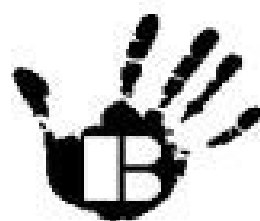


A Play of
Dux Moraud

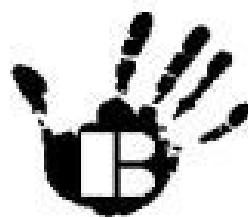
Margaret Frazer



BERKLEY PRIME CRIME, NEW YORK

A Play of
Dux Moraud

Margaret Frazer



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Maydyn so louely and komly of syte,

I prey thee for loue thou wyl lystyn to me; To here my resun I prey thee wel tythe,

Loue so deryn me most schewe to thee . . .

Anonymous,

Dux Moraud

Chapter 1

The summons from Lord Lovell came while they were packing their goods away for the last time before taking to the road again. The playing had gone well. There was no reason for alarm, but out of long habit a quick, assessing look passed among the five of them. Their small company had been Lord Lovell's players for hardly three months. For years before that they had been lordless, with no protection in their travels and work except other people's goodwill and their own wits.

So wariness still came readily, and before the servant was further than, "Lord Lovell has asked you to come . . ." Basset, Ellis, and Joliffe were looking at each other, silently asking why, and Rose's face was gone very still, and even half-grown Piers had frozen out of his happy talk into watching his mother and the others as the servant finished, ". . . to him, Master Basset, if you please. And the one you called Joliffe."

With lordly graciousness, no outward sign of alarm, and a slight bow of his head, Basset said, "It is our honor and pleasure to obey."

Rose immediately came to straighten the upright collar of his doublet and twitch the folds of his surcoat to hang better from his shoulders. She was the only woman in the company and keeper of all their clothing, both for their plays and otherwise. Not that there was much "otherwise" about them. They had been a poor, small playing company for a long while, with almost everything they earned spent to keep them barely going from village to village to sometimes a town, not on such things as new clothing or too much food. To come under Lord Lovell's patronage and protection had been the best stroke of luck. "Ever," Basset had said, and he would best know, having formed the company years before Joliffe had joined.

So when Lord Lovell had made them his company of players and bade them come to Minster Lovell at Michaelmas this year of God's grace 1434 to divert both his household and his officials come from the end-of-harvest reckoning, they had come and were just ending their week here. They were too small a company to have much choice of plays, and filling that much time with suitable ones had been difficult, but by eking it out with Rose's tumbling and Ellis' and Piers' juggling and Joliffe's skill with the lute, they thought they had done well, especially against the general gloom that had come with yet another year's bad harvest. The summer that had started bright and fair had gone to rain and cold by St. Mary Magdalen Day, first delaying the harvest, then rotting too much of it in the fields. Last year had been lean after a bad harvest. This year, with a second bad harvest to follow the other, would be leaner. The players lived only on what other people would give for their work, and when other people had little to give, the players tended to have nothing. Lord Lovell's patronage—and the money that went with it—had come just in time. As they had walked beside their cart toward Minster Lovell, with yet more rain pattering into the road's mud and the hedges and ruined fields around them, Basset had said what they all knew. "We'd not have made it through another year like last."

Now Lord Lovell wanted to see two of them, and while they all thought they had done well enough that he was pleased with them, "The last thing you ever take for certainty is anyone's goodwill," Basset had told Joliffe in his early days with the company. "You may have done everything you could and earned it ten times over and still not get it." Which Joliffe was remembering as he followed Basset away from the shed they had been sharing with their cart and horse. In the servant's wake, they crossed the manor's outer yard, went through the cobbled gateway into the smaller inner yard and

across it not to the wide way into the great hall—tall and newly built with golden Cotswold stone—b
to a lesser door in the older wing of rooms directly across from the gateway. Word was that Lord
Lovell would be having those rebuilt sometime soon, too.

“And pleasant it must be to have the money for putting up new when the old isn’t falling down yet
Ellis had grumbled when Rose mentioned she had heard it. He had been stitching a new patch on
their old tent at the time and not been happy at his work.

“Lord Lovell is doing well enough by us,” Basset had said back. “Don’t you complain about h
money.”

“Not so long as enough of it comes our way,” Joliffe had added. But fear that an end of it might b
coming their way was in him and undoubtedly in Basset, no matter how straight-backed and
seeming ease they went together into the low-beamed room where Lord Lovell awaited them, standing
at a glassed window that looked out at an orchard.

