

# Minda grows up

by

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Bantam	Fighting cock
Bill (Tool-bill)	Hardened metal spike
Billet	Sausage-shaped piece of wood or metal
Borseholder	Senior person in small village
Butts	Archery targets
Butt-law	Requirement for regular archery practice
Espada	Rapier sword
Forestall	Illegally buying goods before they get to open market.
Gleaning	Picking loose grains from a harvested field
Gleaning-bell	Rung to signal start of gleaning
Haysel	Hay harvest
Hundred	Administrative area smaller than a county
Lorimer	Brass founder and harness maker
Manor	Smallest area of civil administration.
Mark	Unit of financial accounting
Midden	Refuse heap
Quench	To harden steel by rapid cooling. Typically by plunging into water
Rake	String of pack animals.
Reeve	Civic official in charge of law and order
Solar	Private room
Stock	Wooden bit of a weapon to hold
Temper toughen it	Precise and gentle heating of steel to
Travus	Part of a smithy where horses are shod
Wattle	Hurdles typically woven of hazel or willow used for penning livestock.

# 1 Rejected

In the dead light of the November overcast a messenger gallops along the watery roads. Every few miles shaggy thatch and greening walls of the next village marks his lonely progress. Deserted fields give way to dark woods that have witnessed hundreds of years of wet leaf-fall.

The Duke of Avel received the news stoically. He had really wanted a second son, still, a girl could be married-off to advantage. The news about the mother was worrying. He really liked Juliana and was almost moved to return to the castle but reasoned there was nothing he could do to help her. They would continue the hunt. "Collins! Ride to Lord Humbrigg's. Tell him we'll be stopping for the night. Messenger! Return to Bartonbry with this proclamation. "The Duke is delighted at the birth of his daughter. In seven days there will be a feast-day to celebrate.'" Ha ha. It would be interesting to see what the leading citizens brought as presents. Gold, perhaps something sparkly for a daughter. The messenger hesitated but then turned and departed through the silent shrouds of mist.

Minda wasn't expected to live much longer than her mother. With a claw foot, deformed hand and messed-up face it was presumed she would weaken fast. The Duke thought of using Juliana's death as an excuse to cancel his proclamation but then with his rogue's insight realised that a brave face would make his people generously sympathetic. The child wouldn't be around long so that would take care of itself. It was all very sad but he couldn't help that. Ellery of Worton had a nice unmarried daughter, or there was Lord Radley's widow with lots of money. Ho hum. Plenty of possibilities, but first he must work on his martyr's face.

In time the Duke remarried and Minda grew into the most cheerful infant anyone could wish for. As an embarrassment she was sent to his furthest estate to be forgotten. For the next fifteen years Minda enjoyed a carefree life combining the privilege that comes with high birth with the simplicity of being brought up in a village. While she was happy and growing strong, the dukedom was decaying and ragged patches of lawlessness spoiled the kingdom.

This is the first part of the story of how Minda fought many things to become the most powerful woman in Europe. Loved by all but without a husband. Trusted and caring but brutally ruthless. Strong in so many ways but suffering bouts of depression. Brilliantly successful but always threatened. A magical legend made from a lonely girl.

# 2 Selenden

The Duke's estate at Selenden was not much more than a manor house with a handful of farms in a gentle valley. Woods descended the flanks of the chalk hills, fields and orchards took the gentler ground with the little river swinging between the meadows in the bottom. The river powered mills and floated barges carrying livestock, timber, stone and bricks to villages strung along its twisting thread.

The Duke's agent, Mister Hesquery, looked after the productivity of the estate while his wife cleverly managed the accounts to ensure there was never a surplus shown in them. Baby Minda was accepted by the childless Hesquerys because they had no choice but she soon stole their hearts. Appalling ugly and destined to be a cripple she became the focus of their love. Everyone got used to Mister Hesquery harking-on about Minda's abilities at reading and sums. Mrs Hesquery would give daily progress reports on walking and screaming with pleasure when drawn round the yard in a dog cart. Enthusiasm and love is contagious, so a shoemaker's wife soon drew her husband's attention to the matter of Minda's club foot. Boot and shoe makers are prone to err on the solid and heavy side so it was fortunate that a basket weaver was instructed by his wife to try something lighter and springier. Minda's squashed face soon had an almost permanent, if lopsided, smile and her big brown eyes and blunt nose weren't that bad really.

Occasionally the special boot chaffed but with attention from the combined forces of the shoemaker, basket maker and harness maker she could roam all day. She tried to count the trees in the wood of soft smells and sighing tops that she dreamed of owning when she was a real duchess. Lying in a nest of the heath-land heather she wondered if the tiny sounds of the shoals of jumping grasshoppers was chattering like the birds to tell the news. What about the wind? He was a messenger you must feel and watch his clouds if you wanted to stay dry. She made up conversations between the nodding bank-side flowers and the ears and mouths of the river's whorls. 'I'm going away. – Where are you going? – To the sea and then the ocean – Come back! – No I can't come back – Take my petals with you to Araby. Farewell.'

Her boot wasn't good enough for chasing running and skipping so Minda didn't play ordinary games with the other children. Ghostly family ties gave her the privilege of being excused the constant chores of her contemporaries. Her claw hand and clumsy foot made her abandon the pastimes of young ladies such as dancing, embroidery and playing an instrument. Instead Minda would smile and ask questions and take herself wherever she wanted. She would be welcomed, given a glass of milk and allowed to stay and watch or try her hand, as far as limited dexterity allowed, at whatever craft was being done. Spinning, dyeing, weaving. Ploughing and harrowing was boring, wet and hard on her leg. Harvest was itchy. She physically couldn't tie sheaf-knots or pole-fork but she was allowed to ride the horses

between the fields and the stack yard. After harvest comes the gleaning when the women and children pick up loose ears of corn from the fields. When she found out about this back-breaking work she kept away. It says a lot about the simple wisdom of these folk that a duke's daughter, destined to be a nobleman's wife, should be strengthening her muscles, making friends with peasants and happily discovering simple labour as one of them. Being hearty, curious and privileged she could investigate the activities of the farms as a spectator and pester the craftsmen and women at their work. She took a dislike to animals, they could crush you against a wall or knock you over. Boskew the head horseman was a funny chap, he taught her horse-riding by telling the horse! "When she pull together you better slow down Stefan." The dust of the mills made her choke. Steady grumbling thunder of the gears and stones shaking the floor signified a power she didn't trust. The millers were queer people too: The windmiller was always in a hurry and angry if she held up his work for a second. The water miller was more kindly but seemed to start every sentence with a 'Don't'. "Don't ever go near the weir", "Don't touch a sack it might fall on you", and the ones that didn't begin with "Don't" started with 'Ask me'. "Ask me if I ground more barley that day than anyone before" or "Ask me if I know the answer to that one." She decided mills and millers were best left alone.

## Smithing

The smithy was different, it became her favourite spot. It was a busy gossip-house where news was discussed and rumour spread. Shoeing horses was the main entertainment for onlookers but Minda was entranced by the magic of making many other things out of sun-bright iron. The urgent sound of the bellows' breath putting life into the roaring coals, the heartbeat thumps of rough billeting then the musical smack-clang of shaping and finally the sizzle of the quench told a story. She could listen to that story all day. Dunstin the smith would let her work the bellows to turn the fire's blood-red bed into gasping claws of transparent flame. She was allowed to swing the grindstone wheel to give sheaves of red and gold shooting stars as he ground moon-silver edges onto black blades.

Blacksmiths are generally easy-going. The first thing they learn is that a bit of metal doesn't care how angry you are. They deal with many customers in different circumstances all of whom respect his immediate application even if they can't pay today. Everyone knows not to fall-out with a smith. From Minda's point of view Dunstin had another special qualification, an eye-patch. The hearth-light turned his features orange with shifting shadows giving him a special power to make things with one constant eye, one force of mind, one storm of blows turning a billet into a knife or a coulter or, and this she thought was a special revelation of magical arts, a springy and sharp wool shears from a single piece in front of her very eyes! She desperately wanted a patch like Dunstin's for her squinty eye but was worried that you couldn't just give yourself an eyepatch, there must be something official that adults whispered about. Nevertheless when nobody was looking she'd hold her hand across her face in front of the mirror and imagine the power she'd have.

Even though Minda was growing up strong, the sort of strength you need to hammer iron is beyond most men let alone a ten-year old girl. Dunstin let her blow the bellows, fetch the coals and do the reckoning for each job. Her deformed hand wasn't good at gripping the smooth iron handle of the quench tongs but Dunstin's eye for

detail and exact knowledge of how much strength to use in every situation covered her hand with his enough to give that little extra force to hold them without making Minda feel a failure. Later he said to her. "I wonder if a little glove would give you more grip? You could ask Karel the harness-maker what he thinks." For him, like the Hesquerys, Minda was the son he didn't have.

## Arm wrestling

Children's games follow each other as the different flowers of the spring and summer have followed each other for as long as time. Arm-wrestling took its turn to be the game of the moment. Naturally the boys were fighting cocks. Minda stood back and watched with an air of superiority calculated to annoy the young Herculeses. When this sport was nearing the natural end of its popularity she called-out Constanz the generally acknowledged champion.

"Are boys stronger than girls Constanz?"

"Of course."

"Well prove it!"

"Easy – George you show her."

"Why not you Constanz? Are you afraid of being beaten by a girl?" She carefully rolled up her sleeves to show her smithing muscles.

"No – Err I don't want to hurt you with my strength."

"But I insist Constanz."

"Alright miss but if you get hurt I can't help it."

"Right you are. And if I hurt you? No hard feelings eh?"

"Pah! – Come on."

On the first grip Constanz yelped. "Ow! Let go of my hand."

"Oh sorry am I hurting you?"

"You're not supposed to crush it."

"Oh dear I don't seem to know the rules." she said innocently as Constanz nursed his hand. "So it's just gentle – Like lovers holding hands is it Constanz?" He blushed and the boys sizzled at his embarrassment. "Be quiet! It's not Constanz's fault he has lover's hands – Is it Constanz?"

"I don't have lover's hands!"

"Let's look at them Constanz – Come on show me." He held out his hands. "Ohh yes. Lovely lover's hands" she said stroking them. "To think I nearly hurt your pretty hand!"

"Come on." he said "I've let you have your girly chit-chat now I'll put you in your place."

"Oh you won't hurt me will you Constanz?" She resumed the classic arm-wrestling pose, clasped his hand, gave it a wiggle and smiled at the spectators. On the word 'Go' she smashed his arm back.

"I wasn't ready!"

"That's your fault lover boy."

# Eye patch

Sometimes on a Sunday Minda would read bible stories to Dunstin and his wife May. They liked to discuss the stories imagining people they knew in them. Who was like Noah? Or his wife? Dunstin was May's Adam and she was his Eve of course, but most villagers were unknowingly used to play parts.

Minda changed the subject. "Dunstin? Do you think I could have an eyepatch like yours?"

Dunstin paused. "It depends if you want one I suppose."

"People look at my squinty eye all the time not the good one. It bothers me."

"What about seeing out of it? Don't worry about the others. Is it good for seeing?"

"Well yes and no."

"How much?"

"Err – I don't know."

"Let's go out the back and see."

"Put your hand over your good eye. Now what can you see?"

"The chickens but not their feathers, the sty, the orchard – but it's blurred – and there's rainbows."

"What about your ring. Look at that."

"That's messy."

"Now change hands and eyes. Can you see everything still?"

"Yes – That's clear. I can see each log in the log pile."

"And what about your ring?"

"Yes that's clear."

"Let's think. If May made you a patch you could wear it in the forge to try it out without anyone knowing."

"Why do I care about people knowing Dunstin?"

"Because the first attempt might not go right and people might laugh. I don't let people watch me practising and they don't see me make mistakes as I learn. That way they have confidence in my workmanship. For you they would snigger behind your back. Come tomorrow and we'll fit you up."

"Please may I ask – if you don't mind – why do you wear a patch Dunstin?"

"An accident in the forge when I was a child. Do I tell you never to pick up a hammer when I'm not looking and never ever leave anything lying about."

"Yes."

"One day I was playing with a hammer and a piece of bar while father was out. It was overhanging the anvil edge so it flew up into my face."

"How was that?" Minda was confused.

"Look I'll show you. Take that spade and lay it over the top bar of the gate. Now when you pull down on the handle what will happen to the spade end?"

"It will fly up."

"And then what?"

"I don't know."

"Right, I'm ready to catch it. Don't let go of the handle whatever you do. Now heave down. Heave!" The far end of the spade flew up as expected but kept coming back over the gate towards and above Minda. Dunstin caught it by the shaft before it could fly out of control.

"Now if that was a big nail and you hit the near end with a hammer it would fly spinning towards you before you could blink. That's why in a forge you never use the near edge of the anvil."

"I'm sorry Dunstin."

"Nothing to be sorry about miss. What's happened has happened."

## Archery

There were two outcomes of this episode. Firstly Minda began wearing an eye patch. It didn't make her pretty but she wore it boldly. Secondly she became fascinated by flying bits of metal. She started by making a knife fly off the edge of table into the rafters at home when nobody was around. Then she discovered the spring of a knife blade could do the same thing. Having been found out by Mr. Hesquery he insisted she leave such dangerous sports alone and suggested archery. Another special glove and binding on the bow meant she could hold it at full draw. Her strength was now being remarked on by the adults as well as feared by the children. Here was something she enjoyed and could practise at on her own week after week. After the usual targets she used a sack swinging from a tree then tried for crows and fish.

When she knew she was good enough it was time to show off. She may have only one good eye, only one good foot and only one good hand but by determination Minda was going to show she was just as good as the local archers. There was supposed to be regular Sunday archery practice but it had fallen into occasional bursts of sport rather than regular duty. Minda went to the Reeve to ask him if there could be a competition.

"Mr. Hesquery didn't demand we did it every week and so we did it less and less often. It is difficult to enforce when the Duke never visits."

"Well I'm the Duke's daughter and will have to stand in for him until he can appear. He is very busy. When can you arrange it?"

"Next Sunday morning if it pleases your duchnessness."

"Please make it so. Also make it known that anyone who can't better me, a one-eyed, one-footed, one-handed girl will be fined sixpence. Best put the butts up on Saturday or before for those who want extra practice."

No official likes opinionated outsiders disturbing the established torpor by imposing tasks so the Reeve hurried to consult with Mr. Hesquery. "Minda has asked me to set up the butts on Sunday Godfrey. She also demands anyone who can't beat her will be fined sixpence."

"What's the problem with that Simon?"



"Well, although I have tried, you know I have tried, I have come to you and asked your aid to bring defaulters to practice, and without success. So what good will restarting it now do?"

"Have you sold the targets Simon?"

"No. A couple of hours work and they will be serviceable".

"Good, so there's no practical reason why you can't do as Minda asked. Excuse me Simon I'll fetch her." After a minute Mr. Hesquery returned with Minda. "Can you tell us why you've come to consult me Reeve?"

"Err – It was just that the Butts-law has fallen into disuse and I'm sure you can see it from my position. I don't want to revive something that is dead on the word of a girl – er begging your pardon your duchnessness. Sometimes it is better to let sleeping dogs lie."

"Thank you Reeve. As far as you know the Butts-law still stands, it is only disused due to neglect."

"Yes Mr. Hesquery that's correct."

"So Minda has asked you to carry out the law."

She butted in: "Ordered. I commanded him as the duke's daughter."

Mr. Hesquery took a deep breath. "I think you *asked* Minda. And being fined a sixpence for not being as good as you isn't in the Butt-law. We will have a grown-up talk about asking and commanding in a minute. Now Reeve, have you any particular objection to Minda's suggestion?"

"No. I was just checking before making fools of everybody."

"Fools Simon?"

"Er – It would be foolish to demand and be rebuffed by insolence."

"How about if we add 'One shilling to every man who can beat Minda' That makes it fair, and gives a sporting incentive."

"I shall do it then and the butts will be up by Friday afternoon for any who want to practise."

"I'll provide a Goose as prize for the shoot-off. Thank you Reeve." said Mr. Hesquery.

"Thank you Reeve." said Minda "Do you want any help setting up?"

"No thank you miss I'll manage. Thank you for asking miss."

