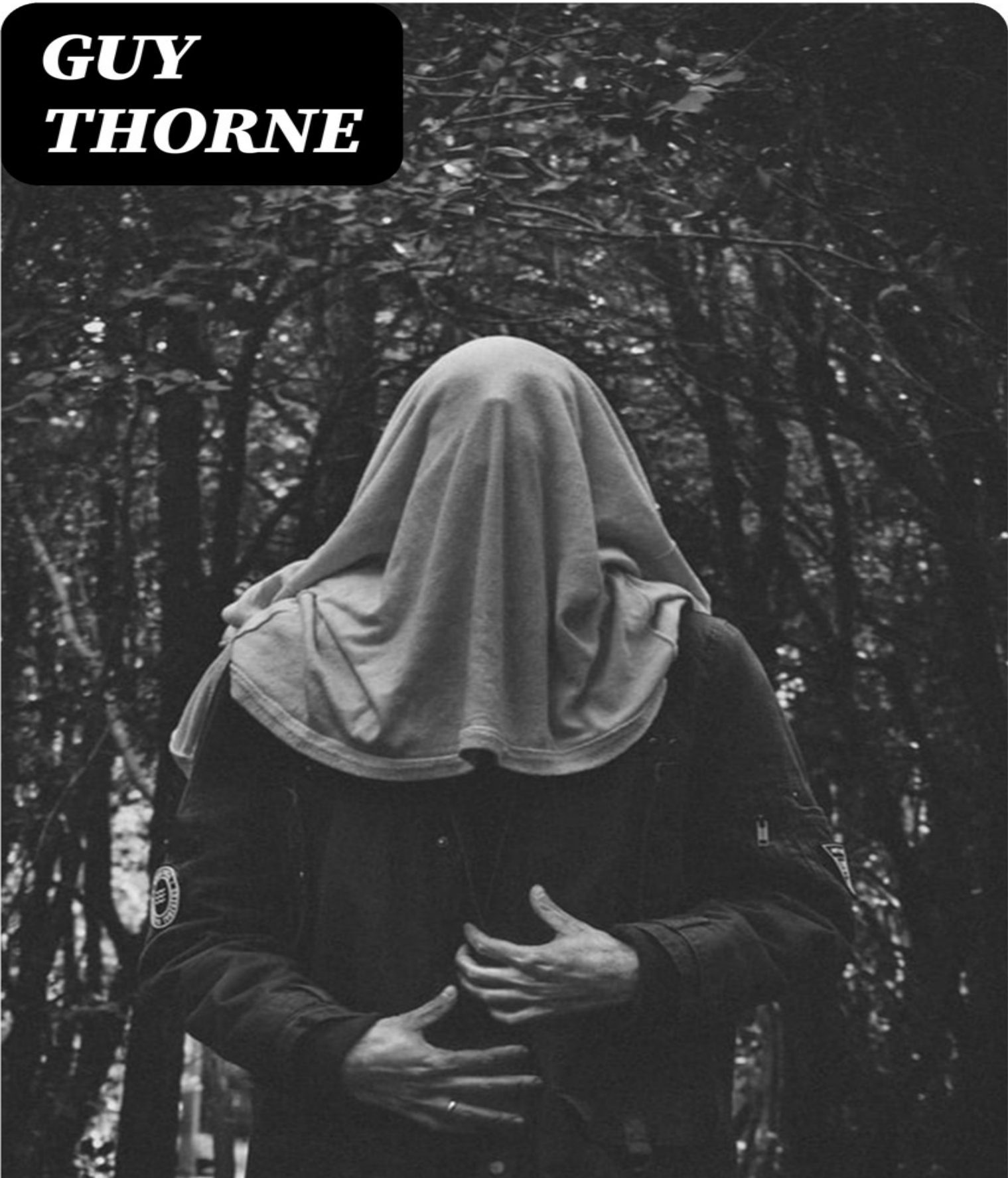


***GUY
THORNE***



THE SERF

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CHAPTER I

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"When Christ slept"

This is the history of a man who lived in misery and torture, and was held as the very dirt of the world. In great travail of body and mind, in a state of bitter and sore distress, he lived his life. His death was stern and pitiless, for they would have slain a dog more gently than he.

And yet, while his lords and masters survive only in a few old chronicles of evil Latin, or perhaps you may see poor broken effigies of them in a very ancient church, the thoughts that Hyla thought still run down time, and have their way with us now. They seared him with heat and scourged him with whips, and hung him high against the sunset from the battlements of Outfangthef Tower, until his body fell in pieces to the fen dogs in the stable yards below. Yet the little misshapen man is worthy of a place in your hearts.