He turned as they entered, a man of medium height with a long swoop of a nose and eyes set rather
too near it, dressed in a floor-long houppelande of deep blue wool, its thick folds gathered low on h
waist by a wide belt set with silver, its end hanging past his knees. Between the French war and h
many lands across England, he was a wealthy man, who—from what Joliffe had seen here—failed
no comforts for himself or his family. At a ready guess, the room was where he did business, with
wide table set to catch the best light from the window, a row of scrolls laid at one end of it with pen
and inkpot beside them, and chests and a closed-door aumbry along one wall where other scrolls an
documents could be kept. There was a single chair beside the table, with a wide, curved seat an
carven arms and back, and as Basset and Joliffe made their deep bows to him, marking the gu
between his high place in the world and their low one, Lord Lovell sat down and regarded them with
benevolence that somewhat eased Joliffe’s mind. He did not look like a man about to unhire them.

Nor was he. Instead he smiled and said, “With one thing and another, I’ve had little chance to sa
how well pleased I’ve been with your company, Master Basset. That you could raise laughs so ofte
after this glum harvest-time is tribute to your skill, besides that my lady wife was most particular
moved by your play of *Cain and Abel*.”

Basset bowed again. “Our pleasure in pleasing you is twice-doubled by knowing she was pleased.”

“My steward delivered your quarter’s money to you?”

“He did, my lord. Thank you for this chance to thank you for it myself.”

“I’ve noted, though, that you’ve added no one to your company. I thought by now you would have.

They did indeed need and want to have a larger company. With only three men—with Jolif
usually playing the women’s roles—and a small boy, the plays they might do were limited; but Bass
said, “As yet we’ve had no place for someone else. Joliffe”—Joliffe bowed—“is reworking plays
that end, but until then another player would not earn his way, I fear.”

Lord Lovell took several silver coins from the flat leather purse hung from his belt beside h
dagger, laid them on the table, and pushed them toward Basset. “Would that help toward taking c
another man? Or boy.”

Basset glanced easily at the coins, as if they were not as much as the company might have earned
a very good month, and said smoothly, “Your lordship has someone in mind?”

Lord Lovell barked a pleased laugh. “Sharp, Master Basset. Very sharp. Yes, I’ve someone in mind
He’s a younger son of one of my bailiffs. Thus far, he’s not proved suited to anything his father has s

him. After watching your company, he claims he wants to be a player. His father, for lack of anything else to do with him, has asked if I might place him with you.”

Standing where he was, Joliffe could not see Basset’s face but he kept his own carefully bright and interested in Lord Lovell’s words, and probably Basset was doing the same—hiding his sure dismay at the likelihood of being saddled with some moonstruck youngling of surely no skill and possibly few wits—though Joliffe would willingly grant that a certain degree of witlessness was necessary in anyone who became a player. Otherwise they’d not choose to be a player.

“In truth,” Lord Lovell finished, “no one knows what else to do with him.”

Whether Basset could do anything with him was beside the point, since there was no wise way to turn down what Lord Lovell asked of them; and putting the best front to it that he could, Basset bowed and said with apparent willingness, “I’ll be pleased to give him a chance.”

Lord Lovell nodded, satisfied. “I can have my clerk draw up a formal contract of apprenticeship while the boy packs.”

Quickly Basset said, “By your leave, my lord, no contract.”

“No?” Lord Lovell asked, surprised. A successful lord, like a successful merchant, knew the benefits of contracts.

So did Basset, but, “Someone is either a player or they’re not, my lord. It would be shame to bind the lad and find he hates the life. Besides that, there are skills I can teach anyone, but there are other things that are either in a man or not, and only time and trying will tell. Binding with a contract will make no difference.”

And if the boy proved impossible, being rid of him would be the easier if there were no contract. But Basset did not say that, and if Lord Lovell thought it, he let it go, too, simply said crisply, “Well enough. I’ll have him sent to you as soon as we’re done here. Now, there’s another matter.” One thing he was less easy about: he paused to shift one of the scrolls lying on the table a little to one side and then back to where it had been before he looked up, not at Basset but past him, for the first time fully at Joliffe. “Last summer. That business at the Penteneys. You found your way through the tangle before anyone else did.”

There was much to be said for a player’s skill at keeping one thing on his face while his mind raced through any number of very other thoughts. Just now Joliffe held his face to a mild interest while in his mind he quickly shifted what he had supposed about the matter at the Penteneys. Yes, he had sorted out the tangle but those who knew that were few and he had not thought Lord Lovell was among them. Keeping his surprise to himself, he simply bowed, and said mildly, “Yes, my lord.”

Lord Lovell shifted the scroll again, to one side and back again, and this time did not look up as he said, “That had much to do with my interest in taking on your company as my own. I wanted to be able to call on your wits if need be.”

With the slightest twitch of their heads, Joliffe and Basset shared a glance. They were both shifting their thoughts, and by the smallest of nods Basset told Joliffe the game was his for now. Putting a careful edge of interest to his voice’s mildness, Joliffe said, “And now there’s need, my lord?”

