured her as a flat-chested girl with a dirty face, sitting at the long table with her father's thuggish comrades, drinking strong ale and belching and singing songs about battle and looting and rape, horses and castles and virgins, until she fell asleep with her little cropped head on the rough board. If only she could have stayed flat-chested forever she would have lived a happy life. But the time came when the men looked at her differently. They no longer laughed uproariously when she said: "Get out of my way or I'll cut off your balls and feed them to the pigs."

Some of them stared at her when she took off her wool tunic and lay down to sleep in her long linen undershirt. When relieving themselves in the woods, they would turn their backs to her, which they never had before. One day she saw her father deep in conversation with the parish priest—a rare event— and the two of them kept looking at her, as if they were talking about her. On the following morning her father said to her: "Go with Henry and Everard and do as they tell you." Then he kissed her forehead. She wondered what on earth had come over him —was he going soft in his old age? She saddled her gray courser—she refused to ride the ladylike palfrey or a child's pony—and set off with the two men-at-arms.

They took her to a nunnery and left her there. The whole place rang with her obscene curses as the two men rode away. She knifed the abbess and walked all the way back to her father's house. He sent her back, bound hand and foot and tied to the saddle of a donkey. They put her in the punishment cell until the abbess's wound healed. It was cold and damp and as black as the night, and there was water to drink but nothing to eat. When they let her out she walked

home again. Her father sent her back again, and this time she was flogged before being put in the cell.

They broke her eventually, of course, and she donned the novice's habit, obeyed the rules and learned the prayers, even if in her heart she hated the nuns and despised the saints and disbelieved everything anyone told her about God on principle. But she learned to read and write, she mastered music and numbers and drawing, and she added Latin to the French and English she had spoken in her father's household. Life in the convent was not so bad, in the end. It was a single-sex community with its own peculiar rules and rituals, and that was exactly what she was used to.

All the nuns had to do some physical labor, and Ellen soon got assigned to work with the horses. Before long she was in charge of the stables. Poverty never worried her. Obedience did not come easily, but it did come, eventually. The third rule, chastity, never troubled her much, although now and again, just to spite the abbess, she would introduce one of the other novice nuns to the pleasures of— Agnes interrupted Ellen's tale at this point and, taking Martha with her, went off to find a stream in which to wash the child's face and clean up her tunic. She took Alfred too, for protection, although she said she would not go out of earshot.

Jack got up to follow them, but Agnes told him firmly to stay behind, and he appeared to understand, for he sat down again. Tom noted that Agnes had succeeded in taking her children where they could not hear any more of this impious and indecent story, while leaving Tom chaperoned. One day, Ellen went on, the abbess's palfrey went lame when she was several days away from the convent. Kingsbridge Priory happened to be nearby, so the abbess borrowed another horse from the prior there.

After she got home, she told Ellen to return the borrowed horse to the priory and bring the lame palfrey back. There, in the monastery stable within sight of the crumbling old cathedral of Kingsbridge, Ellen met a young man who looked like a whipped puppy.

He had the loose-limbed grace of a pup, and the twitching-nosed alertness, but he was cowed and frightened, as if all the playfulness had been beaten out of him. When she spoke to him he did not understand. She tried Latin, but he was not a monk. Finally she said something in French, and his face was suffused with joy and he replied in the same language. Ellen never went back to the

convent. From that day on she lived in the forest, first in a rough shelter of branches and leaves, later in a dry cave. She had not forgotten the masculine skills she had learned in her father's house: she could still hunt deer, trap rabbits and shoot swans with a bow; she could gut and clean and cook the meat; and she even knew how to scrape and cure the hides and furs for her clothes. As well as game, she ate wild fruits, nuts and vegetables. Anything else she needed—salt, woolen clothing, an ax or a new knife —she had to steal. The worst time was when Jack was born. ... But what about the Frenchman? Tom wanted to ask. Was he Jack's father? And if so, when did he die? And how? But he could tell, from her face, that she was not going to talk about that part of the story, and she seemed the type of person who would not be persuaded against her will, so he kept his questions to himself. By this time her father had died and his band of men had dispersed, so she had no relatives or friends in the world. When Jack was about to be born she built an all night fire at the mouth of her cave. She had food and water on hand, and her bow and arrows and knives to ward off the wolves and wild dogs; and she even had a heavy red cloak, stolen from a bishop, to wrap the baby in. But she had not been prepared for the pain and fear of childbirth, and for a long time she thought she was going to die.