When the Reeve had gone Mister Hesquery realised he'd got a lot to say to Minda without knowing how to say it. "You are the best daughter anyone could wish for. Come here and hold me. Look you're taller than me now. And sharper than I'll ever be. Mrs Hesquery and me have looked after you for over fourteen years. Every day has been a pleasure to both of us." The light faded from his face. "Soon you'll be grown up."

"Mister Hesquery?"

"Call me Godfrey – You're as good as a princess now."

"Mister Hesquery – sorry it's habit – Godfrey – no that's doesn't sound right – Mister Hesquery. Dear – very dear Mister Hesquery – dear father for all it matters – why can't I command the Reeve? I'm the Duke's daughter."

"Because darling, a duke's daughter is just a duke's daughter. Not even a duchess. You don't have any authority to command anybody."

"But when I asked he called me 'duchnessness'."

"That's ignorance. He means well and was just covering his back. People don't like being reminded of their duty by cocky girls."

"But I do have authority."

"Listen Minda. Listen very carefully. Have I ever – in fifteen years – been cross with you?"

"No."

"Occasionally very cross but I've tried not to show it. You've seen me very disappointed but not angry. Well that truce is over! You're old enough to understand anger. I'm not angry now but if you ever – ever – ever in the rest of your life demand anything instead of asking for it then I will find you and haunt you – and you'd better believe it! Anything that can be demanded should be earned if you want to keep it. Respect is a good example. Do you understand?"

"A bit."

"On Sunday you will be shooting against the village men. If you beat any of them – and I'm sure you will – then they will give you respect. You will have earned their chagrin at being beaten by a cripple. They will be viciously mocked when word gets around and you will have your fun at their expense. Ha! And you've taken a week's wages off them – how many of them can afford that? ...Oh dear it gets complicated. Right! Suppose John Noake owes you sixpence that he hasn't got. Now what do you do?"

"Wait I suppose until he has got it."

"If you were the Duke he'd demand it and John Noake's children would starve. Is that what you want as the result of a little girl's archery competition?"

"No."

"So what do you – *you* do?"

"I don't know."

"Find out."

"I don't know how."

"Yes you do. Don't get too worried. I'm only teaching you the facts of life. Now who do you know to ask? How about Dunstin? Why not put the problem to him?"

"But it's my problem not his. He doesn't know about that sort of thing."

"If he had a problem would you mind if he asked you?"

"No. But what do I know about anything?"

"You'd be surprised. One day you'll have estates of your own and always be needing advice and having to give it. Why do you think the Reeve came to me? To ask for advice of course. Here I'll give you a hint. Tell Dunstin I know the answer but won't let on. That way you can pretend that I am the problem."

"But you're not the problem."

"Exactly. Tell me in your own words what the problem is."

"Er – The Duke's daughter is demanding money from a family that will starve if I take it."

"And why is it a problem?"

"Because to me is just my pride but to a family it is their food for a week."

"Come to my arms again and hug me and kiss me daughter."

"Why do you twist me so? Can't you just tell me the answers?"

"So you will know about being twisted. A rope is twisted for strength, and I expect if you ask Dunstin he'll tell you that iron has to be beaten before it can be strong. You need to be strong. Really strong. As strong as iron. You need to be stronger than any of us here and we need you to be stronger. One day your strength as a powerful lady will protect us."

"I don't see how."

"There are two reasons why you need to know how to command."

"But you said I shouldn't command things but earn them."

"*Demand* and *command* are different. Demand is to use rank. Command is to use loyalty. You are surrounded here by people who would protect you because they are loyal to a charming rejected child who must be warm and charming because her father is so cold and unpleasant. And you're clever and strong as well. You can do reckoning and writing and you don't demand things."

Minda had often thought about her role in the world, how she should behave, who should be her friends, how to achieve things, what made people befriend her, where unnecessary risks were, why a bit of consideration, if you could think of it, went a long way. Also deep, very deep, inside her: What was this thing of stone called fear?

"The Duke could take you away from here tomorrow. If he says you must marry some horrible courtier then you have to do it. While you are here you are a sort of queen of the country, but if you are at the Duke's town of Bartonbry then you are nobody with no friends. Five bulls on the target won't make a pennyweight difference. I will leave you to twist over that first thing. Secondly this dukedom, the whole kingdom perhaps, has lost it's backbone. Even in Selenden we don't bother with archery and the Reeve does a little smuggling. Here we keep in profit and the harvests have been good but in other parts of the kingdom there is decay and bands of outlaws. Sooner or later our part of the world will become plagued by crime and death in all its forms. You are strong. You know the people of the land and you have commanded since you could walk. As a powerful lady you will be able to hunt the killers of prosperity, for without prosperity there is no happiness. Challenging the men of Selenden to archery is the first step on that road. That's why I'm crying. You've just made that first step in the wicked wide world."

Minda was confused by this. She had never known a world that wasn't peaceful, never really thought of men fighting, never known starvation. Her idea of fear was something inanimate that fell on you if you weren't careful. If the world was so full of misery and danger then that was just the thing she didn't want in her bit of it.

"I'm lost. Do you want me to do something?"

"We will have more talks. Let's see what happens on Sunday. No! We'll sort out how to deal with taking money from peasants now. There are many more steep steps for you to climb now you've started."

"So now I'm an adult."

"Yes I'm afraid so. Don't worry dearest. I know you Minda. You will work away at difficulties."

"I don't know where to start."

"You already have."

"Life is suddenly becoming very interesting father. It's like you've just given me a new journal with some of the pages already written which I can't turn over yet."

Minda asked the Reeve to announce that she wasn't legally permitted to fine anyone for anything but she would still give a shilling to anyone who could beat her. She had worked this out for herself, checked it with Dunstin and agreed it with Mister Hesquery. By being closely involved with the reckoning of the estate's finances Minda had discovered that the Hesquerys were putting a portion of the estate's profits aside into a secret account for her. Her original plan was to be as good as half the competition and break-even, now she was bound to lose something overall. Still that was a price worth paying.

The butts-field behind the church was crowded. A lot of last minute practice was going on with friends heckling and jeering. There was good-humour, rumour and anticipation. Mister Hesquery called for silence and spoke. "It is too long since we had an archery competition here. Who can tell when we might need to fight outlaws at an hour's notice? There is no fine for a low score. There is one silver shilling to anyone who can beat Minda. There is a goose for the champion. Are all the archers ready Reeve?"

"Seventeen men, six boys and one girl Mister Hesquery."

"I too have fletched my arrows. Years ago I could score three eyes but today I fear my aim may be less good. Might I start to show you all that an old man is not afraid to pick up a weapon?"

"A brave gesture to be first in the field Mister Hesquery."

Mister Hesquery took his bow. Smiled at the audience. "This takes me back thirty years." he quipped. Taking his stance he aimed and loosed. All the arrows hit the target and he was awarded a round of applause when the scorer announced seventeen. When each archer had finished they picked a wooden tile from a bucket which told the next one to fire. Thus the order was random and nobody knew when they would be called to the line. Minda knew she should score about 30 but already after five shooters there were two 28s and a 30. She hadn't reckoned on the strain of waiting, especially not knowing when... "Minda next". To her surprise the spectators gave an encouraging cheer as she stepped up to the line. This was the moment. She had to shut the sound and tensions out and make her first shot count. She aimed and in her mind's eye saw a rabbit at the centre, she was hungry and loosed. On the spot! Now she aimed at an imaginary crow and scored another eye. Now a duck and another. What else could she aim at? Wood pigeon. She took her time waiting for it to materialise in her mind and loosed to a fourth eye. Twenty-eight. The crowd couldn't remain silent when there was the possibility of a straight five. It was Minda's turn to quip. "This takes me back thirty seconds." As the banter died down she notched her last arrow and chose to aim at – there was no picture in her mind to aim at – she'd have to think of something – her secret was to have a real thing to judge the scale. At last an apple and she loosed but too quickly and only scored 4. The crowd sighed at the missed straight-five then came the congratulations and clapping. She was too upset at becoming flustered to take much notice. Before she'd

had time to pick the lot for the next archer Dunstin had picked her up and sat her on his hefty shoulders. The anger of the rushed last arrow was forgotten as the crowd renewed their cheering. The Reeve interrupted. "Very well done Miss but the goose is not yours yet. Please pick a lot."

In fact the next competitor, an unknown lanky yellow-haired youth scored a straight-five in quick time without a glance at the crowd. The crowd applauded but there was a sense of disappointment that Minda's glory was so short-lived. Minda had prepared for this. She wanted to be friends with people who were interested in the same things as she was and here was her chance. She congratulated him. "That was fast. I wish I could shoot like that. I don't know you."

"I have heard about you miss, and you did really well. My father has made me practise since I was six so I should be good. I'm Henry Trentchard."

"Pleased to meet you Henry. Where do you live?"

"Trowstead miss. Twelve and a half miles away."

"And you'll have to carry a goose all the way back!"

"There's three more to go yet miss. It might be a only half a goose."

Henry got the goose to himself. Together they shared the glory.

Mister Hesquery was speaking to a tall white-haired man. "Your Henry has filled your pot in more ways than one today."

"Yes. 'Tis a proud moment."

"Will you eat with us Harry? I think we should talk about the future."

"We will. The future is stormy and the sheep are spread all over the moor."

"Shepherds we both are. I think I have a shepherdess for you."

"The Duke's daughter?"

"Let us talk about this in private."

After the excitement Minda just wanted to go home but it was nice of some of those that she'd beaten to shake her hand and congratulate her on her skill. Some even said they would practice a bit more if time allowed. One of the village girls came up to her and asked her if anyone could be an archer. "Yes but you need strength and patience."

"So it's only – special girls that can do it?"

"I'm afraid so. But look at my hand." She removed her glove and showed the girl her deformed hand. "I can't do sewing with a thing like this – so you'd beat me at that. You'd beat me at running."

This seemed to make up for the disappointment of being denied archery. "Well done Minda for beating all those boys. Can I call you Minda – that's a lovely name."

"Boys have got other things to do as well so they don't always have the time to practise."

"It's still good to beat them. If I ever have a cripple baby girl – I mean any girl – I'll call her Minda after you."

"That's very nice. I must go home now." Minda slowly left the crowd entertaining itself and headed home. She'd done what she wanted but somehow victory wasn't

very glorious. Henry was interesting. How quickly he stuck the eye full of five arrows. That was amazing.

## Leaving Selenden

"Minda, please read this letter to your father."

*My Lord Your Grace, for nearly fifteen years I and my wife have had the honour of caring for your daughter Minda. She has grown into a strong and intelligent woman who can reckon, read and write. She cannot sew, weave, embroider or play an instrument and is one-eyed and deformed in the face. She can fashion iron in the smithy to fine skill and has beaten many of the local men at archery today. She can shoot marvellously well even with one eye. She will make a wonderful huntress and to that end I am putting her in the care of Harold Trentchard of Trowstead-Underwold who will teach her the arts of the chase, traverse and reading the land. Also to visit steadings and manors to allow her to exercise her noble manners which she is beginning to assume with a stylish swagger she doesn't know she has yet.*

"Who is Harold Trentchard?"

"Henry's father."

"What's a 'stylish swagger'?"

"How you tease and bully together."

"I don't bully anyone Godfrey. I listened to what you said about demand and command."

Mister Hesquery laughed. "You bully and tease like the old blind beggar cat young lady. You just don't know you're doing it. And I love you for it. Come here and hug me for you must leave this evening. Mrs Hesquery is very sad, please comfort her. Every day you've been with us has been a joy but now you must take your first steps into the whole world. I'm sad too – but proud of you. Really proud. Tomorrow Selenden will be telling all the other villages the news that an abandoned girl cripple child who they nickname 'the ox' beat them all and we'll all be proud of you."

"Ox!"

"I'm afraid so. It's not nice but that's people for you. Most aren't very clever."

"Does Dunstin call me an ox?"

"No of course not. It's just the ones that think you're strong, stupid and ugly and there can't be many of those left after today."

After a while Minda said "Why did you tell me?"

"See, you are intelligent. Possibly the cleverest person in this village as well as the best archer. I would have told you why anyway. You will always be meeting people or making enemies who are ignorant or want to hurt you. If I tell you now then you will be prepared in the future. They will still throw darts at you but you'll have a shield."

"Will I come back?"

"I hope so. You've been playing like a boy with a fort and wooden soldiers. I know all about your experiments with nests of wicked spring knives. Now you're going to

learn about real fighting. In that letter I've told the Duke what I think he wants to hear, but this Dukedom and the whole Kingdom need leaders who can fight. Fight outlaws and foreigners and fight the fear that these bring. That means killing men not rabbits and it means men trying to kill you. You're going to learn how kill without being killed. Harry Trentchard is the man for the job. You will have a really hard time with him. He might wake you up in the middle of the night and make you prepare your own horse then take you to the forest and make you walk back through icy streams and drifts of snow to show you what's it's like if you don't have a horse because it wasn't prepared properly or you lost it. Then he'll take you visit a local lord where you're expected to be a perfectly behaved duke's daughter, and then to another manor where you frighten them by demanding a look at their tax rolls. You've got a lot of thunder and lightning ahead." Minda was silent. Mister Hesquery continued. "Harry will look after you. He knows what he's doing. We, the whole Kingdom may need you. You are the steel which will take the hardest temper and so become the sharpest blade."

"I don't understand."

"There is this room, then this house, then this farmstead, then this village, then this estate then hundred then county then Dukedom then Kingdom then the whole world. The sun shines on the whole world each day doesn't it?"

"Yes?"

"And storms fly round it causing havoc. One day fine the next grey and the next floods frosts and gales. The same happens with peace and wars. I know you have read my copies of *Treatise on war*, *Expeditions to Afric* and *Knights of Cornwall* – By the way the Knights of Cornwall is all fancy, made up for the delight of the ladies of the Court. King Denzil and Queen Karen never existed. Sir Theo never actually cut the head off Sir Jack and Mariland is an imaginary country where there couldn't be beetles that big. Forget all that for now and practise breathing."

"Practise breathing?"

"Staying alive."

"Staying alive?"

"Staying alive when people are shooting at you with arrows and money."

"Money?"

"Money buys many things including death."

"What – Oh I see. Somebody pays someone else to kill another."

"But 'another' is you."

"Me?"

"I'm afraid so."

"It seems to be a rule that anyone who is liked will have secret enemies. Every time you smile sympathetically at some borseholder as you expose his tax-cheating ways you make an enemy for life. They cannot see that their taxes go to protect their idle selves who can't be bothered to train the archers or muster the militia."

"But why would I make deadly enemies? Who would try to kill me?"

"You won't be a village girl chasing shillings but a powerful lady able to threaten outlaw gangs with annihilation or corrupt officials with exposure. If that wasn't enough reason, power creates envy and jealousy."

"Surely it sets an example for others to follow. A girl came up to me today and asked could she do archery. She didn't want to kill me – in fact she wanted to name her child after me and be my friend."

"Most people do but some – the snakes – lie hidden in the grass so you don't notice until they strike with their venom. The more power you have the greater their envy and jealousy. And that's not all – You may be exposing their crimes so they have nothing to lose by killing you."

"I'm confused. I'm not exposing crimes."

"But you will be. And if you want any lessons on ignorance, envy and jealousy then let me tell you that the King's court is a covey of thieves. Many can hardly read write or reckon and are there because they give the King money in the hope he'll give them ways to extort more for themselves."

"Really!"

"Yes. That's why I want you to be the best king this kingdom has ever had... .."Hold me tight Minda. Does this estate run itself? No. If the Hesquerys left it would begin to decay. That's what this Dukedom and Kingdom are doing." There was silence.

"Today Minda you took your best arrows and beat the rest. I only have one arrow. You don't really know your target yet. Just fly straight for me and go to the eye. Oh and don't forget to write every week. We'll miss you."

## Ambush

Harold Trentchard wasn't quite the ogre Mister Hesquery had lead her to believe. Minda, Henry and Mister Trentchard rode to Trowstead in the chilly light of the full moon. Henry's pack had a trussed Goose. Minda's pack had a small bundle of clothes made by a very tearful Mrs Hesquery with the rest to follow. Harold Trentchard had a quiver on his back and bow latched on his pommel. Henry rode a bit behind obviously by some arrangement that Minda noted but didn't question.