Geoffroi de la Bourne is unthought-of dust; Fulke, his son, claims fame by three lines in an old compte-book as a baron who enjoyed the right of making silver coin. In the anarchy of King Stephen's reign he coined money, using black metal—"moneta nigra"—with no small profit to himself. So he has three lines in a chronicle.

Hyla, serf and thrall to him, has had never a word of record until now.

And yet Hyla, who inspired the village community—the first Radical one might fancy him to be—was greater than

Fulke or Geoffroi; and this is the Story of his life. The human heart that beat in him is even as the heart of a good man now. It will be difficult to see any lovable things in this slave, who was a murderer, and whose life was so remote from ours. But, indeed, in regarding such a man, one must remember always his environment. With a little exercise of thought you will see that he was a lovable man, a small hero and untrumpeted, but worthy of a place in a very noble hierarchy.

A man sat in a roughly-constructed punt or raft, low down among the rushes, one hot evening in June. The sun was setting in banks of blood-red light, which turned all the innumerable water-ways and pools of the fen from black to crimson. In the fierce light the tall reeds and grasses rose high into the air, like spears stained with blood.

Although there was no wind to play among the rushes and give the reeds a voice, the air was full of sound, and an enormous life palpitated and moved all round.

The marsh frogs were barking to each other with small elfin voices, and diving into the pools in play. There was a continual sucking sound, as thousands of great eels drew in the air with their heads just rising from the water. Now and again some heavy fish would leap out of the pools with a great noise, and the bitterns called to each other like copper gongs.

Very high in the air a few birds of the plover species wailed sadly to their mates, grieving that day was over.

These sounds of busy life were occasionally mingled with noises which came from the castle and village on the high

grounds which bordered the fen on the south. Now and again the sound of hammers beating upon metal floated over the water, showing that they were working in the armourer's shop. A bell rang frequently, and some one was learning to blow calls upon a horn, for occasionally the clear, sweet notes abruptly changed into a windy lowing, like a bull in pain.

The man in the punt was busy catching eels with a pronged pole, tipped with iron. He drove the pole through the water again and again till a fish was transfixed, and added to the heap in the bottom of the boat. He was a short, thick-set fellow, with arms which were too long for his body, and huge hands and feet. No hair grew upon his face, which was heavy and without expression, though there was evidence of intelligence in the light green-grey eyes.

Round his neck a thin ring of iron was soldered, and where the two ends had been joined together another and smaller ring had been fixed. He was dressed in a coat of leather, black with age and dirt, but strong and supple. This descended almost to his knees, and was caught in round the middle by a leather strap, which was fastened with an iron pin.

His arms were bare, and on one of them, just below the fore-arm, was a red circle the size of a penny, burnt into the flesh, and bearing some marks arranged in a regular pattern.

This was Hyla, one of the serfs belonging to Geoffroi de la Bourne, Baron of Hilgay, and the holder of lands near Mortain, in France.

The absolute anarchy of the country in 1136,—the dark age in which this story of Hyla begins—secured to each petty baron an overwhelming power, and Geoffroi de la Bourne was king, in all but name, of the fens, hills, and cornlands, from Thorney to Thetford, and the undoubted lord of the Southfolk.

For many miles the fens spread under the sky from Ely to King's Lynn, then but a few fisher huts. Hilgay itself rose up on an eminence towards the south of the Great Fen. At the bottom of the hill ran the wide river Ouse, and beyond it stretched the treacherous wastes.

The Castle of Hilgay stood on the hill itself, and was surrounded by a small village, built in the latter years of Henry's reign. It was one of the most modern buildings in East Anglia. Here, surrounded by his men-at-arms, villeins, and serfs, Geoffroi de la Bourne lived secure, and kept the country-side in stern obedience. The Saxon Chronicle, which at the time was being written in the Monastery of Peterborough, says of him: "He took all those he thought had any goods, both by night and day, men and women alike, and put them in prison to get their gold and silver, and tortured them with tortures unspeakable."

Of he and his kind it says: "Never yet was there such misery in the land; never did heathen men worse than they. Christ slept, and all His saints."

Hyla had been spearing his eels in various backwaters and fen-pools which wound in and out from the great river. When his catch was sufficient, he laid down the trident, and, taking up the punt pole, set seriously about the business of

return. The red lights of the sky turned opal and grew dim as he sent his punt gliding swiftly in and out among the rushes.