Lord Lovell looked up at him. “Now there’s need. As players, you can go unquestioned to place anyone else I might send would be suspect. You can be in the midst of a household, seeing things without anyone wondering why you’re there.”

“Where would you have us go, my lord?” Joliffe asked, even-voiced, showing reasonable interest.

and keeping his instant wariness from sight.

“One of my feofees”—holding land from Lord Lovell in return for service if called on for it—“Sir Edmund Deneby, is readying a marriage between his daughter and the nephew of another man I know and am friendly with. It’s a reasonable marriage. I’ve encouraged it. The only thing is that the girl was betrothed before but the man died not long before the wedding.”

“Suspiciously, I take it?” Joliffe asked, the guess not difficult.

“He fell ill of a flux that couldn’t be stopped. Such things happen.” Lord Lovell said it easily but was not at ease about it. He might be unable to say in clear and certain words *why* he was uneasy but nonetheless he was.

“No one else fell ill?” Joliffe asked. Since they were in this with no way out, he might as well know more. “He was a hale man but it came on suddenly and killed him too quickly?”

“You know about it?” Lord Lovell asked in quick return. “You’ve heard something of it?”

“No, my lord. Those simply seemed the most reasonable things to make you uneasy about which might otherwise seem straight-forward mischance.”

Sitting back in his chair, Lord Lovell smiled and rapped his knuckles against the tabletop. “There. That’s what I want. Sharp wits looking at this thing.” He looked to Basset. “Master Basset, I’m sending your company to Sir Edmund as a sort of betrothal present. He and Master Breche are presently at Deneby Manor, working out final matters before the betrothal, settling the contract for Mariena and Amyas’ marriage. Amyas. A fool name. What did they think he was going to be, some hero out of a French romance? Anyway, I’ve had dealings with Master Breche and I’ve backed the marriage, so no one will wonder if I send my players there for this while before the marriage.”

“How long will we have?” Basset asked.

“As I understand it, they’re in the last of the betrothal talks. Everything should be agreed within a few days, the betrothal will be made, the banns immediately given on the three following days, and the marriage held the day after the last of them.”

That was a quick moving toward the marriage. The usual way was for the banns announcing it to be read at the church door for three Sundays in a row and the marriage to follow sometime soon after. It was possible—though rare—to do it more quickly and, “Why the haste?” Joliffe asked. “Is that part of your suspicion?”

“No. Master Breche has merchant interests abroad. He’s due to be in Calais by Martinmas. Amyas is his heir. He wants him settled before he goes.”

“Is the girl Sir Edmund’s heir?”

“There’s a son. Much younger. So she’s not the heir, but Sir Edmund is giving a good dowry with her and she’ll have considerable lands from her mother when her mother dies.”

And her brother might die. Then she would have everything, if—“Is the estate entailed in the male line only?” Joliffe asked. Because that would mean the property could go only from male to male and never to a daughter, however sidewise that might take it, even to remote cousins.

“No,” Lord Lovell said, with a level look at Joliffe that said he understood what lay behind the question. While a well-dowered knight’s daughter was a very good thing, a daughter who was heir to all that knight’s property was even better, and here was someone with only a younger brother in the way to that. But even without that, it was likely a good marriage just as it was, because by way of it,

merchant's heir would rise into the gentry and a knight's daughter acquire a wealthy husband.

Besides, it seemed that Lord Lovell feared for the bridegroom, not the brother.

Even as all that chased through his mind, Joliffe asked, enjoying this chance to question a lord rather than merely obey. "Is there more you could tell us about what has you uneasy?"

"I would there were. As it is, the best I can offer is that you just go there, make of matters what you can, and let me know."

"How do we let you know, my lord?" Basset asked.

"My lady wife and I are coming to the wedding. We'll be there the day before and I'll make an occasion to talk to you. If there's any reason not to go forward with the marriage, I can deal with that then."

Unless the bridegroom died sooner, Joliffe thought but did not say; but found Lord Lovell adding level-voiced and looking straight at him as if reading his mind, "In the meantime, if you see need to keep anyone alive, please do so." He pulled a scroll toward him, dropping his gaze to it, dismissing them with, "I'll have Gil sent to you directly."

Joliffe followed Basset in deeply bowing and retreating from the room. A servant waiting outside went in as they left, probably to receive an order about this Gil with whom they were going to be saddled, but neither Basset nor Joliffe said anything until they were in the middle of the yard, away from anyone to hear Joliffe ask, "What do we tell the others?"

Without slowing or looking at him, Basset said, "What my lord told us. That he has a boy who wants to be a player and we're to take him on, and we're being sent as a betrothal gift to this Sir Edmund Deneby."

"And about the other?"

"Nothing."

The briefness of Basset's answer told how he felt about the business set on them.

"We've been asked to do worse," Joliffe pointed out.

"And when we refused, we lost our then-patron and have been living narrowly ever since," Basset pointed out in return.