Nevertheless the baby was born healthy and strong, and she survived. Ellen and Jack lived a simple, frugal life for the next eleven years. The forest gave them all they needed, as long as they were careful to store enough apples and nuts and salted or smoked venison for the winter months. Ellen often thought that if there were no kings and lords and bishops and sheriffs, then everyone could live like this and be perfectly happy. Tom asked her how she dealt with the other outlaws, men such as Faramond Openmouth. What would happen if they crept up on her at night and tried to rape her? he wondered, and his loins stirred at the thought, although he had never taken a woman against her will, not even his wife. The other outlaws were afraid of Ellen, she told Tom, looking at him with her luminous pale eyes, and he knew why: they thought she was a witch. As for law□abiding people traveling through the forest, people who knew they could rob and rape and murder an outlaw without fear of punishment— Ellen just hid from them. Why then had she not hidden from Tom? Because she had seen a wounded child, and wanted to help.

She had a child herself. She had taught Jack everything she had learned in her father's household about weapons and hunting. Then she had taught him all she had learned from the nuns: reading and writing, music and numbers, French and Latin, how to draw, even the Bible stories. Finally, in the long winter evenings,

she had passed on the legacy of the Frenchman, who knew more stories and poems and songs than anyone else in the world — Tom did not believe that the boy Jack could read and write. Tom could write his name, and a handful of words such as pence and yards and bushels; and Agnes, being the daughter of a priest, could do more, although she wrote slowly and laboriously with her tongue poking out of the corner of her mouth; but Alfred could not write a word, and could barely recognize his own name; and Martha could not even do that. Was it possible that this half-witted child was more literate than Tom's whole family? Ellen told Jack to write something, and he smoothed a patch of earth and scratched letters in it. Tom recognized the first word, Alfred, but not the others, and he felt a fool; then Ellen saved his embarrassment by reading the whole thing aloud: "Alfred is bigger than Jack."

The boy quickly drew two figures, one bigger than the other, and although they were crude, one had broad shoulders and a rather bovine expression and the other was small and grinning. Tom, who himself had a talent for sketching, was astonished at the simplicity and strength of the picture scratched in the dust. But the child seemed an idiot. Ellen had lately begun to realize this, she confessed, guessing Tom's thoughts. Jack had never had the company of other children, or indeed of other human beings except for his mother, and the result was that he was growing up like a wild animal. For all his learning he did not know how to behave with people. That was why he was silent, and stared, and snatched.

As she said this she looked vulnerable for the first time. Her air of impregnable self□sufficiency vanished, and Tom saw her as troubled and rather desperate. For Jack's sake, she needed to rejoin society; but how? If she had been a man, she might conceivably have persuaded some lord to give her a farm, especially if she had lied convincingly and said she was back from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem or Santiago de Compostela. There were some women farmers, but they were invariably widows with grown sons. No lord would give a farm to a woman with one small child.

Nobody would hire her as a laborer, either in town or country; besides, she had no place to live, and unskilled work rarely came with accommodation provided. She had no identity. Tom felt for her. She had given her child everything she could, and it was not enough. But he could see no way out of her dilemma. Beautiful, resourceful, and formidable though she was, she was doomed to spend the rest of her days hiding in the forest with her weird son. Agnes, Martha

and Alfred came back. Tom gazed anxiously at Martha, but she looked as if the worst thing that had ever happened to her was having her face scrubbed. For a while Tom had been absorbed in Ellen's problems, but now he remembered his own plight: he was out of work and his pig had been stolen. The afternoon was wearing on. He began to pick up their remaining possessions. Ellen said: "Where are you headed?" "Winchester, " Tom told her. Winchester had a castle, a palace, several monasteries, and—most important of all— a cathedral. "Salisbury is closer, " Ellen said.