After several minutes of twisting and turning, the ditch widened into a large, still pool, over which the flies were dancing, and beyond it was the black expanse of the river itself. As the boat swung out into the main stream, the castle came plain to the view. A well-beaten road fringed with grass, among which bright golden kingcups were shining, led up to the walls. Clustered round the walls was a little village of sheds, huts, and houses, where the labourers and serfs who were employed on the farm-lands lived.

The castle itself was a massive and imposing place, of great strength and large area. At one corner of the keep stood a great tower, the highest for many miles round, which was covered with a pointed roof of tiles, like that of a French chateau. This was known as the Outfangthef Tower, and Geoffroi and his daughter, Lady Alice, had their private chambers in it.

There was something very stately in the view from the river, all irradiated as it was by the ruddy evening light.

Hyla's punt glided over the still waters till it reached a well-built landing-stage of stone steps descending into the river. Several punts and boats were tied up to mooring stakes. Hard by, the sewage from the castle was carried down by a little brook, and the air all about the landing-place was stagnant and foul.

He moored the punt, and, stringing his eels upon an iron hook, carried them up the hill in the waning light. The very last lights of the day were now expiring, and the scene was full of peace and rest, as night threw her cloak over the

world. A rabbit ran across Hyla's path from side to side of the road, a dusky flash; and, high up in the air, a bird suddenly began to trill the night a welcome.

The man walked slowly, lurching along with his head bent down, and seeing nothing of the evening time. About half-way up the hill he heard someone whistling a comic song, with which a wandering minstrel had convulsed the inmates of the castle a night or two before.

Sitting by the roadside in the dusk, he could distinguish the figure of Pierce, one of the men-at-arms. He was oiling the trigger and barrel of a cross-bow, and polishing the steel parts with a soft skin. The man-at-arms lived in the village with his wife, and was practically in the position of a villein, holding some fields from Lord Geoffroi in return for military service. He was from Boulogne, and had been in the garrison of one of Robert de Bellême's castles in Normandy.

The lessons learnt at Tenchebrai had sunk deep into the mind of this fellow; and when any dirty work was afoot or any foul deed to be done, to Pierce was given the doing of it. As Hyla approached, he stopped his whistling, and broke out into the words of the song, which, filthy and obscene as it was, had enormous popularity all over the country-side.

Then he noticed the serf's approach. "Who are you?" he called out in a *patois* of Norman-French and English, with the curious see-saw of French accentuation in his voice.

"Hyla!" came the answer, and there was strength and music in it.

Something seemed to tickle the soldier to immediate merriment when he heard the identity of the man with the eels.

Hyla knew him well. When he was free from his duties in the castle, Hyla and his wife worked in this man's fields for a loaf of wastel bread or a chance rabbit, and he was in a sense their immediate employer and patron.

It was at the order of Pierce that Hyla had been fishing that evening. The soldier chuckled on, regarding the serf with obvious amusement, though for what reason *he* could not imagine.

"Show your catch," he said at last.

He was shown the hook of great eels, some of which still writhed slowly in torture.

"Take them to my wife," said the soldier, "and take what you want of them for yourself and your people."

"Very gladly," said Hyla, "for there are many mouths to fill."

"Oh! that can be altered," said the soldier, with a grin; "your family can be used in other ways, and live in other housen than under your roof-tree."

"Duke Christ forbid!" said Hyla, giving the Saviour the highest name he knew; "had I not my children and my wife, I should be poor indeed."

"God's teeth!" cried the soldier, with a nasty snarl and complete change of tone, "*your* wife, *your* girls! Man, man! we have been too good to the serfs of late. See to this now, when I was in the train of my Lord de Bellême, both in France and here, we killed serfs like rabbits.

"Well I remember, in the Welsh March, how we hanged men like you up by the feet, and smoked them with foul smoke. Some were hanged up by their thumbs, others by the head, and burning things were hung on to their feet. We

put knotted strings about their heads, and writhed them till they went into the brain. We put men into prisons where adders, snakes, and toads were crawling, and so we tormented them. And the whiles we took their wives and daughters for our own pleasure. Hear you that, Hyla, my friend? Get you off to my wife with the eels, you old dog."

He blazed his bold eyes at the serf, and his swarthy face and coal-black hair seemed bristling with anger and disdain. His face was deeply pitted with marks which one of the numerous varieties of the plague had left upon it, and as his white, strong teeth flashed in anger through the gloom, he looked, so Hyla thought, like the grinning devil-face of stone carved over the servants' wicket at Icombe Abbey.