"But this time we've accepted," Joliffe said cheerfully. "We'll do what we can, which probably won't be much, and there'll be an end of it. Although," he went on thoughtfully, "if my lord thinks I'm going to hurl my body in front of an assassin's dagger or suchlike to protect this Amyas Breche, he can think another thought about it."

"Watch what you don't wish for," Basset muttered. "You might get it. What we need to talk about is this thought Lord Lovell has that we can do his spying for him because of the Penteney business."

Because that matter had been much Joliffe's doing, he started somewhat uneasily, "I—"

"Later," said Basset. "When there's time."

The others were waiting for them with all the hampers and baskets packed into the cart and the man Tisbe hitched between the shafts. While Joliffe went to be sure of her harness' straps and buckle Basset explained about this Gil that was to join them.

All in all, the others took it not so badly as they might. Ellis said, "He'll be the one who was all but falling into the playing area with staring at us, whatever we did here."

“If it is,” Rose said encouragingly, “at least he’s neither lame nor ugly.”

Over Tisbe’s back, Joliffe said, “A player can do with being ugly. Look at Ellis.”

“I’ll look at you with a stick the next time you’re in reach,” Ellis returned without heat. “That’ll help your looks, anyway.”

“It’s what his voice is like and whether he’s trainable,” Basset said.

“Even Joliffe has been mostly trainable,” Piers said from where he sat on the cart’s tail, legs swinging.

“I get enough of that from Ellis,” Joliffe said. “Don’t you start.”

“You give enough of that to Ellis,” Rose said. “All of you stop it.” She was Basset’s daughter and Piers’ mother and Ellis’ love and often sounded as if she would willingly knock all their heads together if she had the chance. “Father, you haven’t noted the cart.”

“The cart? What’s wrong with the cart?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Rose said. “Look.”

Piers helpfully pointed at the cart’s curved canvas top. The high-sided cart carried all the properties needed for their work and what little else there was in their lives. Sturdily made to begin with and carefully kept these many years, it rarely failed them, but it was the canvas cover over curved wooden struts that kept the weather off everything, and despite the best of mending, it was simply wearing out. Patched, blotched, and gray with use, it told all too well how low the players’ fortunes had sunk these past few years. Except that instead of that cover there was another one now—crisp with newness without patch, blotch, or mend to be seen, and brightly painted gold and red in the bold, curving, nebully lines of Lord Lovell’s heraldic arms.

Both Basset and Joliffe must have very satisfactorily gaped at it because Rose and Ellis and Piers all burst into laughter together; and while Joliffe stood back to admire it and Basset circled the cart staring, Ellis said, “The man who brought it said it was Lord Lovell’s gift. He left a cask of paint, too, for us to paint the cart red to match when we’ve a chance.”

Still staring, Basset breathed, “Blessed St. Genesius.” The patron saint of actors.

“You really didn’t see it?” Rose insisted.

Basset shook his head, picked up Piers from where he had fallen off the cart-tail with laughter, and said without taking his eyes from the splendor that had so suddenly overtaken them, “I never did. I was thinking about where we’re going.” He blinked and gathered his thoughts. “Do you know, I don’t know the way to Deneby Manor. We’ll have to ask.”

“I know the way,” said someone from the outer corner of the shed.

They all turned to look at the boy standing there with a long bundle clasped to him with both arms. The same boy—as Ellis had guessed—who had been at everything they had performed at Minster Lovell this week. Until now there had never been reason to note more than that about him, but that had changed and Joliffe made a first, quick assessing of him. Older than Piers by a few years, he was pleasant-featured enough, with straw-brown hair and a well-limbed body, compact enough that he might never take him through a gawking, awkward time. All that, at least, was to the good. More important, including his voice and whether he was trainable, would have to wait. Basset was saying, surely while making his own judgment, “You do? To Deneby? That will be a help. You’re Gil, I take it?”

The boy ducked his head in awkward acknowledgment, thought better of that, and tried a slight bow.

from his waist instead, more awkward because of the bundle clutched to him. As he straightened, his gaze flickered to all of them looking back at him, and Joliffe remembered his own first moment joining Basset's company. That had been before the disaster had come on them, so there were more people looking at him—five men and Rose and another woman—but the feeling must be the same for this Gil as it had been for him: the lone outsider being judged by a close-grown group who knew each other, did not know him, and were unsure they wanted to. Basset had done then just as he did now—said with hearty goodwill, “Welcome, young man—” and went on to make them all known to him. “Ellis Halowe, who does our villains and heroes, depending on which we need. Joliffe Ripon, who mostly plays our women's roles as well as anything else that's needed. My daughter Rose, who'll keep you clothed and teach you your share of the cooking. Her son Piers, who'll make trouble for you, just as he does for the rest of us.”

