

Chapter One

Walter de Burton

1284 - 1317

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

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

Now, at the age of twenty-four years and a seasoned member of the militia, I remembered how fourteen years earlier, the Baron of Tutbury conscripted me to serve the king. Since the time of William the Conqueror, this was the agreement between the monarch and a land baron. The baron provided boys, men, and equipment to serve in the king's militia in exchange for the land. I was just a lad of ten and counted it an honor to serve my king as a squire.

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

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

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

After years of war between England and Scotland, most of the Scottish leaders had surrendered to the demands of Edward, King of England, Edward Longshanks, “the Hammer of the Scots.” The king’s demands were few—to recognize himself, Edward as the lord over Britain. Now, Scotland was a part of that realm. Only one Scotsman held out, William Wallace. In Scotland’s battle for independence, Wallace and his tattered rebels defeated the English army in several skirmishes, the most notable, the Battle of Sterling Bridge. King Edward never forgot that humiliation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Haw! Haw!" I kicked my now startled horse and I shouted, urging him to run. He ran in earnest until he reached a burning cottage where horrified women tried to shield their children from danger. I pulled the reigns to draw him up. In a cloud of dust and stones, I just as quickly

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

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

One young woman understood and pointed the way.

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

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



The boisterous crowds that lined London’s streets startled me back to the reality of the day’s events. I had to swallow hard to keep my stomach in its place, for the smells of equine excrement, human sweat, and rotting garbage hung thick in the air. Fear and inner conflict boiled in my gut. The scent of squeaking leather tack and the sound of rattling armor sickened

me further. I wanted to turn and run—to run away from the images burning in my mind of the massive loss of innocent Scottish lives, but I was a soldier. I could not run. Besides, I had a twelve-year-old son watching. Milton de Burton, a squire to the king, was eager to earn his battle armor and the approval of our sovereign, and I could not let my son see fear and spiritual conflict on my face. So, I shook my head to clear the memory of the carnage in Scotland and marched on in obedience.

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

Facing the field marshal, fifty spearmen raised their spears in salute. This military unit was the largest of all the militia, the first line of defense, loyal to the king, wore no armor, and was expendable. Behind the spearmen stood the infantry. Unlike the spearmen, the infantry wore some protective armor, albeit minimal. They were masters of their weapons and eager to use them. Some wielded spears or axes, while others mastered the crossbow and longbow. Just as the spearmen did, the infantry troops also stood at attention with their weapons held in salute. Hundreds of spears and axes flashed in the sun, creating an appropriate commencement for a royal celebration. Following the infantry’s example, our cavalry unit stood at attention in a

show of gallant loyalty. We sat tall and proud on our warhorses in gleaming armor as our mounts festooned in regalia pawed the ground. Despite my moral and spiritual struggle, I, too, held my sword to my armor faceplate in a salute to honor my promised loyalty to our king. Then my eyes cocked toward the sound of laughter and a wagon, and my pride crashed and vanished.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Stone-faced guards marched beside William Wallace up the steep splinter-laden steps without flinching. Wallace, weak from loss of blood, stumbled. His feet gave way, and he fell to his knees, then to his chest. When he tried to get up, sharp pains tore through his chest like shards of hot lead. He fell again. This time, the right side of his head bounced on the next two steps, gouging deep splinters into his swollen temple and forehead, still black and purple from

earlier torture. The guards grabbed Wallace's burned arms, squeezing the inflamed flesh; they drug his limp body up the splintered steps. The pain in his chest screamed, but Wallace was silent. Sheets of bloody flesh tore down his torso as thick shards of wood gouged and lodged in the length of his body. Waiting at the top of the steps, the artisan of pain, Exzachary Gross, restrained Wallace to the equally splintered death table using leather thongs. Then, with a thorough and heavy hand, Gross made an exhibition of meticulously inspecting each blade for the right tool of torture. This ritual gave Wallace ample time to look deep into the blue sky and realize that he would enjoy no more days of peace, love, and family in his homeland of Scotland.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

The caravan of coaches bumped and sloshed their way back through the sewer-like streets of London in an elegant display, making their way to the castle’s great hall. King Edward waved his white silk hanky to his people, acknowledging their cheers, then covered his mouth and nose against the stench that rose from the muddy animal and human waste that was the road.