"I have never seen a girl shoot as well as you today miss."

"Call me Minda."

"I shall. What you call me – what anyone calls me is up to them. Harold Trentchard is my name and I suggest for now you call me Sir. I will be giving you orders to be obeyed. Have you ever been under orders before Minda?"

"No."

"Well what it means is if I ask you to do something I expect you to do it."

Minda thought about this. Even though it had been a long day she knew that it was at times like this that strength and a clear mind really mattered. Ox! Ha! "Mister Hesquery has told me that you expect me to sleep in the snow and frighten silly borseholders. I'm not afraid of that. He's told me I have to hunt outlaws. I'm not afraid of that. He's told me there is a storm of war coming and hinted if I wanted to do anything about it I'd have to fight the courtiers as well – I don't know anything about that. Are there really outlaws lurking in the woods?"

"I will teach you why Henry is riding thirty paces behind in due course."

"But you haven't answered my question."

He paused. "I haven't and I have." Silence. "Mister Hesquery told me you were special in many ways. I've seen your shooting for myself and spent time with Dunstin. I know it's been a long and exciting day but can you remember yet one more thing?"



"I will try my best sir."

"Special and a half you are! Remember this for now. 'You are what people make you'. Dunstin showed me your secret."

"How could he!"

"Because... ..How many legs does your horse have Minda?"

"Four."

"If it had three would it be any good?"

"No."

"And see how the legs work together. Each one knows what the others are doing so they don't get knotted. I am one of the legs carrying you Minda. I need to know what the others are doing. I will be guiding you." His voice dropped as he reached slowly for his bow. "Come ride on my other side."

She obeyed. How stupid she felt as luggage without a bow – not even in her pack. How could she fight? "Have you got a spare weapon?" "No unfortunately. But don't worry – it's probably just a deer. When I whistle gallop the next mile and wait there safely whatever happens. Understand?"

"Yes sir."

A whistle blasted! Minda forced her sleepy horse into a gallop along the moonlit road. She leant forward instinctively, doing as she was told but wondering mightily if there was anything more positive she could be doing. After what seemed ages of being tumbled on galloping Stefan she realised the stupidity of racing into the mottled unknown and slowed to a standstill to listen for pursuit. She dismounted to be herself. Without anywhere safer to go she retrieved the secret weapon from her pack then climbed into the underbrush at the roadside. On the other side of the road there was a bare field rising up. Behind her a coppice. She considered her shadow in the bright moonlight to be broken enough to fool an outlaw. But what had happened to Henry and Mister Trentchard? What could she do? Did she have to do anything immediately or just wait. What was that in the shadow... Or that shadow... Was that shadow there before... "Aim Minda!" there was a voice inside her head. Her voice. "Come on my friend Minda don't fight a shadow." The spring knives demanded to be used. "We are five death-knives. Use us! We will slaughter your enemies night or day. Push the trigger-peg."

Another inner voice asked if she had any common sense? Where was the danger? She'd been here a minute and invented enemies. How stupid! Still it would be just as stupid to stand in full view. She made up her mind there were no enemies in the shadows. What next? Now did she wait, go on, or back to find Henry and Mister Trentchard? She wasn't doing anything useful here. "Use us. Try us. Dangerous shadows!" Blast the spring knives! She daren't put it down where it might go off by mistake and it would be daft to walk into the road and put it in the pack safely. Then she decided to stop being a silly girl hiding in the edge of the wood. In the moment between thought and action a shadow-owl swooped with a single ghost's breath wing-beat right over her head to pick something from the road in front and then away. She nearly shit her britches! For the first time in her life she knew paralysing fear. A moment of bodily collapse. She physically tried to shake the feeling from her. It was like clinging feather-down where some brushed off but some snagged and there was always another bit unseen that wouldn't be blown away.

She was about to put the weapon back in her pack then ride back with her knife ready to throw when the sound of trotting horses came from the Selenden direction. "Minda?"

She walked into the middle of the road then bellowed "Where have you been!"

Henry and Mister Trentchard appeared round the bend. They were relaxed as she'd twigged from the call. She could be relaxed as well! Nearly shitting herself at the end of a long day had drained her goodwill.

"All's well" said Mister Trentchard.

"No it isn't!" Mister Trentchard and Henry rolled off their horses and dived into the hedge and ditch. In the silence that followed Minda decided to be queen of the moonlight and stood in full view waiting for the men to make the next move.

"What's wrong Minda?" came a whisper from the ditch. That would be Mister Trentchard.

"You never told me there were owls."

"Owls?"

"Stop repeating what I say!"

"What about the owls?"

"Or men who see ghosts."

"What men who see ghosts?"

"Mister Trentchard GET OUT OF THAT DITCH NOW! It is perfectly safe Henry. I've spirited the fairies away with my special spell." When they were all together on the road Minda said "Now which one of us is going to walk in the open to the wood where one hundred and seventy three outlaws and three bogeymen are hiding?" Even in the harsh moonlight she saw realisation forming on their faces. Before they could come up with an answer she hammered her message home. "I will."

"Ah yes Minda. I think we can remount now and carry on." said Mister Trentchard.

"Sure Mister Trentchard?"

"You have done as ordered. Well done Minda now we should press on and get to our beds."

"You haven't asked me about the owls Mister Trentchard."

"They can wait until tomorrow."

"If you say so sir." Minda mounted and urged her horse to an angry gallop.

When they arrived at Trowstead Henry carried her pack which was nice because her foot was aching with riding and her hand was throbbing with everything. In the morning Mister Trentchard was absent but had left orders that as a duke's daughter she should have anything she wished. Minda wasn't fooled, she knew her place – for the moment. She reasoned that being tested and given new tasks was a good thing if she was to grow out of the smithy into the big world. Mister Hesquery had told her she was now grown into an adult so new responsibilities would be natural. Mister Trentchard was a strong horse's leg in his own words. He'd thrown her into a pond last night and she'd learned how to swim, but no thanks to him. Trowstead was going to be a tough school. She met Mistress Marline and her daughters Raysell, a bit older than herself, and Delphia about the same age. It dawned on Minda that Mister Trentchard was not actually married to Mistress Marline even though they seemed to be a family. Brother and sister perhaps? Something to approach gently.

Judging by the size and modern brick style of the hall Mister Trentchard was wealthy and yet his wiryness suggested a weaver rather than a cloth merchant. More things for her to discover.

## 3 Trowstead

That afternoon Mister Trentchard summoned Minda. "I have a lot to teach you in a short time. I know you are bold and brave but without craft and without experience or knowing what to do in the face of fierce odds and without quickness. When confused you will fail."

"Fail at what?"

"Fail at the job of making the country a place where men and women and children can sleep safely. Stopping the rich making the land barren by squeezing it dry. If the Kingdom decays then our neighbours will invade and conquer. Mister Hesquery and myself have been looking after this small part. He makes the land productive and I keep it safe. I expect all this talk of outlaws has been new to you?"

"Yes. Until last night I thought they were of the old times."

"I've kept them out of these parts but they prey elsewhere where pickings are easier."

"What happened last night sir?"

"You tell me."

"We were riding along and you became worried about being caught."

" 'Ambushed' we call it when a gang pounces on travellers. Carry on."

"So you sent me ahead out of harms way. I think it was a ruse."

"Did you hear any fighting?"

"No."

"You're right. You saw right though me. I made it up to see what you did when you were frightened. Do you remember we'd just been talking about obeying orders? Well it's one thing to talk about them and another to follow them. You followed your orders. I'm very pleased."

"I wasn't frightened – Just doing what you told me and doing my best after that."

"What about the owls?"

"I wasn't frightened. I was just worrying about what was the best thing to do. Having cleared my mind a bastard owl swooped over my head like a black silk shadow and nearly made me shit my britches. Now I know what fear is. Please don't take me anywhere near owls Mister Trentchard."

"We're going to have to deal with that devil's knife thrower. It's deadly."

"That's the whole point. It's supposed to be."

"To us! If you'd let it loose those knives could have gone anywhere."

"It was the best weapon I had."

"I think we'll save the springing knives for special occasions. That's one of the things I want to teach you. Close up fighting. How to defend yourself against animals and men and animal men."

"Animal men?"

"Men who are full of reckless fighting strength and don't care about a feeble sword blow. They are just as deadly as the silent assassin."

"What's an assassin?"

"Someone who meets you in the street and stabs you or creeps into your bed chamber and brings a sword sweeping down on your pillow."

"But there aren't any of those round here?"

"No Minda. Not today but if you're going to make enemies of rich men – and I hope you do – then there will be times when you will be wise not to sleep in your bed."

Minda thought about this. "So I'm the hunted one not the huntress?"

"To be hunted means you are causing grief to the enemy. The higher the price on your head the more you are hurting them."

"But I'm still being hunted."

"I'm afraid so. Exciting isn't it?"

"Is there an alternative?"

"You could ask the King if he would protect you against outlaws and his supporters the absent barons who bleed the land, but to be honest I don't think he'd bother to listen. Even if he did he wouldn't know where to start. And even if he did he'd probably use it as an excuse to tax people more and even if that worked you'd have a life of extreme boredom. Do you know what boredom breeds?"

"No."

"Backstabbing without knives. How do you fancy being called 'the ox' by people at Court? How would you deal with that? You can't make them do an archery competition and they would scoff at smithing even though they couldn't go a day without using something that has been fashioned by a smith."

"So you want me as your sword and when your enemies see me bite they will try and break me."

"Minda, my job is not to teach you how to make enemies but how to deal with them. You'll have no trouble making enemies on your own. Do you think the Duke wants to be reminded of the shame of abandoning his crippled daughter? Or – from the highest to the lowest – what if you'd taken sixpence off every man you beat yesterday? The men may see it as one more injustice but what about their wives and children? You would earn their hatred forever and hatred breeds rash deeds. A powerful man can make enemies whenever he wants to. A powerful woman doesn't have to try – In some people's eyes a powerful woman is an enemy just for being a powerful woman."

"You're trying to get me to kill people."

"You have to know how to protect yourself. You have to be ready to do it yourself if you are going to ask others to fight for you."

"Are you sure you don't want me to go killing people for yourself?"

"No. Like Mister Hesquery and Dunstin I am your servant. We teach and protect and we believe there is a tempest ahead which will rain on every one of us. When that storm comes we will have done our bit and it will be your muscles, your brain and your determination that will fight it. We know you have courage. We are the small people but you will be a great lady at court – You will be able to get things that need doing done. You already have strength in many ways. One day you will be in a position to use it." Minda was silent. She could feel heavy cloaks of responsibility being placed on her shoulders. "Why do we do things Minda? Things like teaching, reckoning, smithing, shooting, care for others? Why do we do that?"

She thought. "Because it's a nice thing to do?"

"Because we have nothing better to do. It's the best use of our time and skills and knowledge we can think of. If there was something better then we'd be doing that."

"So you're saying that I'm special because I'm worth spending time on."

"Of course you're special."

"Why?"

"Because you're Minda. What other girl would learn smithing? What other girl would spend a whole year at archery practice then demand a sixpence from men who had families to feed rather than attend drill musters. Yesterday you were the best in your village at archery – one day you could be best at running the whole Kingdom. Better than the King I think. Last night you dealt with danger and made me feel silly. Powerful people make powerful enemies and it's my job to see you can deal with them." Minda had never really thought about enemies before. Arrows and spring knives were an interesting pastime. Nothing was aimed at her. She wasn't sure she really understood the idea of having enemies trying to hurt her. Mister Trentchard was probably trying to frighten her again. "Are you ready Minda? I know yesterday was a long day but we should start tomorrow. Mister Hesquery made the billet. Dunstin shaped it. My job is to give you temper and a sharp edge."

"Does the iron like the fire or the anvil? Who knows but you can't fight without a blade that's been forged tempered and sharpened. I've known you for less than a day but you have put me in the hearth. That is your way of blowing the fire to white heat. I will submit to your beating sir."

Minda said "You did not answer my question last night about why Henry was riding behind."

"I did and I didn't. My answer may not have satisfied you and I promise to do so soon. It should come in it's place when you will see for yourself the reason."

"Can I have my weapon back?"

"Not until you can tell me why you shouldn't have it back." This odd answer confused Minda. All her determination to be her own mistress and conqueror by flying steel knives had turned into a mire of uncertainties. "Don't try to answer that now Minda – you will understand presently. But tell me – when you pulled your stick full of spring knives out of the pack were you hoping to use the knives or to wield the stock?"

"The knives."

"Not the wooden stick?"

"No I hadn't thought of that – Oh."

"You did really well last night. You weren't afraid, you did as ordered and you made an effort to be ready to fight. But if you had to defend yourself you wouldn't have

stood a chance. How would you feel if a couple of ragged tramps had slit your throat to steal your horse?"

"Very cross I suppose."

"And dead."

"And dead, obviously"

"So would you like me to show you the alternative?"

"Yes... ..Please sir."

"Come here daughter. I am going to show you how to live when others are killed. I will take you to places to stab enemies knowing you are sharp enough. And I will try to break you – gently – to see where you are weak. Yes I will make you sleep in the snow if you can't find a better place. Yes you will be in danger. Yes you will be tired beyond tired and I'll still expect you to be awake. To live you will have to know how close you are to death."

Minda was still piqued by not getting her spring knives back but reasoned that Mister Trentchard was the sort of man who really was right all the time so she's better leave that matter to later. She ran the course of Mister Trentchard's hunt through her mind. The prey was the rottenness he spoke about. She was the hawk. All she knew about hawking was that you had to keep the hawk hungry. "I will be your hawk sir."

"No you don't understand. You are not the servant on my arm, you are the hawker not the hawk. I will teach you how to care for your hunters but to do that you need to understand everything about them and your prey in order to direct them. Most important though you need to be the mistress of your own safety. Even when you have servants to stand close by you there may be times when threats become very personal. I expect there will be times when you should not sleep in your own bed if you want to wake up."

"How will I tell?"

"I hope to give you a sniff of the scents on that trail before you go roaming in those woods... Now I shall be away for the next few days. Please get to know my household and especially Mistress Marline and her daughters. I'm sure you will be very welcome. The girls will teach you about grace and gowns and manners you will need when you get to court. I have two servants ready to train you and I'm sure Henry will make a happy companion."

Minda sneaked into the hall garden, not a kitchen garden but a specially made place to relax in private! Two crescent fish ponds embraced an area of patterned flags. Carefully trimmed bushes grew in geometrical beds. A score of young trees had been planted to make an avenue. Square-cut yew hedges contained a little oval lawn with bench made from un-sawn branches. She sat down to think. Soon to be a great lady? Soon to be hunted? Soon to wear gowns and jewels? Soon to be sleeping in the snow? Servants and enemies to deal with. None of it made sense.

Minda had only ridden around the home fields under supervision and helped out at harvest as horse-guide. Despite her dislike of animals that menaced you with their dumb bulk she and her horse Stefan seemed to get along. Last night was the furthest she'd ever ridden. It made her foot ache. Nevertheless hunting was obviously going to be a good excuse to explore the country and practise archery and if Mister Trentchard thought it was worth devoting two servants it must be important. She was rather troubled about being a 'graceful lady'. At Selenden there had never been

any hint of luxury. For her last birthday she was given a leather smith's apron which she loved for its practicality and for the simple recognition that it was where her heart was. She was also given a new best dress in deep ochre velvet and lace trimmings, mainly because she didn't have a respectable dress that would still fit, but to her it was just something to wear. She knew very well even the prettiest dress wouldn't make her beautiful.

While she sat there cowering from Mister Trentchard's future, the game she could never win, mistress Marline found her.

"Welcome to Bridgates Hall My Lady."

"Please call me Minda. I'm not a lady."

"Oh but you are Minda." Mistress Marline smiled and sat on the seat next to Minda. "You are the flower waiting in the bud. Hiding safe in a tough skin during the spring frosts and storms but quietly waiting to surprise us."

Minda wanted to believe her but it was too much. "I know you mean well mistress but this bud has worms in it."

Mistress Marline gently put her hand in Minda's ungloved pink claw and gave it the gentlest squeeze. "All the more reason we must beat the worms eh?"

"I'll try."

"Well said Minda." said Mistress Marline "If we give up now then we've lost before we start. If we try we don't know what we'll achieve.