Gil smiled and nodded at each of them. They smiled and nodded back.

“It's your last name we don't know,” Basset said.

“Densell, if you please, sir,” Gil said.

“Well, Gil Densell, it's time we were on our way. That's all your gear?” Basset asked. “Put it in the back of the cart. Show him where, Piers.”

“There's a meat pie on the top,” Gil said. “For all of . . . us.” He offered that “us” uncertainly. “From my mother,” he added, abashed.

“Then doubly welcome,” Basset said heartily.

Young Gil would learn soon enough, thought Joliffe, that food from anyone for any reason was always welcome among them.

But even now, with Piers showing Gil where to stow his bag and no reason left not to be on the way, Rose said, “There's one more thing.”

Joliffe, going to Tisbe's head to start her away, turned back to see Piers handing his mother a folded cloth that must have been lying at the cart's back. He and his mother and Ellis were all smiling as if it had burst, and before Joliffe or Basset could ask why, Rose shook out the cloth and held it up, showing that it was a tabard of strong red cloth painted with Lord Lovell's badge of a silver wolf-dog—playing on the Latin *lupellus* and Lovell—stitched on its front. Slipped over the head, the tabard would hang loose behind back and front and by the Lovell badge tell to the world whose players they were.

“From Lady Lovell,” Rose said. “There's one for each of you and Piers and Ellis, too.”

“The Lord and St. Anne and the blessed Virgin love her,” Basset breathed, staring much as the Israelites must have stared at the manna from heaven. “I . . .”

Words failed him. Joliffe did not even try for any. A few months ago they had been near to ruin and now they were a lord's players, with all the marks of honor that could go with being so.

“We'll wear them,” Basset said. “As we leave. To let my lady know we honor her gift.”

“And then put them away for later,” Rose said firmly. While Piers tossed folded cloths to Ellis and Joliffe, she went to her father and slipped the tabard over his head, settling and straightening it as she had his surcoat. He struck a pose and she nodded at him, smiling approval. Then she turned to Ellis, waiting for her help though he did not need it; and when she had the tabard on him, her hands lingered on his shoulders, and he put his hands over hers, the both of them smiling at each other with smiles far different from what she had shared with her father.

Joliffe, putting on his own tabard, held in his own smile at sight of them. The affection between them was too often an uneasy thing and it was good to see them being simply glad of each other, bright though it lasted before Rose had to untangle Piers' head from his tabard, saying to Gil while she did so, "I'm afraid there's none for you yet."

Lifting his chin, the boy said cheerfully enough, "That's no matter. After all, I'm not a player yet."

Joliffe began to have hope of him.

Chapter 2

The day's rain held off until the players were a mile or more from Minster Lovell. Their tabards were safely stowed in one of the hampers by then and they had their cloaks on and their hoods up against the soft drizzle that would likely last all day but was better than a downpour. Drizzle took longer to soak through thick-woven wool.

According to Gil, who had been there with his father a few times—"When he still thought he might make a bailiff of me," the boy said simply, with neither triumph that his father had failed nor bitterness that he had tried—the manor of Deneby was north and east from Minster Lovell, a day and half's travel at the cart's pace. "We'll be there early tomorrow afternoon," he said. "All going well."

The boy might be addled enough to want to be a player, Joliffe thought, but he was at least sensible enough to add that "all going well." And he made no word of complaint about the rain or the walking, either, and that was to the good, since walking and rain were both inevitable in a player's life. Unless Joliffe amended, a player prospered to the point of affording a riding horse—which was so rare a thing as to be a laughable thought—or else fell so ill he had to ride in the cart—which God forbid. A player could no more afford to be ill than he could afford a riding horse.

At least this Gil looked healthy enough, striding steadily beside Basset. With Minster Lovell behind them, they had all taken their usual places around the cart: Basset on one side, Ellis on the other, Joliffe at Tisbe's head, Rose and Piers behind. Sometimes it went other ways; sometimes they walked together or in various pairs, and in good weather Piers often roamed forward to Ellis' side or his grandfather's or Joliffe's, but today he kept beside his mother, slogging with the rest of them, and Basset had called Gil to his side to talk with him while they walked.

Joliffe remembered his first walk and talk with Basset, when Basset had skillfully drawn him out with questions and at the same time given him to understand what his place in the company would be, and, for good measure, gave him his first lesson in playing. "Your voice and your body do your work," he had said. "Your voice and body. They're the tools of your trade. However sharp your mind is, but—and I suspect yours is sharp enough you've cut yourself more than once—it's no good to us if you can't work your voice and body into whoever you need to be in a play, and you're going to have to be everyone there ever was if you're going to be in this company—from sweet maiden to old man, from angel to devil, to everyone and everything between. We've no use for someone who can only be himself."