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

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

The militia was last to enter the hall, and when we did, my senses tingled with the plethora of aromas of food, flowers, and herbs. Thick wooden tables laden with rich food seemed to

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

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

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

"Nay. Nay, good people," the king lifted his hand to assure his guests. "This celebration is a happy one to acknowledge our own." Again, the king raised his jewel-bedazzled hand to silence the murmuring crowd. The thick velvet cuff of his burgundy robe fell to the bend of his arm as he continued. "This day, I present to you two of my deserving warriors who have proven themselves worthy in battle. Therefore, Walter de Burton and Marcus Percy, come forward."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Following the official knighting, the king again called for silence. When the crowd was hushed, the king spoke again. "And to commemorate this day, I bestow upon each of my knights a coin, newly struck in the image of your king. Along with the knighthood and coin, I bequeath to each of these, my knights, a small estate and manor house in a county of their own choosing on the outskirts of London."

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Two

My Son, Milton de Burton

1294 - 1356

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

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



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

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

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

When the early morning call went out for the troops to assemble, young trainees scampered, pushing, shoving, trying to gain an advantage to take their positions. All the while this measured chaos ensued, the field marshal stood astride his prancing warhorse with little emotion. This seasoned leader held his mount steady on the cobblestone parade yard as the

white horse strained at the reigns, and his muscular neck bowed, eager to march. The well-trained animal's hooves clip-clopped on the stone ground creating their music of eagerness. Then the horse blew dust from his nose in a show of superiority to the other horses but still obeyed his rider's command.

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

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



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

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

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

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

"Thank you, Lord God," I whispered.

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

The young squires rode behind the knights, well out of harm's way; and like me, Milton rode more to the front center of the squire brigade. He was making a place for himself among the trainees. With each successive tournament, Milton won every piece of armor except the trousers. He yearned for that steel-plated armor that covered him from his waist to his feet.

Milton was proud of each piece of his new steel plates and wore them with dignity. Still, he longed for his trousers that would complete his armor and thus the first step to being a knight.

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

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

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

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

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

"Milton, do you know where we ride?"

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

"I know."

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

"We are going to Cookham."

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

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

"Quiet in the ranks!" the lieutenant in charge of the platoon growled.

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

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

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

The troops separated into small groups and visited as they rode at a leisurely pace. The seasoned knights' friendly yet inflated bantering and boasting filled the young trainees with

excitement and hope. Voices of comrades blended happily with the sound of eager clip-clopping of the warhorses and the squeak of saddle and tack.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Where are they now, Father?"

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

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

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

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

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

My reply caused another pause in our man-to-man conversation. I had never seen Milton so absorbed in a topic before. I noticed that I must tread softly. I wanted to give him truthful

answers but not to heighten, then crush the aspirations of a young lad though they are imaginary.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Aye, Father.”

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

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

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

“Well, son, the Muslims in Jerusalem revolted against the Roman Empire and the Catholic Church, and they won control of the land they considered their rightful inheritance. Fear and hatred of anyone who tried to usurp their rule of the Holy Land dominated the government and

society. When pilgrims started returning to Jerusalem to the Holy Land, the Muslims feared the beginning of another Roman occupation and fought to protect for what they had longed.

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

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

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

“Did they fight, Father?”

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

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

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

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

“So, the Knights Templar were wealthy warriors?”

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

“Why did the Templars disband, Father?”

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

“Did that anger the king, Father?”

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was a festival.

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

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

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

"Parade, at ease."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

"Father?"

"Yes, my son?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Like you embrace Mother?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What did you do, Father?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Father, what did Father Benjamin read?"

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

"Why not, Father?"

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

"Pray tell why, Father?" Milton pressed.

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

"How did you learn to read the Scriptures, Father?"

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

“Hush, lad,” I warned.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