*Prepare to win and you might win  
Prepare to lose you might survive  
But if from life you try to hide  
Fate will find you and decide."*

"But look at me. I'll never be pretty or graceful. I don't mind that – it's the hollow pretence that offends and stings. Would you dress an ox and call her beautiful?"

"You are not an ox."

"People call me that."

"You're a sweet and lovely person. Good news travels fast Minda. You're strong and clever as well. Everyone here knows you're crippled but how do you think that makes them feel when you've beaten all the archers of Selenden. How impressed they must be. And a girl!"

"Witchcraft."

Mistress Marline was shocked by this and took a moment to recover. "Witchcraft is fed by spite and there is none of that round here."

"But all those men I beat yesterday will hate me inside."

"Not from what I've heard Minda. They love you for being honest and hardworking. They know it wasn't easy for you. They know you didn't cheat. They know you wanted a way to show the world how hard you practised. You beat them fairly for sport... ...Do you know the difference between a 'winner' and a 'champion'?"

"No."

"A winner wins but a champion wins hearts. A champion never has to tell people they've won because the defeated will do it for them. You're a champion Minda."

"That doesn't make me look good in a gown."

"It makes you look good whatever you're wearing."

"Huh. Not really."

"Yes it does. When people know your reputation before they meet you then they're not shocked when you have an eyepatch and odd face. Did you know your skin has a lovely complexion?"

Minda was out of her depth but could tell Mistress Marline was honest. "I'm sorry to be so suspicious mistress but I'm not really used to things girls do. You know – pretty dresses, face paint, tapestry and dancing. I can't dance with my foot."

"Have you tried?"

"No." Minda lied. (She'd imagining dancing with knights and princes a few times out of sight in a secret woodland clearing but every time ended in angry tears of frustration.)

"Don't be afraid. 'Strength will find a way'." Minda wondered why she was worried about sleeping in the snow when lace, small-talk and dancing were frost in her stomach. "It's well that we have spoken Minda for you are really are sweet and lovely. And clever and strong."

Minda and mistress Marline took comfort in the silence of joint relaxation and speculation. After five minutes Marline spoke: "Minda. Will you embrace me now? Once – for all the futures." Minda did as she was commanded not really knowing why. The strength of her arms suddenly brought mistress Marline so close that a whisper or a kiss was instinctively demanded. Minda was at a loss. What was this hugging business? She could feel Mistress Marline's bones, but she wasn't a bag of bones! The thought repelled her and she undid the hug unfulfilled... ..Then burst into tears... to be re-hugged by Marline. "Sweet Minda child. Growing-up is a well we all fall into. The people at the bottom will catch you."

## A long days ride

On the first day of Minda's new routine she was introduced to Brand, a stocky old soldier still with lots of black curly hair and a cheerful grin. He would be in charge of fighting and anything outside. Flor was a servant the same age, lanky yellow hair and sparse build as Henry with a long flabby hare's face. Henry explained that the expeditions were for her to practise horse riding and learn the country. Mister Trentchard was keen that Minda would be able to recall the details where they went and what happened.

She soon saw that they had done this sort of thing many times before. Riding with them was a challenge. They were always teasing her and testing her but then making excuses between themselves for their excesses. The good-natured arguments, often using Minda's welfare as an excuse were quite amusing.

"Now then Flor. If you hadn't led us through those trees our caps wouldn't have kept being knocked off and eyes poked out."

"Well if we'd skirted the wood we'd have been spotted by the outlaws."

According to Brand and Flor there were outlaws everywhere outnumbering them ten to one. Another time it would be "If you'd taken us around instead of through those woods we wouldn't have been spotted by the outlaws." Flor was just as critical of Brand so everyone was happy. Henry was neutral. They made their jesting way around woods, through woods, across streams, led their horses just under hill crests,



trotted along roads, galloped over heaths, made fires, went hungry because 'making a fire was a bad thing to do', called at farmsteads, circuited manors, and disappeared into the woods when a solitary stranger was spied in the distance.

After the first day of this routine Brand said "Miss I was looking at your bad foot and wondered if you might spend a few minutes with the head horseman so we're not twisting you as you ride."

"Yes of course." Minda had already concluded that the only response to suggestions by her servants, for that's what they'd all volunteered to be or so it appeared, was to agree. Clearly there were things that they knew which she didn't. She went to the stables with Brand. Her horse was looking forward to peace and quiet as much as she was. "Come on Stefan – It's only for a minute while these men work out how to stop me kicking you or something then you can get back to your oats." As she was helped up muscles that had rested a while complained about yet another stretch.

Lewin the head horseman murmured. "Aha". He stood with crossed arms and that steady look which Boskew used to see through things.

"Brand would you lead Stefan round the yard." Adjustments were made. "Miss would you leave the reins go and hold your arms straight out at the side." She did as requested.

"Aha. Thank you miss. You can lead him back nowr."

"Do you mind if I ask miss? Do you have much push in that toe?"

"I haven't got a toe."

"Sorry miss."

"Do you have an ankle?"

"Not really. More a knuckle and ankle combined."

"Thank you miss. Sorry for asking but that tells me a lot. I've watched you walk."

"And now this horse is tired and so miss if you'll let me help you down..."

What! The horse was tired! What about her, she was exhausted. Drained exhaustion. "Thank you Lewin." She began to roll off the animal with laziness but remembered tiredness was today's enemy and regained her coordination to slide off gracefully into the waiting arms of Lewin who winked cheerfully at her. Why did she blush! A pungent horseman winks and she blushes. Is she a dairymaid? Reluctantly to be truthful, she gets her balance. He is soft and comfortable like a feather bed before dawn. "Even if you can't fix my foot you tried. Give me a hug."

"You are a bit wherrity miss but I think you'll do."

"Come and let me hug you too Brand. It was really clever of you to think of it."

"I haven't done anything miss." He submitted to his hugging.

"I've got to go back to face Mistress Marline and her daughters who expect me to hold a knife like a pen and speak when I'm spoken to. I'd rather have bread and cheese in the stables."

"Minda!" Mistress Marline's voice was frightfully close and sharp. "Go into the house. You will wash and dress for supper. Delphia will help you."

"Yes Mistress."

After Minda had crossed the courtyard mistress Marline addressed them. "Lewin and Brand you have made a good start. Our young lady needs as many hugs as you can

give her. Don't over do it Brand! And I know your kisses Lewin – Quick! Give me a kiss before your missus sees."

Delphia followed Minda to the wash house. She was the same age as Minda but delicate, pretty, skipped along and she hadn't been out since first light on a horseback obstacle course. "Did you do anything interesting today? Look I have been sewing my sampler. Do you like the colours. I hate embroidery but mother says I have to. Doves are so pretty don't you think. Raysell says they mean love. She's mad on romance."

"Delphia?"

"Yes Minda?"

"I am tired, in pain, dirty and hungry."

"Oh I'm sorry to hear that. Let me cheer you up with a riddle. Raysell always/"

"/Which makes me a little irritable at the moment."

"Oh I'm sorry to hear that."

"And when I'm irritable I might do something you'd regret."

"Oh I'm sorry to hear that."

"For the short time between me picking you up and throwing you head down into the midden"

"Awesome. Are you really that strong? Go on pick me up!"

Minda slid out her polished dagger and held it pointing at Delphia's chin. "I made this with my own hands."

"Awesome. Can you make horseshoes too?"

"Where's the midden?"

"Over past the kitchen."

"Well go and make yourself useful. Tell the cook I want a double helping on your way to jumping in the midden."

"Oh all right. Your dress is laid out on the bed."

When she'd gone Minda removed her boots and placed her bad foot still wrapped in binding into a pail of cold water. Sitting alone with the deadening chill spreading up her leg she tried to ignore the sparkling daggers of irritation. She had never screamed with frustration before but wanted to now. There was a commotion as mistress Marline dragged a silent Delphia into the wash house. Minda didn't look up.

"Minda. We don't usually threaten people with knives."

"I'm sorry mistress. I'm not used to being plagued by gabble-mouths – 'Specially when I need silence to draw out the pain. Every day I have to make an effort to live my life and today I've made more effort than ever before. You like riddles Delphia. 'If you have nothing to say say it'. Mistress can I ask a favour? Would Delphia please undo the bindings on my foot. It is very tender and needs two soft hands."

Mistress Marline was silent for a moment. "Yes of course. No I'll do it. Delphia go and get my balm."

"Yes mother."

"Plain goose fat will be fine."

"Come on Minda, let's patch you up and feed you up." Unwrapping the blood-soaked linen from Minda's foot was a trial. Delphia was horrified as the bleeding pink deformity was revealed. "Are you watching daughter? See how gentle you have to be."

Mistress Marline rebound it according to instructions from Minda with new linen and balm that smelled of sharp herbs. "Your other boots came from Selenden today. Shall we fetch those and give these ones a good clean?"

"Yes please mistress."

"I don't think you'll be out riding with this tomorrow Minda."

"But/"

"/It looks like drenching wet anyway. Brand says they had only meant to go as far as the river-meet but you lead them as far the other side again. Normally a nod is all the praise anyone gets from Brand but with my own ears I heard him say you reminded him of the best general in the army. 'Took him back to his young days'. You've won an old soldier's heart there Minda. That's something to ask him about—"

But Minda was asleep.

## A long wet walk

The next day dawned grey and wet through. Minda ached but was refreshed and determined not to acquire the status of an invalid. Delphia had grown-up a bit and decided that being on a mission of mercy was better than being a charming companion. She was keen to try her new role of nurse. Could she do this? Would Minda like that? No no. Minda must stay there while she fetched it and so on. Minda thought if she was a general then how should a general deal with this?

"Delphia. Would you come here please. I am not an invalid. From time to time your help will be very welcome." She slipped off her pink dummy glove and showed Delphia her claw hand. I can't do knots in laces. See how my dress has buttons and toggles while yours has eyes and laces. See how my boots have buckles while yours have laces. But that doesn't make me an imbecile. I can't sew but I can make a dagger. It is under my pillow – fetch it. Let me show it to you. See how it shines. Look – it notches this bench easily." Minda tossed the dagger spinning into the air and caught it casually. You see how my good eye is sharp and my good hand is able? Would you like to try?"

"No."

"Now you see the hook on the door over there?"

"Yes." Minda stood up, raised the dagger then threw it. Bang! The dagger went through up to the hilt. "Awesome Minda. Can you show me how/"

"/And the second thing is that my world is a practical world. I have many other things on my mind than samplers and doves and would appreciate the time to myself to be able to deal with them."

Brand's voice came from outside. "Have you finished throwing things Minda?"

"I think so. Come in." As the door opened six inches of bright blade could be seen sticking through the other side at head height. "I was just showing Delphia how to throw a knife. Sorry it's my fault Brand. Delphia has been helping me but I got carried away. I will be ready in three minutes – or two if you can pull that out for me."

"Five minutes then. And we're going for a walk in the pouring rain."

Before they started Brand explained privately to Minda that she was not to get to the point where her foot was unbearable or damaged. They didn't expect her to be invincible. She wasn't letting them down by saying 'enough' – In fact she was helping herself and that's what they were all there for. "And that's an order."

"I understand."

"Good girl. Well done yesterday you were champion. Now let's be going."

"Men" said Brand "We are going out today because the land may change beneath our feet in the next month. There may be frost, floods and February has been known to have flocks of birds brought on a warm southern breeze only to die the next day of ice. We will be feeling the soil with our feet, scanning the treetops and watching the brooks. Henry and Minda you will write these things and the traces of any creatures when we return. In the afternoon we will have combat." Flor whispered into Brand's ear. The unmistakable expression of embarrassing realisation passed across his face. "Ahem. I just called you 'men'. I apologise miss."

Minda hadn't noticed. "Let's not worry about that Brand. The sooner we start the sooner we'll be back in the dry."

"Spoken like a – er – Let's go!"

Minda's foot soon subsided into dull ache and as she'd got no personal grievance against the rain she concentrated on comparing notes with her fellow student Henry. He was obviously good at this.

"See how the rivulets carry the soil to make little valleys. See how the soil is moved first then gravel leaving the stones until last. But the stones can't stay without the soil round them so they inch down hill."

"So why doesn't the soil from further up the hillside fill in the gaps?"

"Because it is already in a moving stream that doesn't slow until it reaches the flat."

Minda thought about this. There was plenty of surface water to observe. It all seemed to have one purpose: To draw the top of the hill to the bottom. Henry drew her attention to the way the field strips were aligned to get the best of the sun and block runaway streams taking the goodness into the quags beside the river. The track turned to a wooden causeway. Even in mid-summer a traveller would be foolish to trust to the boggy ground but now summer's uncertain tussocks were replaced by winter's promise of solitary sucking death. They all took extra care when Flor told them the tale of monks who came across the causeway one Christmas and were lead off the track by Jack 'o lanterns thinking they were holy candles. Even now, he said, a relic might appear, thrown up by the never ending motion of the mire.

"Who keeps this causeway?" asked Minda.

"We do." said Brand.

"You and Flor?"

"Yes and no. The manor of Trowstead-Underwold has the duty to maintain it. So Mister Trentchard has to see that it is kept in repair. Guess who ends up being the men who fell the trees, cart the timber, plant the posts and nail the boards?"

She wasn't used to this style of sarcasm. "I don't know. Who?"

"Flor and me. Henry has been with us the last few springs seeing how it's done and helping out."

Minda eyed the uneven ribbon of planks. "There's something that I want to say – like if it wasn't for you the grain wouldn't get to the mill and we'd all starve but I don't know what it is – It's beyond me at the moment."

Henry spoke "This is an important and busy short cut."

"Strange we haven't met anybody yet then." said Minda and instantly regretted it. Henry wasn't another empty-head like Delphia. "Er – I'm sure the weather must have put them off."

As always happens on walking journeys the party split into couples. Henry and Flor lagged behind examining the increasing number of porridge rivulets crossing the track. There is something about trudging along in the rain that makes people want to talk or sing songs. Minda decided to draw Brand out. Mistress Marline had given her the key. "I'm not lame yet Brand but would you link your arm with mine."

"Yes of course miss."

"It gives me a bit of confidence. And please call me Minda. I know who I am then. I want to know all the secrets not just those fit for a 'miss'." After a minute or two Minda continued. "Mistress Marline tells me you're an old soldier."

"Yes miss. Fought the Grofs at Rukion and the Imperial Stinnish at Okerdam."

"What's it like in a battle?"

"Like a nightmare you can't wake from miss. A butcher's shop inside a rolling barrel miss."

"Call me 'miss' again and I'll be your nightmare! Carry on."

"Yes miss er Minda" She smiled at him and gripped his arm more tightly. He smiled back, happy to serve and shape a gem that sparkled on this dullest day. "This afternoon miss I'll kill you ten times over in combat practice. Every time I stab you to death I know you will learn and not let me do that again."

"You called me 'miss' again, you know what that means". Even sloshing through the clay track in the middle of the relentless rain she couldn't to keep a straight face.

"Nightmares miss. Horrible nightmares miss. Unnamed things with tentacles clawing at my face." He was smiling too.

"You don't care do you Brand. Your nightmare won't be unnamed things with tentacles but me – Juggling with a dagger. Oh and owls."

"Owls?"

"The most scary thing I could think of."

"How's your leg Minda?"

"It aches like hell, but that's nothing new. I'll be happy to be home but I'm not a cripple yet."

"I want you to be fit for combat practice this afternoon." Minda didn't have a reply.

"Here's an order miss. See that wall. Up you go. Now up on my back... ..Now we've got a mile to get back by the High road. I want you to be lookout. We don't want anyone to see us like this do we?"

Minda was confused by this last bit. "Why not?"

"Because leaders are not invalids. They are strong and perfect. I've known a few and they were mostly sick and frightened but who would follow one of those?... ..Now

Minda I want you to pay particular attention to what happens and also what doesn't happen on the way back."

They finally trudged back through the mud of the deserted village street back to the Hall. The clay-grey clouds swirled above in their haste like the tumbling turmoil in the ditches below. The rain was getting heavier. It teemed off the roofs into the swirling courtyard. Inside they found the fire. Hot soup and bread arrived in moments. Somebody had the forethought that goes with well-run establishments to make obvious arrangements. Everybody had a second helping. Someone had thought of that as well.