"And last time I was there, they were rebuilding the cathedral—making it bigger." Tom's heart leaped. This was what he was looking for. If only he could get a job on a cathedral building project he believed he had the ability to become master builder eventually. "Which way is Salisbury?" he said eagerly. "Back the way you came, for three or four miles. Do you remember a fork in the road, where you went left?" "Yes—by a pond of foul water." "That's it. The right fork leads to Salisbury." They took their leave. Agnes had not liked Ellen, but managed nevertheless to say graciously:

"Thank you for helping me take care of Martha." Ellen smiled and looked wistful as they left. When they had walked along the road for a few minutes Tom looked back. Ellen was still watching them, standing in the road with her legs apart, shading her eyes with her hand, the peculiar boy standing beside her. Tom waved, and she waved back. "An interesting woman, " he said to Agnes. Agnes said nothing.

Alfred said: "That boy was strange." They walked into the low autumn sun. Tom wondered what Salisbury was like: he had never been there. He felt excited. Of course, his dream was to build a new cathedral from the ground up, but that almost never happened: it was much more common to find an old building being improved or extended, or partly rebuilt. But that would be good enough for him, as long as it offered the prospect of building to his own designs eventually. Martha said: "Why did the man hit me?" "Because he wanted to steal our pig, " Agnes told her. "He should get his own pig, " Martha said indignantly, as if she had only just realized that the outlaw had done something wrong. Ellen's problem would have been solved if she had had a craft, Tom reflected. A mason, a carpenter, a weaver or a tanner would not have found himself in her position. He could always go to a town and look for work. There were a few craftswomen, but they were generally the wives or widows of craftsmen.

“What she needs, ” Tom said aloud, “is a husband.” Agnes said crisply: “Well, she can’t have mine.” III The day they lost the pig was also the last day of mild weather. They spent that night in a barn, and when they came out in the morning the sky was the color of a lead roof, and there was a cold wind with gusts of driving rain.

They unbundled their cloaks of thick, felted cloth and put them on, fastening them tight under their chins and pulling the hoods well forward to keep the rain off their faces. They set off in a grim mood, four gloomy ghosts in a rainstorm, their wooden clogs splashing along the puddled, muddy road. Tom wondered what Salisbury cathedral would be like. A cathedral was a church like any other, in principle: it was simply the church where the bishop had his throne. But in practice cathedral churches were the biggest, richest, grandest and most elaborate. A cathedral was rarely a tunnel with windows. Most were three tunnels, a tall one flanked by two smaller ones in a head□and-shoulders shape, forming a nave with side aisles.

The side walls of the central tunnel were reduced to two lines of pillars linked by arches, forming an arcade. The aisles were used for processions—which could be spectacular in cathedral churches—and might also provide space for small side chapels dedicated to particular saints, which attracted important extra donations. Cathedrals were the most costly buildings in the world, far more so than palaces or castles, and they had to earn their keep. Salisbury was closer than Tom had thought.

Around mid-morning they crested a rise, and found the road falling away gently before them in a long curve; and across the rainswept fields, rising out of the flat plain like a boat on a lake, they saw the fortified hill town of Salisbury. Its details were veiled by the rain, but Tom could make out several towers, four or five, soaring high above the city walls. His spirits lifted at the sight of so much stonework. A cold wind whipped across the plain, freezing their faces and hands as they followed the road toward the east gate.

Four roads met at the foot of the hill, amid a scatter of houses spilled over from the town, and there they were joined by other travelers, walking with hunched shoulders and lowered heads, butting through the weather to the shelter of the walls. On the slope leading to the gate they came up with an ox cart bearing a load of stone— a very hopeful sign for Tom. The carter was bent down behind the crude wooden vehicle, pushing with his shoulder, adding his strength to that of the two oxen as they inched uphill. Tom saw a chance to make

a friend. He beckoned to Alfred, and they both put their shoulders to the back of the cart and helped push. The huge wooden wheels rumbled onto a timber bridge that spanned an enormous dry moat.