Remembering, Joliffe smiled to himself. He had learned, and he was good, and he took pleasure both in the work and in being good at it. He smiled, too, because his years of almost always playing to a woman or girl in any play they did were maybe done. He was become somewhat old for playing to maidens. If Gil proved any good at all, he was more than welcome to become every maiden there was in all their plays.

Their plays. Despite his boots were in mud and rain was dripping off his hood's edge past his eyes, Joliffe smiled wider at the thought of what he could do with their plays if Gil proved good. When the company had broken up and shrunk, he had reworked what plays of theirs he could to fit the few of them that were left, with him and Basset and Ellis often shifting to play two or more parts apiece in a single play. Too many of their plays, though, could not be altered enough to be playable by so small a company and had languished these years in the bottom of the box where their scripts were kept. With

even one more player, possibilities opened up and through the summer, after Lord Lovell had taken the company for his own, Joliffe had begun to work over the plays, seeing what could be done.

Now, with Gil to be maybe of their company, he could think more directly about possibilities ignoring Tisbe while he did, knowing full well she did not need him. The mare had been with the company long enough that she knew her business. Set out along a road, she simply kept on going. she came to a crossroads and no one told her otherwise, she stopped until told which way to turn. she came to a bad stretch of mud, holes, ruts, or rocks, she waited for someone to guide her and the cart carefully past it. When a village or town came into sight, she slowed until told whether or not the players meant to stop and make ready to perform there or else go straight on. This last year, things being as bad as they were with the ruined harvest, they had played everywhere they came to, needing whatever farthings or foodstuffs were given them in return.

Supposing any were given at all.

With Lord Lovell's coins in their purse these past few months, they had done a little more choosing and today, with more of Lord Lovell's coins in hand and some place particular they were supposed to be, they simply traveled on. Not that there were many places to pause the way they were going, nor west and east through the wide forest of Wychwood, but by late afternoon they were beyond it, and with early dark drawing in because of the rain, they stopped for the night in a village where the reeve agreed they could shelter in his barn in return for performing for his family after supper.

That was a good enough exchange. "Though we don't have to give as much as we might, since we're feeding ourselves," Basset said over the players' own supper of Gil's meat pie and a leather bottle of ale brought from Minster Lovell. "This is excellent pie, young Gil. Our thanks to your mother and welcome to you."

Basset lifted his handleless cup as he said it and the others followed suit. Gil grinned and lifted his in return. "My thanks to you," he said. "For taking me on."

"We'll see how thankful you are in a week or so, once Basset has put you to work," Ellis said. But he was smiling. He tended toward black-browed frowns more than any of them, but even he was presently in good humour, being well-fed, well-sheltered, and with money in hand.

As the players had expected, after supper they found most of the village crowded into the reeve's house. There was not much space left for them to play but they were used to that and began with some juggling by Basset, Ellis, and Piers. Then Joliffe played his lute (his juggling skills were execrable) while Piers sang in his bright, clear child's voice. Basset's sleight-of-hand tricks followed, accompanied by a running exchange of practiced insults between Joliffe and Ellis that rocked the lookers-on with laughter and approving shouts.

Rose kept aside, near the door with Gil, and slipped him away as Basset began his flowered closing speech of thanks to all, interrupted by Joliffe and Ellis snipping insults at each other behind his back until with a roar he chased them both out the door, leaving Piers to make the final bow all by himself with a flourish of his feathered cap and a wide, triumphant smile before running after the others, leaving shouts, laughter, and clapping behind him.

All the brightness of performance was gone from them, though, while they laid out their pads and blankets on the barn's packed-earth floor by the small light of a single tallow candle in a lantern. With no one to see them, they moved with the tiredness earned by a day's walking and an evening's work and Gil asked somewhat shyly, "Do you have to do that all the time? Play at the day's end?"

“Often,” Basset said. “Nor it doesn’t do to give less for these things. Next time we come this way they’ll remember us, and better they remember well than ill. Value for value.”

“And at the end of a rainy day there isn’t better value than a dry place to sleep,” Rose said. “Piers don’t you dare lie down in those wet hosen.” She had set up a drying rack around the small clay pot that carried their fire and was hanging all their hosen over it. Fed with a little of their hoarded charcoal and the dry sticks they kept in the cart against wet days, the fire heated the pot; the pot, the covered to slow the fire to a smother, gave off warmth most of a night—too little warmth to be much use against cold nights but grand for drying wet hosen, and dry hosen were far more pleasant to put on in the morning than were damp.

Piers stripped his legs bare at his mother’s order, yawning while he did. Ellis, already sitting on his blankets, was rubbing his bare feet as if they ached, while Basset lowered himself with a groan on his bed; and Gil asked, “You seemed not tired at all while you were playing. How do you do that after a day of walking?”

“Being half-mad or else an idiot helps,” Joliffe said, spreading his still-damp cloak over his blankets.