After that refill that makes the body warm and the heart soft; with leggings steaming nicely in front of the fire, Brand gave his orders. "Henry can you write down your notes on the land now. Flor I want you to tell the herdsmen to get animals off the lower pastures by tonight and middle pastures by tomorrow noon. Tell them the upper and commons are open. If they need help – Oh they will – I know take three village lads and Henry. Henry cancel that last order. Take two day's bread and go with Flor who will probably give you a job as a shepherd's assistant. Meet tomorrow noon at High Oak. If the banks burst then you'll have done your duty. Off you go men. Make the most of the daylight. Take some rope." When Flor and Henry had gone Brand spoke seriously to Minda. "Yesterday we were playing at scouts and hunting. Today we are the hunted. Tomorrow the flood may spread a lake half a mile wide across the valley. Pitch black where there ought to be lights of farmhouses. We must outwit Nature the huntress. She will kill us all in the end but until then we have a chance."

"Now Minda can you tell me what didn't happen. You remember?"

"Yes I remember. You asked me to note what did and particularly didn't happen."

"Have a think. Something didn't happen that might have?"

"Nothing comes to mind."

"Take more time to think... ..Who was in our group and what were they there for?"

Minda was completely at a loss. "Err You were in charge. I was there to be shown the locality and to see if I was fit after going on a tour of the Kingdom yesterday. Henry was there because he's good at that sort of thing – making notes of stones and tracks. And Flor was there because he's useful to have around."

"Good. Well done Minda. Now can you see what didn't happen? – Say halfway between you getting on my shoulders and getting off when we entered the village?"

"No. Sorry Brand. I know the sun didn't come out but that's not what you're looking for."

"Let me put this another way. Somebody in our group, not you, not me didn't do something."

"I know you think it's obvious but I still can't see it."

"If you were walking with Mistress Marline and her daughters and say Delphia twisted her ankle would you carry her on your shoulders?"

"I'd try."

"Of course you would. What if Mistress Marline had started carrying her first?"

Minda was still lost. "I'm on the edge but the quarry is still in shadow."

"Would you think to take over the task at half-way? You're easily stronger than Marline."

Things began to dawn. "Yes. And Flor didn't offer!"

"What about Henry?"

"Oh. It never entered his head."

"Did it ever enter Flor's head?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Me neither. I think we should find out. The lesson is this: We are always helping each other. If Flor had taken over carrying you – and you're not light miss – then you wouldn't have noticed but the deed would have been done and I would have noticed. Perhaps he's got something more pressing with Henry. I guess the weather washed out his brains."

After a while Minda said "How does a girl who can't see where the foot-soldiers are slacking remind you of a general?"

Brand had hoped this particular epithet wouldn't have found its way to Minda. "It's just like red hair or blue eyes. You have the gift of strength and commanding people to help you. I can't teach you much about leadership but I can teach you a bit about staying alive."

"This thing about staying alive is a bit worrying."

"I hope you'll be making enemies miss. That shows you are hurting them. Until they're eliminated they may be paying people to slit your throat. That's a really good reason for throwing a dagger through a door when you're staying at an inn miss. When mistress Marline saw that she was only a couple of yards away when it came through the door. If I was you I'd apologise as soon as possible."

"Oh no! Will you excuse me while I do that and then we can do combat."

## Body in the forge

Brand observed "It's too wet to open the doors of the little barn so we'll have to use the cartlodge."

"Why not use the travus in the forge? I saw the smithy was shut again as we passed this morning. And it's private."

"Now that's a good idea. Trust you to think of the forge. But we haven't got the key and the smith has gone away."

"I think I can guess where it is. There's a brotherhood of smiths and they have secret signs. Dunstin, the smith at Selenden, taught me things – But you mustn't say as I'm not a proper brother yet."

"Right Minda. You go ahead and if you haven't returned in five minutes I'll follow with my gear."

Minda hurried through the noisy downpour. She found the secret sign on the hitching rail that told her which tile the key was hidden under. She opened the door and drew it nearly closed behind to keep out the hissing rain. The familiar forge smell and soft gloom, the dirt floor and half-seen racks of tools lifted her heart... Until she saw the thing hanging in the middle of the travus. No doubt but it was a body, hanging two feet from the floor, perfectly stationary as if on a rod. She'd rarely seen a completely cold forge and never an abandoned one. What made her come here now?

She'd known inside there was something wrong when they passed that morning. She opened the door open a bit more and the grey light showed a man with a face creased in pain like grey cloths in a washtub. She locked the door and walked back to the Hall with every raindrop a hammer blow.

She showed Brand the key before he could ask. Emptiness on her wet face told a disaster. "Did he have a family Brand?"

"Tell me the facts first. That's an order. Always tell the facts when reporting to your commander."

"There's a body hanging from a beam." She put her arm across her face as if to hide the sight and drooped ready to be washed away as clay.

"Are you sure? – Of course you're sure. Sorry. Um – Let's go to the stables. Come!" He took her arm.

The stables were just as gloomy but there was warm life as the horses were having an unexpected holiday. Lewin greeted them. "Oh miss come and look what I've done." Minda didn't move, she was just standing gazing into the darkness, cape and hat dripping tears that smacked onto the cobbles.

"She's had a shock Lewin. Can you look after her while I go to the forge?"

"A pleasure to look after my lovely. Come here miss and we'll get those wet things off." But Minda didn't register. Out of her sight Brand mimed a strangled man on the end of a rope. Lewin took a moment to let the news wash through him then bustled Minda into his sanctum. "Now then come and I'll show you the old horseman's secret to a glossy coat." As Minda didn't react to the Holy Grail of horsemanship he was at a loss except to place her by the fire, remove her cape and hat and wrap her in a horse blanket. By habit he considered a bucket of oats, molasses and Valerian. Maybe a cup of molasses with hot water – and why not a pinch of Valerian root – it couldn't hurt. Minda was unresponsive as Lewin chatted to her like his horses – they never spoke either. He sat down with one arm round Minda as if to stop her bolting while he brought the warm and pungent cup to her lips. "Come on my lovely. This will make you better. Can't be having nightmares in daytime. Come on drink up. Push those clouds away – speaking of which what do you think of this weather? It's going to be floods I'm sure – lucky we're ahead. Come on gal – just a bit. We'll soon have you trotting in the sun again." His persistence paid off and Minda began to collect herself. The flickering became a real fire. The clamp on her shoulders became Lewin's supporting arm. The swirling smell became a cup of medicine. She wasn't sure why she was here but Lewin's gentle talk made it alright. He saw her face wrinkle as the ripe cheese odour of the Valerian ran all the way up her nose. "It won't hurt you lovely. Just something to freshen the brains. I give it for nightmares and fitful sleeping. And also if a horse gets twitchy, say it's been stung by a hornet and won't go back into the field where it happened, well you have to act quick miss to take away the fright. Come on lovely that'll make you warm and strong." She summoned her courage and found the medicine tasted better than it smelled. "Good girl. You've had a fright but that's past now. It's wet outside but warm in here." His arm and horse blanket made her feel cozy in a nest.

"What's happened Lewin?"

"You were taken with a fright miss."

"Was I? What happened?"

"Can you not remember?"



"No."

"Well don't try. See I told you the Valerian takes away frights."

"But I want to know."

"Now look here miss. If I struck you on the head and stunned you and then you asked me to do it again I wouldn't would I?"

"No."

"Well I'm not going to frighten you again. There's nothing to worry about. I want you to stop here for a while with me. The world will keep going round without us bothering it for a while."

A lifetime of looking after horses gave Lewin magical soothing powers. Stroking palms, firm hug, voice like a creaking windmill putting the world at its ease. And he had a few secret tricks that only real horsemen know. Minda nestled next to him in pure contentment. The steady rain on the roof was pleasantly distracting...

"Time to go miss." She awoke reluctantly. "The light's fading and tomorrow will bring no good. We must be getting ready for days of misery. I'm sure the river here is already full and there must be worse to come."

"What will I do Lewin?"

"I don't know miss, but if I was you I'd watch the people and save your strength. Don't exhaust it tomorrow as you'll need it for a whole week. Oh and you're still only a young girl. Just because you have strong arms doesn't mean the rest of you matches. It was me who told Brand you need plenty of walking to build up your legs as well. You see here ..." He knelt down and put his hands round Minda thighs, feeling the muscles and bones up and down. "Just a bit at a time to give you a steady pace. I'll be watching your gait too."

"You'll be feeding me oats next Lewin! Shall I go back to the house?"

"Yes miss."

"Thank you Lewin. I still want to know what the fright was but I promise not to worry about it when there are more important things."

He was happy with an hour's work well done. "If you was a horse miss I'd give you a right good friendly clap on your rump. Be off!"

## Writing histories

In the house she was told to change into dry things. Delphia helped her. "They say tomorrow the river will be a lake all the way over the meadows to Loughbridge and Stickmere."

"I shouldn't be surprised Delphia. Every man is out bringing the stock to higher ground. Lewin says it may last a week."

"Raining for a week! I couldn't bear that."

"Mister Hesquery said to me about the weather. 'We'll just have to do what they do in Araby'."

"What do they do in Araby Minda?"

"Put up with it!"

Delphi wasn't the sharpest thought Minda but this confusing bit of wisdom eventually sank in. "Oh that's clever Minda. Like that clever thing you said yesterday."

"What was that?"

"If you've got nothing to say – say it."

"Can you write Delphia?"

"A bit. Mother makes me practise."

"Would you like to practise with me."

"Oh yes please."

"We have an hour. My journal came from Selenden yesterday and I have a lot to catch up. And Brand wants me to make notes on this morning's walk – inspection I suppose you'd call it."

"You were brave to go out in all that rain."

"Are you afraid of the rain Delphia?"

She hesitated. "I don't like getting wet and cold and muddy. And once you're wet and cold and muddy you only end up getting wetter and colder and muddier."

"I don't like it either. But I asked 'were you *afraid* of it' – Does it give you nightmares?"

"No – Not like that."

"So if there's no fear then where's the bravery you speak of?"

"Um. You looked brave. I wish I was brave."

"Did I? How did I look?"

"You know. Just 'brave'."

Minda put this aside for later consideration as Delphia didn't look like she was going to be much more help. "Come on, lets get these clothes drying and some candles to write by."

Minda hadn't expected Delphia's writing to be good but it was better than hers. "Do you have a journal Delphia?"

"What's a journal?"

"Something you write in what's happened each day."

"Like a diary."

"What's a diary?"

"You put into the diary everything that's happened each day. You start each day with the date and the day of the week and then what you did."

"That's what you do with a journal."

"It's the same thing! A diary and journal are the same thing. I must write that down. G – O – R – N – L That sounds superior to 'diary'."

"I think there may be an 'A' in it at the end but it doesn't matter."

"It's fun to be writing with you Minda."

"Some people think the scritch of pen on paper is like black beetles. They sometimes say the scrawl might as well have been made by a beetle dipped in ink."

"That's very clever. I will write that down."

Minda liked writing, there was something final about fixing events on a page. Somehow it made them real like stuffing a pillow tight with feathers. Sometimes you saw things you didn't see at the time. She drifted back to the walk in the rain. Everything was done with purpose. Lessons at every turn. Lewin had wanted her walking instead of riding to strengthen her legs. Strangers putting their experience to work just for her. How could Brand betray Flor as thoughtless or perhaps lazy? He could have just whistled to him to take over. A lesson inside a lesson. Then she'd had a fright – What was it? Did fright stun people or was it something else? The fright-fixer round here was Lewin. Still she'd promised him she wouldn't look there until the coming crisis had been dealt with.

Delphia was gazing at her intently. "Have you been thinking Minda?"

"Oh – Yes. Trying to put things in their place."

"I wish I could think like you."

"Really?"

"Yes. You look so wise – and deep."

Nobody had ever called her wise before! But then anyone would seem wise to Delphia. "How do I look wise?"

"Staring steadily into the distance."

"Do I?"

"Yes. I've been watching you this last five minutes. I heard your pen stop and looked up to see you were like in a trance."

"What's a trance?"

"Er seeing a ghost? Um like this." Delphia blanked her face and stared at the edge of Minda's grotesque shadow fidgeting from the candle flames. "Well something like that anyway – I know! Like a dog when it half-wakes from sleep to think of meat for a moment."

This made complete sense to Minda. Once in a while she'd wake up and dream. No it wasn't dreaming! That's what girls like Delphia did. She wasn't spinning from cloud-wool but making nails to clench things, hard things, sharp things. "No you don't want to think like me Delphia. Really you don't. You don't want to be thinking how hard every day is. How to turn dull iron into a silver sword. How to kill a man with a dagger. Why you want to kill a man. Why a man wants to kill you. How strong do you have to be to keep your breath when others are losing theirs. How much pain can you bear. Why do so many people want to help you for no reason? Do you want a head spinning with mill cogs? No! Take my advice and stick to writing the facts and try not to think where they lead."

"I must write that down."

"I tell you what Delphia. Why not write a history of the flood?"

"What here?"

"Yes why not? Then in years to come people will read it and know what happened in the great Trowstead flood."

"But a history has to be written by a famous person and have pictures and be about princes and battles."

"No it doesn't. A history can be about anything er – historical."

"But this flood isn't historical. It hasn't happened yet."

"I know but in a week or two it will be history and you will be able to read to the servants how hard they worked and they will be proud."

"Will they? Can I?"

"Of course. You can always write a fair copy later."

"I could write a history. How thrilling."

"You might write a copy for the King to get him to send money to help the poor people who have had their houses washed away."

"Really? The King?"

"Possibly. Er – I don't know if he can read. But he must have clerks who could read it to him."

"Until now I thought writing was a chore like collecting firewood but – Oh I wish I was as clever as you Minda – it can be so exciting. To think of the King reading my history of the great flood!"

## The flood

Mistress Marline warned the house-servants of the need to feed and heat and re-clothe. The Hall and hall farm would be the centre of operations. Their duty was to find a bed for the tired and bedless and feed the hungry above all else. The village itself was safe but their neighbours would need helping and anything could happen at any hour of the day from now on. Everybody knew, in fact many had relatives, who would most likely be flooded-out or swept away while trying to salvage their livings. That night everyone went to bed with the steady rain and splashing roof-drop telling their doom. Delphia had nightmares about rain knocking on the shutters and trying to drag her out and drown her. Minda had a nightmare about a forge with frost instead of flames, with the whirling north wind instead of a smith, an anvil of empty shadow, bones instead of iron and owls hooting and blinking where there should be a crowd of casual slackers passing the time of day.

Minda and Delphia and Raysell were told to keep out of the way. Mistress Marline explained. "I know you want to go and see what's happening and help. There will be more than enough to see and more than enough for you to do later. Raysell, you're the eldest, I'm putting you in charge. This morning you will go with Delphia and Minda to the dairy. When you're finished go to the stables and be useful there. If you can't be useful then you will rest in your room. In no circumstance is your party of three to be split up without my permission. Is that understood? Raysell?"

"Yes mother."

"Delphia?"

"Yes mother."

"Minda?"

"Yes mistress."

"Sure?"

"Yes mistress. I promise to keep Delphia and Raysell with me."

"Oh no – you don't fool me miss! Who did I put in charge?"

"Raysell mistress."

"Good. Remember that. If you feel the need then give her advice but I won't have you giving commands today is that understood?"

"Yes mistress."

"Now we're all in for a tough few days. Tired, wet, worried and homeless people don't want twittering girls getting in their way. You will be shouted at for no reason. If you can't be useful then don't be a useless hindrance. Keep as dry as you can and off you go." She kissed her daughters and Minda to dismiss them. "Oh Minda!" she called after them as they'd left. Minda returned. "I'm really pleased you're here to look after them." She gave Minda a wink and a quick embrace. "Lie low for the next couple of days. Build your strength. Now off you go."

Minda had mostly managed to avoid dairies but today was obviously going to be the reckoning. She hated muddy pushy cows who could trample without thinking. So stupid! She had no effective weapon. Horrible thought! – 'Delphia' what a good name for a cow! She nearly said it aloud but blushed bright instead. She tried to push the thought away but it kept coming back. Luckily the focus was on other things. Raysell spoke to the first person she saw, a dairymaid hunched against a cow. "Can we help you?"