He slunk away from the man-at-arms without a word, and toiled on up the hill. He fancied he could hear Pierce laughing down below him, and he spat upon the ground in impotent rage.

He soon came to a few pasture fields on the outskirts of the village, some parts of them all silver-white with "lady-smocks." Hardy little cows, goats, and sheep roamed in the meadows, which were enclosed with rough stone walls. A herd of pigs were wallowing in the mud which lined the banks of the sewage stream, for, with their usual ignorance, the castle architects allowed this to run right through the pastures on the hill slope.

The cows were lowing uneasily to each other, for they were tormented by hosts of knats and marsh-begotten flies which rose up from the fen below.

Past the fields the road widened out into a square of yellow, dust-powdered grass—the village green—and round

this were set some of the principal houses.

There was no room for comfortable dwelling-places inside the castle itself for the crowd of inferior officers and men-at-arms. Accordingly they made their home in the village at its walls, and could retreat into safety in times of war.

Eustace, the head armourer, had a house here, the best in the village, roofed with shingle and built of solid timber. The men-at-arms, Pierce among them, who were married, or lived with women taken in battle, had their dwellings there; and one thatched Saxon house belonged to Lewin, the worker in metal, and chief of Baron Geoffroi's mint.

Hyla was a labourer in the mint, and under the orders of Lewin the Jew.

In 1133 it was established as a general truth and legal adage, by the Justiciar of England himself, that no subject might coin silver money. The adulteration practised in the baronial mints had reduced coins, which pretended to be of silver, into an alloy which was principally composed of a bastard copper. A few exceptions were made to the law, but all private mints were supposed to be under the direct superintendence of crown officials. In the anarchy of Stephen's reign this rule became inoperative, and many barons and bishops coined money for themselves.

Few did this so completely and well as Geoffroi de la Bourne.

When Bishop Roger of Salisbury made his son Chancellor of the Exchequer, in King Henry's reign, the chancellor had in his train a clever Jew boy, baptised by force, very skilful in the manual arts.

It was the youth Lewin who invented the cloth, chequered like a chess-board, which covered the table of the "Exchequer," and on which money was counted out; and he also claimed that the "tallies" which were given in receipt for taxes to the county sheriffs were a product of his fertile brain.

This man, was always looked upon with suspicion by the many churchmen with whom he came in contact. Finance was almost entirely in the hands of the great clergymen, and the servant Lewin was distrusted for his cleverness and anti-Christian blood. At dinner many a worthy bishop would urge the chancellor to dismiss him.

The Jew was too shrewd not to feel their hostility and know their dislike; and when he came across Geoffroi de la Bourne in the Tower Royal, where Cheapside now stands, he was easily persuaded to enter his service.

At Hilgay Castle he was at the head of a fine organisation of metal-workers, and under the direct protection of a powerful chief. So lawless was the time that he could gratify the coarse passions of his Eastern blood to the full, and he counted few men, and certainly no other Jew in East England, more fortunately circumstanced than he was.

A few villeins of the farmer class, who were also skilled men at arms, had rough houses in the village, and tilled the corn-fields and looked after the cattle. Beyond their dwellings, on the verge of the woods of oak and beech which purpled the southern distance, were the huts of the serfs.

Hyla passed slowly through the village. On the green, by a well which stood in the centre, a group of light-haired

Saxon women were chattering over their household affairs. At the doors of some of the houses of the Norman men-at-arms sat French women on stools, rinsing pot herbs and scouring iron cooking bowls. Their black hair, prominent noses, and alert eyes contrasted favourably with the somewhat stupid faces of the Saxons, and there could be seen in them more than one sign of a conquering race.

They were also more neatly dressed, and a coarse flax linen bound their temples in its whiteness, or lay about their throats.

Stepping over a gutter full of evil-smelling refuse, Hyla came to the house of Pierce, and beat upon the wooden door, which hung upon hinges of leather made from bullock's hide.

It swung open, and Adelais, the soldier's wife, named after the Duke of Brabant's daughter, stood upon the threshold obedient to the summons.

She took the eels from him without a word, and began to unhook them.

"Pierce said that I might have some fish to take home," Hyla told her humbly.

"You may take your belly full," she answered; "it's little enough I like the river worms, for that is all they are. My man likes them as little as I."

"It was he that sent me a-fishing," said Hyla in surprise.

"Then he had a due reason," said the woman; "but get you home, the evening is spent, and the night comes."