The earthworks were formidable: digging that moat, and throwing up the soil to form the town wall, must have taken hundreds of men, Tom thought; a much bigger job even than digging the foundations for a cathedral. The bridge that crossed the moat rattled and creaked under the weight of the cart and the two mighty beasts that were pulling it. The slope leveled and the cart moved more easily as they approached the gateway. The carter straightened up, and Tom and Alfred did likewise. “I thank you kindly, ” the carter said. Tom asked: “What’s the stone for?” “The new cathedral.” “New? I heard they were just enlarging the old one.” The carter nodded. “That’s what they said, ten years ago. But there’s more new than old, now.”

This was further good news. “Who’s the master builder?” “John of Shaftesbury, though Bishop Roger has a lot to do with the designs.” That was normal. Bishops rarely left builders alone to do the job. One of the master builder’s problems was often to calm the fevered imaginations of the clerics and set practical limits to their soaring fantasies. But it would be John of Shaftesbury who hired men. The carter nodded at Tom’s satchel of tools. “Mason?” “Yes. Looking for work.” “You may find it, ” the carter said neutrally. “If not on the cathedral, perhaps on the castle.” “And who governs the castle?” “The same Roger is both bishop and castellan.”

Of course, Tom thought. He had heard of the powerful Roger of Salisbury, who had been close to the king for as long as anyone could remember. They passed through the gateway into the town. The place was crammed so full of buildings, people and animals that it seemed in danger of bursting its circular ramparts and spilling out into the moat.

The wooden houses were jammed together shoulder to shoulder, jostling for space like spectators at a hanging. Every tiny piece of land was used for something. Where two houses had been built with an alleyway between them, someone had put up a half-size dwelling in the alley, with no windows because its door took up almost all the frontage. Wherever a site was too small even for the narrowest of houses, there was a stall on it selling ale or bread or apples; and if there was not even room for that, then there would be a stable, a pigsty, a dunghill or a water barrel. It was noisy, too. The rain did little to deaden the clamor of craftsmen’s workshops, hawkers calling their wares, people greeting

one another and bargaining and quarreling, animals neighing and barking and fighting. Raising her voice above the noise, Martha said: “What’s that stink?” Tom smiled. She had not been in a town for a couple of years. “That’s the smell of people, ” he told her.

The street was only a little wider than the ox cart, but the carter would not let his beasts stop, for fear they might not start again; so he whipped them on, ignoring all obstacles, and they shouldered their dumb way through the multitude, indiscriminately shoving aside a knight on a war-horse, a forester with a bow, a fat monk on a pony, men-at-arms and beggars and housewives and whores. The cart came up behind an old shepherd struggling to keep a small flock together. It must be market day, Tom realized. As the cart went by, one of the sheep plunged through the open door of an alehouse, and in a moment the whole flock was in the house, bleating and panicking and upsetting tables and stools and alepots.

The ground underfoot was a sea of mud and rubbish. Tom had an eye for the fall of rain on a roof, and the width of gutter required to take the rain away; and he could see that all the rain falling on all the roofs of this half of the town was draining away through this street. In a bad storm, he thought, you would need a boat to cross the street. As they approached the castle at the summit of the hill, the street widened. Here there were stone houses, one or two of them in need of a little repair.

They belonged to craftsmen and traders, who had their shops and stores on the ground floor and living quarters above. Looking with a practiced eye at what was on sale, Tom could tell that this was a prosperous town. Everyone had to have knives and pots, but only prosperous people bought embroidered shawls, decorated belts and silver clasps. In front of the castle the carter turned his ox team to the right, and Tom and his family followed. The street led around a quarter-circle, skirting the castle ramparts.

Passing through another gate they left the hurly-burly of the town as quickly as they had entered it, and walked into a different kind of maelstrom: the hectic but ordered diversity of a major building site. They were inside the walled cathedral close, which occupied the entire northwest quarter of the circular town. Tom stood for a moment taking it in.

Just seeing and hearing and smelling it gave him a thrill like a sunny day. As they arrived behind the cartload of stone, two more carts were leaving empty.

In lean-to sheds all along the side walls of the church, masons could be seen sculpting the stone blocks, with iron chisels and big wooden hammers, into the shapes that would be put together to form plinths, columns, capitals, shafts, buttresses, arches, windows, sills, pinnacles and parapets. In the middle of the close, well away from other buildings, stood the smithy, the glow of its fire visible through the open doorway; and the clang of hammer on anvil carried across the close as the smith made new tools to replace the ones the masons were wearing down.