“Then you should be better at it than any of us,” Ellis muttered.

“Pretend I’ve just thrown my pillow at you,” Joliffe said. His pillow being a small oblong of straw-stuffed canvas and somewhat hard.

“Pretend I’ve just thrown it back at you,” Ellis said around a yawn. He slid between his own cloak-covered blanket and straw-stuffed sleeping pad.

“We’re players,” Basset said, answering Gil. “That means that when we’re pretending to be someone, we feign feelings that they have, not our own. Tonight we were ‘the jolly players,’ full of mirth and fun. At Minster Lovell you saw Joliffe as the fair Marian and Ellis as bold Robin, most wonderfully in love with one another. Do they look to be in love with one another to you, now that you know them?”

Joliffe made mime of gagging, and from the depths of his blanket, Ellis snorted. Rose, kneeling just finished with tucking Piers into his own bed, turned and reached, smiling, across her own bed toward Ellis, who put out a hand and briefly clasped hers. With her was where his love lay, and he was with him, however rarely it came to more than wishing between them.

Gil looked as if he were sorting through a great many thoughts as he crawled into his own blankets.

In the morning Basset’s value for value was rewarded. The rain had stopped in the night and yellowish dawn was trying to happen through thinning clouds as they started out, cloaks and leather shoes still damp and stomachs only somewhat satisfied with the barley gruel and the bit of yesterday’s bread that Rose had portioned them for breakfast. But as Tisbe turned the cart into the village street headed the way she had been going yesterday, a woman came out from one of the houses, hurried toward Basset, thrust a small loaf of bread into his hands, and said, “For last night. Our own thanks.’Tisn’t much, but it’s something.”

Loaf in one hand, Basset swept off his hat with the other and made her a low bow. “Good lady, thank you. It comes from your fair self makes it precious beyond gold.”

She laughed at him but was blushing, pleased, as she retreated to her cottage. Only when the village was behind them did Basset say to Gil at his side, “Folk know when you’ve given fully and fairly

them. Some will take it all and give little or nothing. Some pay what's asked and no more. Some, like that good woman who owed us nothing, give something more precious than a silver coin from a lord. Because in a dearth-time like this year, silver coins might sometimes be more readily had than bread. "It's still warm from her oven," Basset said. "Shall we have it now or save it?"

The vote was entirely to have it now. Warm, fresh bread was too good a thing to let go cold for later; and though divided among the six of them, the little loaf did not go far, the pleasure of it raised spirits.

The drying weather raised spirits more, nor did it seem there'd been so much rain here: the going was none so bad, with rarely need to heave the cart along through a mud-hole. Basset had taken one of their scripts from the box and tucked it inside his doublet before they had started today. Now he brought it out and set Gil to reading it aloud, first to find out what possibilities his voice had, then to begin training him both to understand what he read and how to make the most of it.

"These aren't just words you're reading, lad. These are people talking. You have to understand not just what they're saying but why they're saying it. Because if you don't understand why they're saying it, chances are your listeners won't understand it either, and nothing loses you a crowd like them not understanding what you're doing. And if you lose your crowd—"

"You lose your money," chorused Joliffe, Ellis, and Piers from ahead, aside, and behind. It was a lesson they'd heard more often than almost any other.

Ignoring them, Basset went on, "You lose your money. Which can mean no food for your belly or no roof for your head that night."

"Which we don't always have anyway," Ellis put in. "You've been lucky so far."

"Remember when—" Piers started.

"We'll remember later," Basset said, probably not trusting what Piers would choose to remember. "Right now I want to work him." And through the rest of the morning's miles Basset did.

The rest of them closely heeded how it went, not for the sake of the lesson itself but to judge what they could about Gil, because besides that they needed him to be good, they needed to know something about him. They all lived too much together, day in and out and nights, too, to add to the company someone with whom they could not live—a complainer or a whiner or someone given to quarrels or naturally glum, unable to find an often desperately needed laugh when things were bad; or someone too weak in body to keep up their traveling pace; or too weak in voice to be of use; or too stupid to learn.

They already knew Gil could keep to the walking well enough, and before the morning was out, they found he was both clear-voiced and fairly quick to catch what Basset wanted from him. He was also cheerful at it. How cheerful he would be after a few weeks on the road was another matter—one they would have to wait those few weeks for answer, Joliffe supposed.

They paused along the road to eat their noontide bread and cheese and ale. The sun was weakly out but the grass was still too wet for sitting on. Rose and Piers sat on the lowered tail-gate of the cart. The rest of them made do with standing, and when the first edge of hunger was off and everyone's chewing had slowed, Basset said, "So, young Gil, how far would you say we are from Deneby?"

With all of them looking at him, Gil seemed to find his bread and cheese suddenly far too dry in his mouth; but he chewed and swallowed and said, "My guess is about two hours' walk, Master Basset. But that's just a guess."