"No I don't think so miss Raysell."

That appeared to be the end of the subject until Minda asked "Can I watch what you do? I've never been in a dairy before – I spent all my time in Selenden learning smithing." The pstssth pstssth of the milking didn't stop but the maid looked round to stare at Minda. "I don't want to try milking as I've only got one good hand but show me."

"Look it's quite easy. Just pull and the cow does the rest." The pstssth pstssth continued.

"Don't the cows try to trample you?"

"No. They like it. But sometimes you get a queen-cow who has a mind to be awkward."

"What do you do then?"

"Shout in their ear and look them in the eye."

"Could I try later if it's not getting in the way?"

"I suppose so."

Minda watched the dairymaid, she was only small, approach each tethered cow and speak to it by name. They all looked alike to Minda. "How do you tell them apart? My name's Minda."

"You just do I suppose. Teara here has a black top-knot and really wiggly ears. – Don't you Teara dear."

"She talks to the cows!" exclaimed Raysell.

Minda gave her a look. "Take no notice of Raysell. In the forge I talk to billets of dumb iron."

The 'pstssth pstssth' stopped. "You know about Salvin then."

"No. Who's he?"

"Didn't"

"/Can you show me please." Interrupted Delphia urgently. "I really want to have a try. Come on let me have a go. I've always wanted to milk a cow."

Minda lost the initiative. Her job here was done anyway. It would be interesting to see Delphia cope with the mud. She'd decided to ask Lewin about this Salvin that way she might get a good answer. Raysell was noticeably hanging back.

There were hopeful signs of the rain thinning out by the early dusk. Minda concentrated on being dumb and practical in the stables as wet and weary men and horses returned. Lewin was out with a team of six doing difficult things in appalling conditions as much as she knew. She could see by their gloomy faces that what they'd won was less than they'd lost but didn't enquire further. Womenfolk passed in and out seeking information and leaving messages. Minda made sure Delphia and Raysell noted the details. At one point Raysell suggested that they should return to the house. Minda was horrified. "You two can go but Lewin and six horses are still out there. Don't you want to be here to help when they get back? Tell mistress Marline why I'm still here will you please." That settled the matter.

Dark came with no sign of Lewin.

"Has something happened to Lewin?" said Delphia.

"Possibly. Or perhaps he's having to stay somewhere else for the night."

"I do hope he hasn't drowned." added Raysell.

"Raysell. Perhaps we should stay here while you ask your mother what we should do next." She didn't answer but vanished into the dark. "Come back Raysell!" shouted Minda. "Take a lantern. Here." She lit a lantern from the one by the door. Now take care. And if we're to stay here bring some something to eat." Soon after Raysell had vanished for a second time the headlight of Lewin's team appeared in the yard.

"Come on! Grab a halter." said Minda to Delphia. "Is that Lewin?"

"Yes it is my lovely." came a tired voice from the dark.

"Welcome home Lewin."

The team halted outside. Minda took the door lamp off its bracket and gave it to Delphia. "Lewin can do this harness by touch but I need to see."

"What to do master?"

"I'll do the harness you lead them in miss. Who's waving that lantern?"

"Delphia sir."

"Well bring it here wench so I can see this damned harness and hold the bloody thing steady."

Raysell returned and was dispatched back to the house to pull out the horsemen who'd arrived earlier to give assistance. When the men ejected from their rest appeared to give a hand Lewin apologised to Delphia for swearing. It was nearly an hour later before the stables could be shut for the night. "Do I see you to your cottage Lewin?" said Minda.

"No you daren't do that miss." said one of the horsemen "He may have been with a team of six all day but he's still got enough energy to/"

"/That'll do Nicol!"

"Sorry master."

"I'm not done-in yet miss. And we'll all be out again tomorrow so best as you find your own supper and beds before long. Bad days need good nights."

"Well goodnight then. Nichol can you show me back to the house there's no moon and no lantern."

That evening the girls had their meal with Mistress Marline. She praised them for doing as they were told and being useful in the dairy and stables. The news was that the bottom meadows were already flooded. There was no way across with or without a boat, and up and down the valley was the same. The home mill was flooded to at least three feet and still rising. Luckily the valley was wide so the flood water could spread out into a huge brown lake. Troker brook had carved its banks and trees collapsed into it forming a dam and more scouring. The roads were badly waterlogged, rutted and covered with mud flows. Peasant Richard's house had slid down the hillside and was now a folded ruin. As far as they knew all the livestock had been rescued except for two cows lost when the roadside ditch collapsed into a heaving pool of sucking mud.

Mistress Marline waited until the meal was finished and the house servants had cleared the table. "Tomorrow will probably be watching and waiting. Most of what can be done has been. You can write your diaries up tomorrow morning then what happens will depend on the weather."

"Can I help with the milking mother?" asked Delphia.

"If you get up at first light before breakfast." Delphia seemed quite pleased by this.

"How is your foot Minda?"

"It aches and itches but is bearable."

"Raysell. Would you like to read us a page or two before bed time?"

As was Raysell's way she departed on a mission without a word to fetch her favourite book.

"Please mistress. When will Mister Trentchard return?" asked Minda.

"He is away on business. He tells me and Brand what he is doing and when he expects to return but his instructions are that we should not let anyone know. 'An innocent mouth and an evil ear can kill as sure as a steely spear.'"

Raysell returned and brought the book to the candle-lit table.

"I shall read from the tale of Sir Eglamour of Artois. It's about a knight who has to perform three quests to be allowed to marry the wicked earl's daughter. – Shall I start at the beginning mother as Minda hasn't heard it before."

"Have you heard it Minda?"

"No mistress."

Raysell started without waiting for the command. She read slowly and confidently emphasising any word of interest and pausing either for Delphia to comment or to make an observation herself. Minda could read but it was relaxing to have somebody paint pictures for you. Many of the words were new and she had to interrupt to find out. This didn't seem to annoy Raysell who took the opportunity to read the line again with even more feeling. Long before the giant of the first quest had been slain mistress Marline called a halt and bade them go to bed. That night Delphia dreamed of conversations with cows in the cowshed. Minda had a nightmare. The mill stones

were about to float away on the lake while owls in boats bobbed up and down chattering with glee.

In the next few days the flood spread then subsided like a black then tender bruise. As Mistress Marline had predicted there wasn't much more that could be done. More news of disaster and curiosities came in: A hen house with a rooster crowing on top was seen floating down past the lower ford. Carwell stream had decided it didn't like the bridge-hole under the high road and now lurched into the roadside ditch then carved a ragged zig-zag gully for a hundred yards right across the road before rejoining its old course. The chalk bank of Brinks hollow had sloughed across the road to Wherestead. It took a dozen men and two carts nearly two days to clear the blockage. This provided a useful two days pay for the men who had no other employment at this time of year.

The weather remained dry and calm but steadily became colder with starry frosts biting at night. In the daytime there was thin but welcome warmth from the sun. Clouds of breath rose from the men working at flood repairs, hedge-laying and ditching.

On the evening before the Smith Salvin's funeral Mistress Marline debated whether to send Minda away with Brand for the day or lance the boil. "What should we do Brand?"

"She'll have to know sooner or later."

"But now? Time heals, why not later?"

"We can't pretend for much longer. She'll find out somehow and that might be another sudden shock."

"So we should tell her gently?"

"Yes mistress. The sooner the bone's set the sooner it mends."

"Should we check with Lewin? He's a wise one."

"I've discussed it with him mistress and he's of the opinion that honesty is the best policy."

"In that case I'll tell her now."

"He also said that she shouldn't have time to brood."

"How do you mean?"

"Keep her occupied."

"What do you think?"

"Tomorrow I'll start the combat practice that we were about to do when it happened and then the floods have distracted us. When the funeral goes by the small barn we'll join in and then afterwards resume practice at double speed."

"Do that then. Is this combat practice really necessary? It sounds like you're trying to make her into a soldier when she's just a girl. She may be a duke's daughter but that doesn't mean she should strap on armour and go swaggering about looking for trouble."

"Orders mistress. Also if she's to lead men she needs to know something of what they do. Mister Trentchard believes she is fearless enough to lead and intelligent enough



to lead sensibly and err – not likely to spend much time being distracted by courtiers. She's like the pawn-to-be-queen on a chessboard he said."

"She doesn't have to do sword-fighting herself. Men always think you have to be good at fighting or nobody will respect you. If she becomes a great lady then she will have guards to protect her."

"How will she know where and when to use them? How will she know if those guards are any good? If you ask a servant to cook you a cake you can taste it to test it but it's too late to do anything about lazy guards when you have an arrow in your chest."

"Twice already I've seen her use for her knife when she's a bit cross. That's no way for anybody to behave."

"You're right of course mistress. I don't have to tell you that to command well you need to know who you command. I have to show her that. Also I must show her how to defend herself. That may be by throwing a knife into an attacker, or going around a dangerous situation or having guards by her side."

"And that's another thing mistress. It was something that Lewin said. 'Fear is the quickest whip'."

"Explain."

Brand paused, this had been a revelation of the obvious to him. "Ask him mistress. I'd say that one way to be safe is to make people afraid of attacking you, and that's my job. He also said she was 'unconscious of charm and threats but had *the power*' and it was up to us to harness her determination, make her aware and teach her how to use it."

Mistress Marline thought about this. Eventually she said "So my job is to teach her about charm. How to win what you want by a smile. It seems like teaching her how to prey on the good nature of others."

"Or prey on the evil nature of others. Bribery and flattery may achieve what the King's law can't."

"Thank you Brand for telling me these things. I also sense the autumn coming to our summer of peace."

"Mister Trentchard prepares for the future. He has marked the trees to cut down when needed to strengthen the homestead. Henry and Minda are two."

"That sounds bad. Cutting down Henry and Minda."

"It's the way of the world Marline. Some of our children will die fighting – and some will go to fight green and supple then come back hard and dry."

"Horrible. Why can't people be nice to each other Brand? It's getting late, would you like to share a cup of best ale with me?"

"Shall we say two Marline?"

She returned in a minute with a flagon for him and a cup for herself. "Many years ago I knew your brother. He was always a one for flagons too."

"He always had an eye for the best Marline."

"He was killed while defending the frontier against Lanconian raiders. Not yet twenty-one."

Brand knew the truth about a brawl in a brothel but kept it to himself. "Sad. Killed so young. Fighting to the last against the odds."

"I liked him. I would rather he ran away and came home."

"But Marline if you don't make a stand what was the point of trying."

"I suppose that's what people like about Minda. She doesn't know the meaning of 'Give up'."

"She doesn't know the meaning of lots of things."

Brand pinched-out the candle. "How shall we keep out the winter cold girl?"

"Together." she whispered.

## Self defence

Next morning Brand started on combat practice with Minda. The south doors of the small barn were swung back to give a sunny patch on the threshing floor. Brand started directly. "Minda, how would you kill me now?"

"I'd throw my knife at you?"

"Good. Show me the knife." Innocently she pulled her dagger from her boot and held it out. "Excellent. That's a really good start. Let me have a look." He took it from her. "And now I have your knife how would you kill me?"

"I don't know."

"Have you got any friends near by who could kill me?"

"I don't want to kill you."

"Suppose you did."

"No."

"Have you got any other weapons?"

"No. If I couldn't use a knife then that's the end."

"You have lots of other weapons and I'll be teaching them to you bit by bit."

"What?"

"Yes. One day you may be staying at an inn and be attacked by one of your many enemies and I want you to kill that Christlant."

"Christlant?"

"Oh, the name of my brother. A bit of a ladies man."

"What's a 'ladies man'?"

"Someone who is always found in the wrong bedroom."

"What! Raping women!"

"No. There by invitation. There are some men who always seem to be falling into the arms of hot-breathed women. My brother was one of those. Err not like me."

"Oh. Romance."

"Err – Romance as you say. He was very romantic. Got killed by being careless."

"What was he doing?"

"Err – Engaging the enemy ... Really close."

"Sounds very heroic."

"Yes it does. Actually he was caught with his trousers down."

"Trousers down?"

"He wasn't wearing any. Very careless."

"Yes going out fighting half dressed would be difficult."

"Anyway miss, let's get back to you killing me."

"But why do I want to kill you?"

"Because I'm trying to kill you."

"Why are you trying to kill me?"

"Because I'm your enemy."

"I don't have enemies."

"Today's lesson is that one day you will have many enemies and each enemy you make will be a result of a victory."

"But I'm not fighting battles."

"Not yet Minda but one day you will be. Perhaps sooner than you think."

"I don't want to be a soldier."

"You're not going to be a mere soldier but a knight commander. You will be the queen that men will follow to sweep the dirt out of the Kingdom."

"Kingdom?"

"Minda is it so long ago that you've forgotten how you beat the world at archery?"

"I didn't beat the world."

"Most of it. You are an exceptional person. Tell me what your strengths are." Minda hadn't ever thought about herself in these terms before. She just did things and some turned out better than others. She was silent in thought. "Let's discuss that later Minda. Just remember that I'm teaching you how to defend yourself and a bit more for good reason."

"But—"

Brand sprung at her throat and very gently pretended to strangle her. "Go on I'm strangling you and your eyes are bulging. Do something." With all her strength Minda tried to kick Brand in the groin. This failed miserably, so she swung an arm at his head but couldn't reach. This was getting upsetting. "You have strong arms. Why not grab mine and force them apart?" She did as Brand suggested. After a couple of attempts at getting a purchase and a struggle of sorts she pushed his hands away. "Good. Well done. See there's often a way. You used your strength to overcome mine." She wasn't convinced about Brand's weakness but let it go. "Your lesson today is that you are strong in ways you don't know."

"But you haven't told me why I might have enemies"

"Ah! – Today my lesson is that I shouldn't underestimate your persistence. Um. If you go fighting people then you'll make enemies."

"But I don't want to go fighting people."

"But you will."

"Why?"

"Because you will be the axle on which the wheel turns."

"I don't understand you."

"Miss it is like this. There will soon be bands of evil men wandering around and unless the good folk fight them the evil men will win."

"What has that got to do with me?"

"Because you, being a duke's daughter, and – and a very fierce person when she wants to be, much much fiercer than the men, beats them all at archery for example, throws knives through doors that sort of thing – is the one person who will make the men practise their archery, stand watch all night in the rain and stab or be stabbed in battle. We will need you when the time comes to send us knowing what we do is right into battle – or more likely long wet marches with only rumours to frighten us."

The words of Mister Hesquery and Mister Trentchard had been the same. 'You will save us in battle.' They all had plans for her which she didn't understand. There didn't seem to be much she could do about it.

Brand handed her dagger back. "That'll be useful in the right hands. Yours are the right hands. I'll show you how to use it. Mistress Marline will show you how to avoid having to use it. If you listen to Lewin carefully he'll show you how to make it work for you as mill sails work, you put up the sails and thin air does the rest."

## Smith Salvin's funeral

Brand and Minda had been too occupied with starting-off on the right foot to notice the solemn procession passing along the street in silence. "Are you two joining us?" Lewin, perfectly still, perfectly composed, smiling, looked in. "Come and take my arm Minda." said Lewin. She obeyed by instinct when the master calls. Brand shut the doors behind them and caught up.

"Oh it's a funeral Lewin."

"Yes miss. It's the old smith. Salvin."

Minda was silent. She'd seen many funerals before but never someone as close as a brother smith. "Which is his son Lewin?"

"He hadn't got a son miss. His wife and child are already in the churchyard. It was all very sad."

The dark curtains of unknown certainty closed within her. 'All very sad' made it certain that there were suspicions she should know about but a more important thought burst through. "Has somebody got the handful of nails?"

"What Minda?"

"When a smith is buried you have to throw a handful of iron nails on the coffin."

"Is that what they do at Selenden?"

"It's what they do everywhere." Brand ran ahead, whispered to the sexton then signalled thumb down. "We must do something Lewin."

"Do what?"

"Get some nails."

"I'll help you."

"There must be some in the smithy"

"I'll come with you."

Lewin opened one door fully back. "This is where you had your fright Minda. There's sun now and nothing to stop the hearth roaring again. Let's find those nails, no time to lose."