To most people it was a scene of chaos, but Tom saw a large and complex mechanism which he itched to control. He knew what each man was doing and he could see instantly how far the work had progressed. They were building the east facade. There was a run of scaffolding across the east end at a height of twenty-five or thirty feet. The masons were in the porch, waiting for the rain to ease up, but their laborers were running up and down the ladders with stones on their shoulders. Higher up, on the timber framework of the roof, were the plumbers, like spiders creeping across a giant wooden web, nailing sheets of lead to the struts and installing the drainpipes and gutters.

Tom realized regretfully that the building was almost finished. If he did get hired here the work would not last more than a couple of years— hardly enough time for him to rise to the position of master mason, let alone master builder. Nevertheless he would take the job, if he were offered it, for winter was coming. He and his family could have survived a winter without work if they had still had the pig, but without it Tom had to get a job. They followed the cart across the close to where the stones were stacked. The oxen gratefully dipped their heads to the water trough.

The carter called to a passing mason: “Where’s the master builder?” “In the castle, ” the mason replied. The carter nodded and turned to Tom. “You’ll find him in the bishop’s palace, I expect.” “Thanks.” “Mine to you.” Tom left the close with Agnes and the children following. They retraced their steps through the thronged, narrow streets to the front of the castle. Here was another dry moat and a second huge earthen rampart surrounding the central stronghold. They walked across the drawbridge.

In a guardhouse to one side of the gateway, a thickset man in a leather tunic sat on a stool, looking out at the rain. He was wearing a sword. Tom addressed him. “Good day. I’m called Tom Builder. I want to see the master builder, John of Shaftesbury.” “With the bishop, ” the guard said indifferently.

They went inside. Like most castles, this was a collection of miscellaneous buildings inside a wall of earth. The courtyard was about a hundred yards across. Opposite the gateway, on the far side, was the massive keep, the last stronghold in time of attack, rising high above the ramparts to provide a lookout. On their left was a clutter of low buildings, mostly wooden: a long stable, a kitchen, a bakery and several storehouses. There was a well in the middle. On the right, taking up most of the northern half of the compound, was a large stone house that was obviously the palace.

It was built in the same style as the new cathedral, with small round-headed doorways and windows, and it had two stories. It was new—indeed, masons were still working on one corner of it, apparently building a tower. Despite the rain there were plenty of people in the courtyard, coming in and going out or hurrying through the rain from one building to another: men-at-arms, priests, tradesmen, construction workers and palace servants. Tom could see several doorways in the palace, all open despite the rain. He was not quite sure what to do next. If the master builder was with the bishop, perhaps he ought not to interrupt. On the other hand, a bishop was not a king; and Tom was a free man and a mason on legitimate business, not some groveling serf with a complaint. He decided to be bold.

Leaving Agnes and Martha, he walked with Alfred across the muddy courtyard to the palace and went through the nearest door. They found themselves in a small chapel with a vaulted ceiling and a window in the far end over the altar. Near the doorway a priest sat at a high desk, writing rapidly on vellum. He looked up. Tom said briskly: “Where’s Master John?” “In the vestry,” said the priest, jerking his head toward a door in the side wall. Tom did not ask to see the master. He found that if he acted as if he were expected he was less likely to waste time waiting around. He crossed the little chapel in a couple of strides and entered the vestry. It was a small, square chamber lit by many candles. Most of the floor space was taken up by a shallow sandpit. The fine sand had been smoothed perfectly level with a rule.

There were two men in the room. Both glanced briefly at Tom, then returned their attention to the sand. The bishop, a wrinkled old man with flashing black eyes, was drawing in the sand with a pointed stick. The master builder, wearing a leather apron, watched him with a patient air and a skeptical expression. Tom waited in anxious silence. He must make a good impression: be courteous but not groveling and show his knowledge without being cocky. A

master craftsman wanted his subordinates to be obedient as well as skillful, Tom knew from his own experience of being the hirer. Bishop Roger was sketching a two-story building with large windows in three sides. He was a good draftsman, making straight lines and true right angles. He drew a plan and a side view of the building. Tom could see that it would never be built. The bishop finished it and said: “There.” John turned to Tom and said: “What is it?” Tom pretended to think he was being asked for his opinion of the drawing. He said: “You can’t have windows that big in an undercroft.” The bishop looked at him with irritation. “It’s a writing room, not an undercroft.” “It will fall down just the same.” John said: “He’s right.” “But they must have light to write by.”