“That’s good enough,” Basset assured him. “Suppose you tell us, though, before we get there, what you know about this Sir Edmund Deneby and his people. There’s a wife and a son and the daughter whose marriage they’re working toward, yes?”

“Mariena,” Gil said. “I’ve seen her. She’s lovely.” From the way he said the word, her loveliness was still warm in his memory, and Joliffe felt a twitch of wariness. They didn’t need a lovesick boy mooning after their host’s daughter. Gil shrugged. “Her brother is just a boy. But then there’s Lady Benedicta.” His voice went altogether the other way from how he had spoken of her daughter.

“Hard to please, is she?” Basset asked.

Gil paused over his answer before saying slowly, “I don’t know what she is. I never had anything to do with her, nor my father either. I only saw her at meals in the great hall. A hard-favored woman. The sort you don’t want ever mad at you?”

He made the last a question, as if uncertain that it told Basset enough. Basset acknowledged with a nod that it did and asked, “What of Sir Edmund?”

“He’s a good sort, my father says. Straight-forward. No twisting about. His people like him.”

Basset nodded some more, satisfied with that. “Well done. Thank you.”

Well done, indeed. It never hurt to know ahead of time what sort of people they were going to play for. From what Gil said, Joliffe judged that Sir Edmund would probably be easy to please but his wife might be a trouble; but among Basset’s sayings about trouble was the palpable truth, “If there isn’t one, there’s another,” and they had had to deal with troublesome wives before now. Sometimes it took no more than doing a play that ended with a wife having the upper hand. Sometimes it took other than that. They would have to wait until they were at Deneby to judge, but at least they were forewarned.

While they passed around the leather bottle of ale for the last time before moving on, Basset said, “I’m thinking that we should stop in Deneby village before pushing on to the manor. There’s a village isn’t there, young Gil?”

“About a quarter mile from the manor house itself,” Gil readily supplied.

“Better yet,” said Basset. “I say we stop there for the night, to learn what else we can about what what at Deneby. Play something, then spend a few hours of the evening at the alehouse, and move on in the morning to present ourselves to Sir Edmund and all.”

There were general nods to that before Ellis asked, “Play what?”

That was always a closely considered question, because an ill-judged choice, no matter how well played, could put them into trouble in some places or, here, set them off on the wrong foot before they were even at the manor.

“Not a farce about marriage,” Rose said. “Not before we know how feelings are running about the one.”

“Nor about stewards,” Basset said, and explained to Gil, “Making sport of stewards and reeves and any other manor officers is always an easy way to laughs in villages, but we’re going to be here too many days together and there’s no use in finding out too late the steward overmuch minds being laughed at.”

Gil nodded with ready understanding. “That play you did about the priest, then? That had us all laughing.”

Basset briefly considered but said, “Best not. We might want the priest’s friendship while we’re

there.”

“A saint’s play,” Joliffe said. “That won’t offend anyone.”

“So long as it’s not one about the virtues of virginity,” Basset said. “Virginity not being what’s on people’s minds at Deneby these days. But, yes, one of the slap-and-fall-about saints plays should do. Are we ready to move on? Gil, why don’t you walk ahead with our good Tisbe, and Joliffe and I can talk about which play will serve.”

That was reasonable enough; but when Basset sorted it so that Rose and Piers were walking beside the cart, and he and Joliffe well behind it as they set off again, Joliffe knew they were going to talk about more than which play to do. Nor did Basset waste time but said when the others were enough ahead not to hear him, “We’ll do *St. Nicholas and the Thief*. There. That’s settled. Now, about the spying we’re to do.”

“It’s not my fault,” Joliffe tried.

“Of course it’s your fault,” Basset said without heat. “You made clever this summer and got yourself noticed. There’s nobody to blame for that except you.”

“Maybe we could blame Lord Lovell? He’s the one who’s done the noticing.”

“No one ever got far in the world by blaming a lord for anything. No, it’s all of it your fault and that’s settled. It’s what we’re to do about it is the question.”

“Be such poor spies Lord Lovell doesn’t ask us to do it again?”

“And maybe lose his interest in us? No, honest work is honest work. You and I will do what we can to keep the others out of it if possible, and hope for the best.”

“Spying is honest work?”

“Starving may be more honest,” Basset said with sudden grimness. “But if I’m choosing, I’ll forgive the starving, thank you.”

“Basset, I *am* sorry for this,” Joliffe said, serious.

But Basset waved both that and his own grimness away with one hand, saying, easy again, “Sorry, butters no parsnips, boy. Not that it would much matter if it did. I’ve never been partial to parsnips. We’ll do what we can and it will have to be enough. Just like with everything else in life. Come. Let’s tell the others who we’re going to be this afternoon.”

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