Minda the girl saw the ghost of the smith while Minda the smith saw where the nails would be. She collected a handful and passed them to Lewin. She stooped for more but Lewin put a hand on her shoulder. "We have enough. We cannot put every nail here into the grave. He wouldn't want that. The living need nails as well as the dead." Minda let the second handful fall back into the box. "Come miss. Let us walk in the sunlight."

As they hurried to the graveyard Minda sought and held Lewin's hand. "There's something sadder than I know."

"Yes miss there is."

"Tell me."

"Sadness feeds on men as frost feeds on rocks."

"What does that mean?"

"From time to time we all have sadness. Sometimes the stones are broken into pieces by the ice." Minda felt in a peculiar way that Lewin had just carefully planted a seed inside her as if he could see the future.

Most of the people in the graveyard were unknown to Minda, there was no sign of Delphia or Raysell. She kept back as she didn't really belong. She was glad about the nails – it would have been horrible to think of a smith being buried without the necessary... necessary what? She didn't quite know but knew it mattered. From where Minda stood the low sun silhouetted the mourners and tombstones alike. The graves seemed to be breathing as wisps of steam rose from the frosted gravestones to vanish in a twisting shadow. The coffin was lowered into the hole.

Lewin stepped forward, showed his handful of nails to the watchers. He dropped some into the grave. "These are for the man who can make hard things soft." He dropped some more. "These are for the man who can make shape out of fire." The last half dozen were thrown one at a time as he said "These are for all of us who will one day rust away." The only movement was the silver breath of the mourners gently floating away in the crisp sunlight. The priest murmured a few words and it was over. Perhaps Raysell would be interested in the romance of breathing gravestones? She'd certainly tell them about the nails and Lewin.

Brand came over. "It's back to work now Minda."

"One moment please Brand." She hurried over to Lewin and kissed him.

"Ah Minda this is my wife Joan."

"Isn't he wonderful Joan?"

"So all the girls in the village tell me." Grinning broadly she linked arms with her husband. Minda took that fraction of a second to catch up which marks a moment of learning. In her confusion she did the right thing and kissed Joan before hurrying back to Brand blushing to the ears.

## More combat training

Back in the arena of the small barn the tuition continued.

"Now, what did you learn before."

"Err – That I'm strong but don't know it."

"Well done Minda – That's an important lesson. And where are you weak?"

"I don't know."

"How good are you at running away?"

"I can't run."

"So that's a weakness."

"Surely running away is a weakness so standing firm is a strength."

"Many people think so but no. Sometimes running away is the right thing to do. You only fight in two cases. Firstly when you have all the advantages and secondly when you have no alternative. Suppose I had a sword and you had your throwing knife. If we walked towards each other from a hundred paces you could strike me before I could strike you. So I know I've lost before I start. Better for me to run away to lose and live than lose and die."

"But you wouldn't do that."

"What? Run away. I would. I have. That's why I'm here."

"No. I meant you would hide round a corner and surprise me close up."

"Well done Minda. You are a good pupil. Of course I would. So what does that mean."

"I should have you killed before you can sneak up on me."

"Can you repeat that slowly Minda."

"I should have you" /

/ "Not 'I should kill you' "?

For the second time today Minda was conscious of a page in the journal of her life being turned. Others seemed to be able to read ahead but she couldn't see what was written next.

Brand continued "Mistress. Do you know why people help you, train you, feed you, look after you, keep you safe from hurt, get saddle sore keeping up with you, carry you through the pouring rain?"

"No – It just happens."

"It happens for a reason. And that reason is your heart of command. The yeast that makes a general into a great leader. You just said you'd have a servant sent to kill me first. Those are the words of a great commander."

"I didn't know I said it."

"But it came out nevertheless. And I'll sleep at the foot of your bed."

"Thank you Brand but I'm never going to be a warrior queen. My strengths are very slow archery and a throwing knife. My weaknesses are everything else. By the time I hobbled to the battlefield everyone would have gone home."

"I'm going to teach you staying alive miss. And also a bit of archery and how to be a real menace with your throwing knives."

" 'Knife'. Only one."

"Build on your strengths. Oh and one of your other strengths is being an innocent girl who can throw axes through walls. That really frightens people."

"Don't exaggerate Brand. It went a little bit through a simple wooden door."

"But the rumour is that you demolished half the solar wall with an axe you keep under your pillow."

"Nonsense."

"I saw the knife through the door with my own eyes Minda. I hate to think what you'd have done with an axe."

"But I didn't – don't have an axe!"

"Amazing how a little incident where a duke's daughter sleeps with an axe under her pillow gets magnified so you hurled it through a neighbouring cottage wall just because you were being kept awake by the harping of a stag beetle in the wainscot of this cottage across the road."

"How dare people tell those stories!"

"I made the second one up, but I did spread the bit about the axe under the pillow."

"But you can't do that!"

"Yes I can. And I must. My job is to protect you. When word gets around you can see in the dark because of your blind eye assassins will try to find another way before creeping up on you at night."

"But I can't."

"But *they* don't know that. Remember that bit about running away? You only fight when you have everything on your side. If not go home and think of something better."

Somehow Minda felt violated but at the same time lifted up to look down on the world. This was a funny day. Perhaps it was a dream. Stones that breathed sadness. Nails for the smith. Brand sleeping at the foot of her bed. Mrs Lewin – Joan having such a oneness with 'what matters'. "Don't over do it Brand. If people think I might chop off their heads for sneezing then how will they be nice to me?"

"It's all right miss. I have only spoken the facts about the knife and the door. And I did say you weren't aiming at anybody or anything, just having a bit of fun. But the principle stands. In a fight your strength will draw your friends to you and push your enemies away – even if that strength is mostly legend."

The training session continued with physical lessons. How Minda should try to get her back to a post or wall to stop her being pushed over easily. The vulnerabilities of the human body. Where to slash and where to stab. They threw wool balls weighted with stones at each other.

Finally Brand said "Enough! You are a good learner Minda. There's many hours of practise ahead. We will do blade and shield tomorrow. One day you can teach me about throwing knives and then I'll show you how to fight with them. Come here Minda." He hugged her really tightly. "I'm sorry about the smith. I really meant it about sleeping at the bottom of your bed miss. If there's a threat it is better that you get a good nights sleep and live through to dawn while and I stay awake."

## Writing fiction

That afternoon Delphia and Minda worked hard with their ink and pens. Delphia was getting used to the long pauses in Minda's writing. Delphia had abandoned her royal history of the great floods but Minda made her add notes of what loose ends of news arrived. "What's the point of ploughing the field if you don't take the crop to the barn? All that work and it's going to the pigeons!"

"Delphia I have something interesting for you to write in your diary."

"What is it?"

"Today I was at the Smith Salvin's funeral and Lewin threw some nails onto the coffin in the grave."

"Why?"

"It's a custom for smiths."

"I'll write that down."

"And the tombstones were breathing."

"Breathing!"

"They only looked like that as the sun turned their frost into steam."

"Oh. Shall I write that down?"

"Why not. It's not every day you see stones breathing."

"But when mother reads it she'll ask me if I've been dreaming. Or if you were dreaming."

"I suppose I was dreaming – just a little bit. But you know how the sun catches the frost in the still air. There's that flicker of steam that rises then vanishes – just like people's breath."

"Does it?"

"Well write it down and put at the end 'So Minda says' if you like."

"Yes Minda."

"Have you ever seen nails thrown onto a coffin before?"

"No. Real nails? The things that hold horseshoes on?"

"Yes. Iron nails."

"And that's because he was a smith?"

"Yes."

"So do they throw other things into graves? Like wool for a shepherd, reeds for a thatcher, shield for a knight?"

"I don't know Delphia. I only know about smithing."

"Delphia. Do you remember when I threw my knife through the door?"

"Oh yes. Awesome!"

"Did you tell anybody about it?"

Delphia paused. "Only Raysell. Oh and mother of course. Oh and the dairymaid. Oh and the house servants. Shouldn't I have?"

"What did you tell them?"

"That you sat on the bed and threw the knife through the door. Was that wrong?"



"No. It's just that someone has been saying it was an axe and it went through a wall."

"That would be lying?"

"So who's been lying?"

"Can you really smash a wall with an axe Minda?"

"No! Err – I've never tried."

"Awesome. I bet you could."

"Shall we get back to writing? My hand is aching from all the practice I've done this morning with Brand. Can you write a letter to Smith Dunstin at Selenden for me?"

"Of course."

"Just write. 'Dear Dunstin. Smith Salvin has died. Forge stone cold. No sons. Love Minda. PS Very sad. Love to you all. PS Mister Trentchard has confiscated it.' "

"It? What's that?"

"Oh just a wooden stick and some knives."

"What? Like you threw through the door?"

"Oh no, tiny ones. Really tiny ones."

"So why has Mister Trentchard confiscated it?"

"He thinks it's a dangerous toy but I think it can kill five men at one time. Five blades of spring steel launch themselves to slaughter the enemy."

"Sounds dangerous to me. Scary. What if it went off by mistake!"

"Why would it go off by mistake?"

"Perhaps you drop it on the floor or throw the whole thing at somebody if you're cross."

Minda wasn't used to this sort of questioning. Delphia was scared. Anyone could see that it wouldn't go off until the staple was pulled back. Practically impossible! For the second time today instinct took over: She made a point of sulking, something she'd never done before.

"It was a pity you didn't come sooner to help Salvin Minda."

"How would coming sooner have helped? What happened?"

"You should know – you found him."

"What do you mean?"

Delphia realised she'd let the cat out of the bag. "Mother told me not to tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"The thing that I'm not to tell you."

"And are you going to tell me?"

"No I mustn't."

"Did she say you mustn't write it down?"

"No – But she meant that as well."

Strengths. What were her strengths? Search for her strengths like Brand had told her. What was Delphia's weak spot? What was the point of lessons if you didn't learn. She didn't know the answers but made the best of it. "You've passed the test Delphia – Well done. I wondered if you could keep a secret. That's a big relief to me you know. I have so many important secrets."

"Do you? Awesome!"

"Yes it is a terrible burden Delphia – I'll just have to be strong."

"Mother said you had a horrible fright and went all queer."

"Well you know how it is – no probably you don't – sometimes our terrible burdens of deadly knowledge get too much for us. It could happen any moment. Next time it might be fatal. Ah! One minute carelessly throwing an axe through a wall, the next a victim of a head burst open with too many secrets."

"Do heads burst?"

"Brains spattered everywhere."

"Really?"

"Not often. Usually there's some warning signs."

"Warning signs?"

"Now are you sure you won't tell anybody?"

"Of course."

"All right. Um. Sure Delphia?"

"Yes. Cross my heart."

"Whistling like a horse walking." she whispered.

"Like a horse walking?" Delphia made a confused attempt... "Show me Minda."

Minda took a breath, peeped a couple of peeps then wobbled in a dizzy way put her hands to her ears to stop her head exploding and panted. Delphi was paralysed with fear. "It's all right I think Delphia." Breathing deeply with relief at her close shave with death by exploding head she reassured Delphia. "I'll be all right in a minute. Could you fetch me a cup of water?" As she left Minda called behind her. "And if I can't stop laughing shut the door and hide in the stables – that's another sign."

The evening meal was again just mistress Marline, Raysell, Daphnia and Minda. They were in their best gowns. Instead of the usual ribbons their hair was capped except for the odd fashionable wayward curl. Minda's rather noisy drinking of the soup was ignored. She couldn't help it. The head of the kitchen had been delighted when she'd demanded extra portions after her first horse-riding expedition. That was only a week ago! A second bowl was brought immediately for her without command or comment. When the meat and vegetables arrived Minda, simply used her dagger for cutting and capturing what she wanted. The others were wearing their best indoor shoes which didn't have a special knife pocket like Minda's boot. Still she passed it around sociably so the others needn't use their fingers. The talk was of the slowness of the floods to subside, and their effects. Delphia was quizzed about her visits to the dairy. Raysell was quizzed about the etiquette of dealing with servants who had suffered personal misfortune through the flood. Marline asked Minda if she'd learned much with Brand but stopped her giving more than a perfunctory answer. Apples and nuts were brought. Delphia said "Minda thought the gravestones in the church yard were breathing."

"How so?" asked mistress Marline.

"The sun on them made the frost rise as steam. Little wisps like smaller versions of the breaths of people by the grave. It was very beautiful – I meant to tell you Raysell – it was magical."

"Magic?"

"You know. Like an enchanted wood except these were enchanted stones whispering so softly nobody could hear them."

"That's romancing. You don't believe those stories?"

"I'm only saying the frost rising as steam was like that. Something to make stories out of."

Delphia burst in to the discussion. "What were they saying Minda?"

"Nothing. They didn't say anything. It was just the sun on the stones. They were boiling off sadness trying to get warm." Minda had an idea. What Lewin told her! She knew the trick to cracking walnuts in her fist. "You see those are just stones and every night they have the frost that gnaws at their bones. So they breathe a sigh of relief when the sun comes and melts it. You know what frost can do to stone?"

Mistress Marline looked at her daughters expectantly. The silence was broken as Minda broke a couple of walnuts in her hand. Innocently she sorted out the shell fragments from the kernels then looked up with a carefully guileless face. "Cracks it. What are you all looking at me for?"

"Awesome!"

"Minda. A lady doesn't crack nuts in her hand."

"Sorry mistress."

"Thank you Minda. It's a good trick though. Is it strength or skill that does it?"

"There's a trick mistress but you do need some strength."

"Show us and we can all try." There was a lot of frustrated straining and occasional happy crack. Marline could do it two times out of three using both hands but the girls failed. Everyone had fun trying and the bits were shared around.

"Mistress? Delphia said it was a pity I didn't come sooner to help the smith. How could I have helped?"

Marline took time to reply. "His wife and child died of Black Fever – I think what Delphia meant was that a cheerful and boisterous girl like you might have been the boat that carried him across the river of despair."

"I had a nightmare where a beautiful but cruel white owl was using the blast of the North wind to forge ice-arrows and the smith was..." Minda hid her face.

Delphia inched away. Marline looked at the others as if to say 'This is the moment we feared.' "It must have been horrible Minda. He said he was going to see his brother in Bruch."

"His face was..." Minda was confused but determined not to cry if she could help it.

"That's enough! Tell me later if you like. It was terrible chance you should find him. It wasn't your fault. There was nothing you could do."

"Couldn't one of you – I don't know – have helped?"

Raysell broke the silence. "If someone had asked I'd have read him a story or helped him tidy his house."

"Well said daughter. But perhaps we shouldn't have waited to be asked?"

"I meant no criticism mistress. It was just a question."

Mistress Marline looked very carefully at Minda to see if she was wearing her 'innocent' mask but was satisfied she simply assumed smiths were all open arms. "Henry should be back tomorrow. I have reports of him working hard, getting wet, and doing manly deeds. Let's make him specially welcome."

Although she promised herself she'd review the many lessons of the day before she went to sleep, nature took its course and sent her spinning through a world of talking gravestones that were strangely bitchy and threw nails at each other when they thought nobody was looking.

## More hand to hand fighting

Sword fighting was just as horrible and difficult as Minda had imagined. The idea was to either slash or stab but to do so you needed to be within slashing or stabbing distance of your opponent. Obviously this meant they could stab or slash you. Even if you had a shield Brand would get round it with his broom. After a few minutes of this punishment Brand called a halt.

"Minda you are the bravest girl I know. You are not fighting because you're stupid but because you're obeying orders. What have you learned?"

"Sword fighting is one of my weaknesses."

"Well done."

"I knew that before we started and you knew that a minute later. For some people it's the last thing they ever learn."

"They get killed?"

"I'm afraid so. Mostly ruffians who carry a club to scare peasants."

"A club would scare me."

"It might kill you if your opponent was lucky or very clever but it shouldn't frighten you."

"Why not?"

"Because you could catch it if necessary and push its swing off its deadly path. Remember your strengths. Shall we give it a try? Very slowly I will try to hit you on the head with this billet of wood... You reach up with both hands... Well done. Now as it comes down push it back to me. See? Now again a bit faster. Good. And a bit faster. Did you see you had no weapon?"

"But you just do it again and again."

"What! Are you going to let me?"

"Err no. But show me."

"What weapons do you have?"

"My knife, or you've told me to kick in the bowels if all else fails."