Just then, from the castle above their heads, which towered up into the still warm air, came the mellow sound of

a horn, and following upon it the deep tolling of a bell ringing the curfew.

Although the evening bell did not ring at that time with any legal significance as it did in towns, its sound was generally a signal for sleep; and as the brazen notes floated above them, the groups at the doors and on the green broke up and dispersed.

"Sleep well, Hyla!" Adelais said kindly, and, retiring into the house, she shut her door.

Hyla went on till he came opposite the great gate of the castle, and could hear the guards being changed on the other side of the drawbridge.

He was now on the very brow of the hill, and, stopping for a moment, looked right down over the road he had traversed. The moon was just rising, and the road was all white in its light. Far beyond, the vast fens were a sea of white mist, and the blue will-o'-the-wisp was beginning to bob and pirouette among it. The air of the village was full of the sweet pungent smell of the blue wood smoke.

The night was full of peace and sweetness, and, as the last throbbing note of the curfew bell died away, it would have been difficult to find a gentler, mellower place.

Thin lines of lights, like jewels in velvet, began to twinkle out in the black walls of the castle as he turned towards the place of the serfs. He went down a lane fringed with beeches, and emerged upon the open glade. A fire was burning in the centre, and dark forms were flitting round it cooking the evening meals. Dogs were barking, and there was a continual hum and clatter of life.

Picture for yourself an oblong space surrounded by heavy trees, the outer boles being striped clear of bark, and many of them remaining but dead stumps.

Round the arena stood forty or fifty huts of wood, wattled with oziers and thatched with fern and dried rushes.

Many of the huts were built round a tree trunk, and the pole in the middle served to hang skins and implements upon by means of wooden pegs driven into it.

A hole in the roof let out smoke, and in the walls let in the light. The floors of these huts were of hard-beaten earth, as durable as stone; but they were littered with old bones, dust, and dried rushes for several inches deep, and swarming with animal life.

They were the merest shelters, and served only for sleep. Most of the household business was conducted in the open before the huts, and in fine weather the fires were nearly all outside. In winter time the serf women and girls generally suffered from an irritating soreness of the eyes, which was produced by living in the acrid smoke which filled the shelters and escaped but slowly through the roofs.

The household utensils were few and simple. A large wooden bucket, which was carried on a pole between two women, served to fetch water from the well upon the village green, for the serfs had no watering-place in their own enclosure. An earthenware pot or so—very liable to break and crack, as it was baked from the black and porous fen clay—and an iron cooking pot, often the common property of two or more families, comprised the household goods.

They slept in the back part of the huts, men, women, and children together, on dried fern, or with, perhaps, an old and

filthy sheep's skin for cover. The sleeping-room was called the "bower."

This enclosure where the theows lived was known as the "fold," as it was fenced in from the forest, on which it abutted, by felled trees. This was done for protection against wild beasts. Herds of wild and savage white cattle, such as may now only be seen at Chillingham, roamed through the wood. Savage boars lived on the forest acorns, and would attack an unarmed man at sight. Wolves abounded in the depths of the forest. It often happened that some little serf child wandered away, and was never seen again, and it was useless for a thrall to attempt escape into its mysterious depths.

For the most part only married serfs lived in the fold or "stoke," as it was sometimes called. Many of the younger men were employed as grooms and water-carriers in the castle, or slept and lived in sheds and cattle houses belonging to the men-at-arms and farmers in the village.

It was thus that the serfs lived, and Hyla skirted the fold till he came to his own house. He was very tired and hungry, and eager for a meal before sleeping.

All the morning he had laboured, sweating by the glowing fires of the mint, pouring molten metal into the moulds. At mid-day the steward had given him a vessel of spoilt black barley for his wife to bake bread, and he had taken it home to her and his two daughters against his return.

In the afternoon Hyla and his two daughters, Frija and Elgifu, girls of twenty and nineteen, had been at work dunging the fields of Pierce the man-at-arms, and the evening had been spent, as we have seen, in spearing eels.

Hyla was very weary and hungry. When he came up to his hut he saw angrily that the fire in front of it was nothing but dead embers, and, indeed, was long since cold. His two little sons, who were generally tumbling about naked by the hut, were not there, nor could he see Gruach his wife.

He flung down the eels in a temper, and called aloud, in his strong voice, "Frija! Elgifu! Gruach!"

His cries brought no response, and he turned towards the fire in the centre of the stoke which was now but a red glow, and round which various people were sitting eating their evening meal.