John shrugged and turned to Tom. “Who are you?” “My name is Tom and I’m a mason.” “I guessed that. What brings you here?” “I’m looking for work.” Tom held his breath. John shook his head immediately. “I can’t hire you.” Tom’s heart sank. He felt like turning on his heel, but he waited politely to hear the reasons. “We’ve been building for ten years here, ” John went on. “Most of the masons have houses in the town. We’re coming to the end, and now I have more masons on the site than I really need.” Tom knew it was hopeless, but he said: “And the palace?” “Same thing, ” said John.

“This is where I’m using my surplus men. If it weren’t for this, and Bishop Roger’s other castles, I’d be laying masons off already.” Tom nodded. In a neutral voice, trying not to sound desperate, he said: “Do you hear of work anywhere?” “They were building at the monastery in Shaftesbury earlier in the year. Perhaps they still are. It’s a day’s journey away.” “Thanks.” Tom turned to go. “I’m sorry, ” John called after him. “You seem like a good man.” Tom went out without replying. He felt let down. He had allowed his hopes to rise too early: there was nothing unusual about being turned down. But he had been excited at the prospect of working on a cathedral again. Now he might have to work on a monotonous town wall or an ugly house for a silversmith.

He squared his shoulders as he walked back across the castle courtyard to where Agnes waited with Martha. He never showed his disappointment to her. He always tried to give the impression that all was well, he was in control of the situation, and it was of no great consequence if there was no work here because there was sure to be something in the next town, or the one after that. He knew that if he showed any sign of distress Agnes would urge him to find a place to settle down, and he did not want to do that, not unless he could settle in a town where there was a cathedral to be built. “There’s nothing for me here, ” he said

to Agnes. “Let’s move on.” She looked crestfallen. “You’d think, with a cathedral and a palace under construction, there would be room for one more mason.” “Both buildings are almost finished, ” Tom explained. “They’ve got more men than they want.”

The family crossed the drawbridge and plunged back into the crowded streets of the town. They had entered Salisbury by the east gate, and they would leave by the west, for that way led to Shaftesbury. Tom turned right, leading them through the part of the town they had not so far seen. He stopped outside a stone house that looked in dire need of repair. The mortar used in building it had been too weak, and was now crumbling and falling out. Frost had got into the holes, cracking some of the stones. If it were left for another winter the damage would be worse. Tom decided to point this out to the owner. The ground-floor entrance was a wide arch. The wooden door was open, and in the doorway a craftsman sat with a hammer in his right hand and a bradawl, a small metal tool with a sharp point, in his left.

He was carving a complex design on a wooden saddle which sat on the bench before him. In the background Tom could see stores of wood and leather, and a boy with a broom sweeping shavings.

Tom said: “Good day, Master Saddler.” The saddler looked up, classified Tom as the kind of man who would make his own saddle if he needed one, and gave a curt nod. “I’m a builder, ” Tom went on. “I see you’re in need of my services.” “Why?” “Your mortar is crumbling, your stones are cracking and your house may not last another winter.” The saddler shook his head. “This town is full of masons. Why would I employ a stranger?” “Very well.” Tom turned away. “God be with you.” “I hope so, ” said the saddler.

“An ill-mannered fellow, ” Agnes muttered to Tom as they walked away. The street led them to a marketplace. Here in a half□acre sea of mud, peasants from the surrounding countryside exchanged what little surplus they might have of meat or grain, milk or eggs, for the things they needed and could not make themselves—pots, plowshares, ropes and salt. Markets were usually colorful and rather boisterous. There was a lot of good-natured haggling, mock rivalry between adjacent stall holders, cheap cakes for the children, sometimes a minstrel or a group of tumblers, lots of painted whores, and perhaps a crippled soldier with tales of eastern deserts and berserk Saracen hordes.