He burst into the circle. "Where is Gruach?" he said to a young man who was dipping his hand into an earthen pot held between his knees.

This was Harl, an armourer's rivetter, who generally lived within the castle walls.

"Gruach is at the hut of Cerdic," he said, with some embarrassment, and, so it seemed to Hyla, with pity in his voice.

The men and women sitting by the fire turned their faces towards him without exception, and their faces bore the same expression as Harl's.

Hyla stared stupidly from one to the other. His eyes fell upon Cerdic himself, a kennel serf, and something of a veterinary surgeon. It was he who cut off two toes from each dog used for droving, so that they should not hunt the deer.

Fastened to his girdle was the ring through which the feet of the "lawed" dogs were passed, and he carried his operating knife in a sheath at his side.

"My woman is in your hut, Cerdic," said Hyla, "and why is she with?"

"She is with," said Cerdic, "because she is in sore trouble, and walks in fear of worse. Go you to her, Hyla, and hear her words, and then come you here again to me."

A deep sigh burst from all of them as Cerdic spoke, and one woman fell crying.

Hyla turned, and strode hastily to Cerdic's hut. He heard a low moaning coming from it, which rose and fell unceasingly, and was broken in upon by a woman's voice cooing kind words of comfort.

He pushed into the hut. It was quite dark and full of foetid smoke and a most evil odour.

"Gruach," he said, "Gruach! why are you not home? What hurts you?"

The moaning stopped, and there was a sound of some one rising.

Then a voice, which Hyla recognised as belonging to Cerdic's wife, said, "Here is your man, Gruach! Rise and tell him what bitter things have been afoot."

Gruach rose, a tall woman of middle age, and came out of the hut into the twilight.

"Hyla!" she said, "Saints help you and me, for they have taken Elgifu and Frija to the castle."

The man quivered all over as if he would have fallen on the ground. Then he gripped his wife's arm. "Tell me," he said hoarsely, "To the castle? to the castle? Frija and Elgifu?"

"Aye, your maids and mine, and maids no longer. I had gone to Adalais to seek food for this night, and found you sent a-fishing. Frija and Elgifu were carrying the dung to the

fields. Pierce was in the field speaking to our girls. Then came Huber and John from the castle with their pikes, and they took away our daughters, saying Lord Geoffroi and Lord Fulke had sent for them. Huber struck me in the face at my crying. 'Take care!' cwaeth he, 'old women are easily flogged; there is little value in you.' And I saw them holding my girls, and they took them in the great gate of the castle laughing, and I did not see them again."

Hyla said nothing for a minute, but remained still and motionless. The blow struck him too hard for speech.

"Get you home," he said at length, "if perchance you may fall asleep. I am going to talk with Cerdic. Take her home, wife, and God rest you for your comfort!"

He walked quickly across the open space back to the fire. The circle was broken up, and only Cerdic and Harl sat there waiting Hyla's return.

Stuck into the ground was a cow's horn full of ale, and as Hyla came into the circle of dim red light, Harl handed it to him.

He drank deep, and drank again till the comfort of the liquor filled his craving stomach, and his brain grew clearer.

"Sit here, friend," said Cerdic. "This is a foul thing that has been done."



CHAPTER II

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"Coelum coeli Domino terram autem dedit filiis hominum."

In the fifth volume of an instructive work by Le Grand d'Aussy, who was, in his way, a kind of inferior Dean Swift, there is an interesting story, one of a collection of "Fabliaux."

There was once a genial ruffian who lived by highway robbery, but who, on setting about his occupation, was careful to address a prayer to the Virgin. He was taken at the end, and sentenced with doom of hanging. While the executioner was fitting him with the cord, he made his usual little prayer. It proved effectual. The Virgin supported his feet "with her white hands," and thus kept him alive two days to the no small surprise of the executioner, who attempted to complete his work with a hatchet. But this was turned aside by the same invisible hand, and the executioner bowed to the miracle, and unstrung the robber. With that—very naturally—the rogue entered a monastery.

In another tale the Virgin takes the shape of a nun, who had eloped from the convent where she was professed, and performs her duties for ten years. At last, tired of a libertine life, the nun returned unsuspected. This signal service was performed in consideration of the nun's having never omitted to say an Ave as she passed the Virgin's image.^[1]

^[1] *These stories are perfectly fair examples of monastic teachings in the Twelfth Century. Roughly speaking, any one might do anything if he or she said an occasional Ave. Indeed, Dom Mathew Paris, the most pious and trustworthy*