"Good girl. Quick thinking."

"Now there's a better weapon in your hands"

"In my hands? Oh! The club. But that's your weapon."

"What's to stop you using it?"

"You're holding it."

"So?"

"A moment ago I was smashing your head in and about to run off as fast as I could go. Now it's all gone wrong and I'm struggling to keep hold of my club. Oh dear I should have thought of this but I didn't."

"But I haven't killed you and you could still kill me."

"There are two parts to that – Let's sit down and get our breath... ..That's better. When practising there's a time to focus on fighting with every muscle in your body and a time to think about it all."

"Did I do alright?"

"You did very well. Of course you have a superb teacher!"

Minda replied to this obvious jest likewise: "I'm using every muscle to think hard about that!" While success in anything is never guaranteed, when you can be fighting by instinct one minute and jesting the next, a relationship like this is bound to end up at a pinnacle of satisfaction and respect.

After a happy pause, a happiness born out of progress and confidence in progress to come, Brand resumed: "Two parts: I haven't killed you. So I was trying but failed. Never ask yourself the question 'why is this man trying to kill me' just be glad that you're still alive to not think of the question and get on with the second bit. 'I could still kill you.' How has the balance of power changed?"

"I know he's trying to kill me."

"Has that affected the balance of power?"

"A bit because before I wouldn't have killed him just tried to beat him off."

"Has he given you any clue about ways to make it hard for him to attack you?"

Minda thought about this. It was obvious to Brand but not her. "I don't know."

"Split into parts: He's attacking you with a club. Can you club somebody right up close?"

"I don't know."

"Well have my club and stand chest to chest and try hitting me." Minda did as instructed and as she swept the club round to hit Brand on the back he grabbed her wrist and the billet span out of her grip and scuttled along the floor. "You see. You can't get much of a stroke and it is easy to clap their wrist."

"Will you try that with me?"

Brand gently, then more fiercely, attacked her face to face. "And now you could stab me. Where?"

Minda poked the middle finger of her good hand where she'd been told that a dagger would do most good.

"Excellent. 'Argh arghh flumph grugle'."

"Suppose you didn't have your dagger or couldn't reach it. How many weapons are there between you?"

"One – The club"

"Exactly. Could you use it if it was yours?"

"Yes I could hammer his brains out."

"So why not take it and do that? Your strength will give you an advantage."

"I'll have to take it from him."

"Yes and no. But if you can lever an advantage then you're in control. Let's try it. Be careful, I don't really want to have my neck broken or knees smashed."

Afterwards they sat on the stooks, both happy that they'd achieved something. "So one of your strengths, obvious if I may say so is you can clout with a club and punch with a fist. I hadn't thought of a girl punching."

"Sorry Brand – I hope it didn't hurt."

"It nearly knocked me out! Never mind, it's my fault for not tying you down with chains."

"I was distracted. It just came naturally."

"It was good. If you'd knocked me out you could then have killed me."

"But I don't want..."

"This lesson was supposed to be 'your weapon is a wicked thing but it can be used against you. You could grasp the club, avoid the blow, distract your attacker and then you have the choice of weapons including, if you have no other, the club. The important thing is you live to fight another day. Alright?"

"Yes. I'm not used to such intense... ..fighting."

"Don't worry. Many men end up shattered after winning as well. I knew a tough old soldier who could spear a man but couldn't cut the head off a chicken for the pot."

"Fighting and killing. Are you sure this is necessary?"

"Unfortunately yes. I'm not doing it for fun either. And it's not 'fighting and killing' but 'fighting and staying alive' that I'm teaching you. You've done well today. I'm really proud of you. It's still early shall we go walking with our bows to see if we can catch anything?"

"You are the teacher. My foot is feeling fine – I put a new binding on this morning."

"Tell Mistress Marline you'll be back before dusk and I'll fetch bread from the kitchen. I promise not to attack you if you don't attack me."

"Brand. I'm sorry if I hurt you then. Please promise that you won't ever make a pretend attack on me without warning. You're turning me from a bit of dull iron that takes blows to a bit of steel with an edge and spring."

"Explain that to me as we walk."

# 4 Two years at Trowstead

After the flood it was a mild and dry winter. What work in the fields and hedges and ditches that could be done was pushed ahead as fast as possible as there was nothing so mistrustworthy as the weather. March saw a week of the blackest bruised clouds, an inch or so of snow and a spattering of hail showers but these were mere promises of another winter yet to come. Minda, Brand, Henry and Flor would often be riding, hunting, surveying and practising skirmishing. By the time winter was over Minda's honey hair thatched a weathered face full of confidence. She could stand viewing a landscape, take in its actual and less physical features and understand how it and the people and the crops and the animals and elements combined in repeating patterns. Henry could chart and measure but somehow it was only Minda who could overlook a vale and own it.

Mister Trentchard came and went on his mysterious journeys but never stayed long. He would often spend a night away. Sometimes he'd take Brand and Flor or just his scraggly servant, Spiten, with googly eyes in a skull of yellow skin who looked after his master and the pack horses. Minda's attempts to make a friend of Spiten failed – He appeared to be dumb and avoided any meaningful gesture.

Mister Trentchard was always pleased to see Minda. He asked the obvious questions: What had she been doing with Brand? Was she still writing her journal? How was she learning the ways of courtly ladies? What did she learn yesterday exactly? In one way he was as cold as his servant but underneath he could be a boy playing with the bellows to bring bursts of orange from charcoals. "There's a lot of evil in this world, sweeping like black clouds that will soon rain and snow on us all whether we like it or not. Lewin said you might be a bit wherrity but you were stronger in every limb than any girl he'd ever known. And when I pressed him he let on you were strong in your heart and strong in your mind and strong in your self." Minda wasn't quite sure what he meant but it sounded good and sincere so she kept her 'encouraging face' on. "We will have to fight but we need to know who we can trust to fight by our side. We need to know how strong and useful they are when the day comes. You will lead."

"Me!"

"Yes you. Minda the Duke's daughter who can shoot a man in the face at 40 paces in the dark. Minda the Duke's daughter who can show grown men how to forge swords.

Minda the Duke's daughter who can spot false accounts at a glance. Minda the Duke's daughter who commands men to slit throats of anyone she takes a dislike to."

"But I can't do any of those things."

"One day – one evil day – the world will need a leader. Could I be a leader? Come on tell me Minda."

"I don't know. You seem to command and people obey."

"If I commanded you to shoe my horse would you obey?"

"I can make but not fit horseshoes. I do tempered things like shears and swords or small furnitures."

"What if I asked you to learn."

"Then I'd try hard with the help of the smith. But to be honest it would take weeks and then – well you see – most horses are easy but the ones that aren't would be impossible and there are quite a few that aren't easy." Minda was upset at having to admit this to a stranger like Mister Trentchard.

"We must all work within our limitations. That's my point Minda."

She was lost. "I don't understand."

"You would like to be able to shoe horses like all the other smiths and I would like to be a famous general."

"I'm sure if you tried."

"I have. A bit – You know what it's like when something just isn't working..."

"Yes I suppose so. Coming up against a wall."

"So what do you do?"

"Don't do it!"

"Exactly – But now you have to do something else."

"Why? Why not give up?"

"Because if a horse needs shoeing then somehow it has to get shod."

"I can make horseshoes – it's the horses that I can't handle"

"I'm the same. I can see the developing situation. I can forge a weapon – that weapon is you Minda but I can't walk into battle. Or to be more accurate if I walked into battle no one would follow me."

"I'd follow you."

"No you wouldn't. At least not when I've finished forging you. For two good reasons. First I wouldn't drag you into one of my personal feuds. Second you would see for yourself how unimportant my skirmish was and spend your time getting me out of trouble."

"You keep talking of me as if I'm a great general."

"You will be a great general. Greater than the greatest general by living long enough to have other good generals working for you. That's what you can do that nobody else I know could."

"I'm lost. What can I do?"

"Sweet – I can see why the Husquerys worshipped you. Sweet Minda. Lovely Minda – yes you are lovely – can't you see that people treasure you?"

"Do they? Treasure me?"



"Of course we do."

"Why?"

"Because you are a treasure."

"Gold and jewels! Mister Trentchard! I am ugly and crippled. You don't have to flatter me just because I'm the Duke's daughter. I know what happened so I'm hardly anything to do with the Duke any more. I'm just a forgotten cast-off."

"You have something the rest of us need Minda. Something that makes the difference between diamond and glass – the difference between lamb and mutton – between a shot to the head and a wound to the flank."

"But I don't/"

"/You'll just have to believe me that you do. If you go into battle today then I will follow. I may not be very good but I will follow."

"Battle. Mister Trentchard what are all these battles? Since I've arrived in Trowstead there's been this constant military training. What is it all for?"

"If you can't get what you want by peaceful agreement then what are you options?"

"Force I suppose."

"Does that answer your question?"

"No. In Selenden and here I haven't seen any military force."

"Do you recall how you challenged the Reeve to set up the butts in Selenden and how you beat the men? That shows you how many people don't expect that one day they will have to fight off raiders. Oh you're a good archer Minda, but most of the village lads were so out of practice they shouldn't have been allowed to hold a bow in case they did somebody else an injury."

"You didn't answer the question Mister Trentchard."

"Didn't I?"

"No! You're testing me. Go on test me."

"Within my estates and a bit beyond I make sure that everyone has enough to eat and no need to kill his neighbour to feed. It isn't the same everywhere. It can be like lions fighting over a deer carcass."

Minda had seen a bestiary with drawings and descriptions of lions so this was fairly clear. "If there was one I might stand a chance but I can't fight a whole band of raiders."

"Yes you can. Just not on your own and not in the dark."

"Not in the dark?"

"Come on Minda. Brand has drilled you with finding the opponent's strengths and weaknesses before fighting."

"Yes?"

"That means finding out about where they are, how many they are, what weapons they have, what their tactics are and what their next plan is. That's what I do."

"What? You go into raider's camps and find that out?"

"Not quite. You mustn't tell anybody this. Not anybody except Brand and Brand alone. Sometimes I'm trading spices and other things and sometimes I'm finding things out."

"What sort of things?"

"Let's save that for another day. You have been very good. You have understood that one day you will lead us all by – by being a leader. My job is to prepare you for that and your job is – well you know it."

"Perhaps I should spend time in the forge and make myself some shining armour."

"If you have to wear armour then you'll have lost in your heart and likely soon to be dead. Swords and shields are for knights, your weapons are different. Fear, knowledge, and followers."

"Fear?"

"Yes. Most fights never happen because someone runs away first. That's the best sort of fight – the one where you opponent treats you as too strong to tackle. It doesn't always work but if the Duke's daughter can shoot in the dark then it will take ten times the money to find an assassin to attack you which means ten times the difficulty."

"Why is anyone trying to kill me?"

"Because you are in their way. If you uncover smuggling or stop raiders taking rich pickings from our settled farmsteads then they will soon put a price on your head."

"Am I going to do that?"

"I hope so. If there are flies around looking for places to lay their poison maggots you'd deal with them wouldn't you?"

"Yes."

"Well these are bigger and nastier flies."

## Social skills

Minda soon realised the necessity for learning how to behave as a lady. At least when it suited her. She was prejudiced against the delicate arts courtly ladies were supposed to study. Dancing and the cult of beautification irritated her to the point of anger. It would be considered very rude if she picked up two ladies and swung them round at the same time but pretty steps or playing the lute were beyond her. Mistress Marline and her daughters soon recognised this terrible chasm between their ambitions and Minda's capabilities. There were many embarrassing moments of good intention and then worse moments of apologies. Despite this nobody gave up trying. They found the answer was simply to say sorry and give a hug. Raysell tried for the result she wanted, Delphia was pleased with any attempt and Marline was referee. For example one time Delphia showed her how the lute was played, coaxed Minda to use her good hand to pluck the strings while she managed the frets. Even though the girls smiled and it was nice to make some sort of music Minda knew you couldn't make seeds from stone. Against all logic, when Minda wore a formal gown, the girl who could win hearts with a broken smile, overwhelmed rather than charmed. Sadly she was larger and stronger than most men. When a man sits on *your* knee you know it's a temporary gesture of politeness. Nevertheless there were many evenings of relaxing education at Trowstead and often Henry and Mister Trentchard would join-in. Pastimes such as singing, silly games – even so silly as bobbing for apples and telling riddles – gave them pleasure. Henry was good at memory games such as sending him out of the room, making some changes then asking him to spot what was different. Minda realised this was more than just fun as far as her and Henry were concerned. When anyone performed something new or beyond her Minda asked about it. She reasoned that just because she couldn't do,

say, embroidery didn't mean she shouldn't take an interest and praise the artist. Henry would occasionally play a tiny flute for bright dancing, sometimes jiggling and playing at the same time. Once he acted-out how to find the size of the earth, involving them all in the calculations and scoffing at the fools that had got it wrong in the past. The bit that really tickled Minda at the end was what a small dot on the surface of the world their village was. Minda noticed Mister Trentchard and mistress Marline holding hands in the shadows and was proud to be part of the best dot on the planet.

Mister Trentchard would take her riding with him to visit neighbouring land-owners. On these expeditions Minda would be required to observe everything, the state of repair of the dwellings on the lord's land, how many chimneys showed smoke, the way the fields were being managed, details of the woods, roads and most importantly bridges and causeways. Invariably at their destination Mister Trentchard and their host would have an hour alone while Minda was left in the care of the womenfolk. Before they arrived Mister Trentchard would brief her on information to collect if she could and they'd discuss ways of innocently finding out things. Should Minda portray a rough warrior or a privileged noble lady for best effect? One of the things she soon learned to put at the top of her agenda was 'where were her targets weak' and then how could she exploit them. This was an interesting game with an edge. The other side of this ladies-war was Minda was supposed to reluctantly let 'certain facts' slip out. As time went on Minda learned to ask questions she already knew the answers to and to imply she knew the important bits anyway but would enjoy the gossipy details. As Mister Trentchard admitted, these secrets were a game of no importance but the art of underhand discovery was something that needed lots of practise. By haysel she had an expensive bright red cloak, very fine riding boots, silver earrings which she secretly hated and wonderfully intricate bracelets and brooches. Her appearance of wealth impressed their hosts for long enough to allow Minda to become a person in her own right. Mister Trentchard would invent an excuse to send her with a message for some lords and it was her job to be familiar with them whether they were prepared for it or not. Charm and the assumption of status usually worked.

Wherever there was a smithy she would give a secret sign and say hello to the smith. She would often carry messages on their behalf, and of course pick up more gossip about bad luck and bad management by the lord. All the smiths around and for a lot further knew of the cheerful one-eyed duke's daughter that could temper spring steel to perfection, wasn't too proud to laugh with them and always remembered their names and wives names and children's names.

## Visit to Selenden

It was nearly two years before she managed to visit Selenden. Meeting Mister and Mrs Hesquerry again was the most emotional moment of her life. How could she have left them? How happy they were. How happy she was. Only now, through tears, did she appreciate their years of dedicated love. She had written of course, but no words written or spoken will ever carry the deep heart heat that an embrace and kiss amongst sheafs of stray hair can. She had grown even taller and stronger.

Lewin's work had evened her carriage. Fine clothes and outdoor face made her rich and strong. Everyone had to be summoned quickly to 'come and look at our Minda'.

She had developed a wicked habit of asking people she wanted a quiet word with to link arms to 'steady my walking' although really it was only after long days out that this was needed. She caught the Reeve like this. "I never had a chance to thank you for organising the archery competition reeve. I can't believe that's nearly two years ago."

"That's alright Miss. You did a good thing. There are some good archers here now."

"That's good news reeve. Keep them keen. I have to practise twice a week. Once for accuracy and once for speed. My speed shooting is beginning to please me. You could try rolling your targets down Church field for practise. Now I have it on good authority that October will be a really bad month for smugglers and deer poachers. My horse will be unattended by the smithy with a bottle of spirits in the right rear saddle bag at six tomorrow morning."

"Someone might steal it."

"No. You mis-understand. The saddle bag will be empty at quarter to six. Actually you could get two bottles in at a pinch but it is so annoying when they keep clinking together. Still these things are sent to try us. Thank you for helping me to Fullers row. I think I can manage on my own now."

Fullers row was a handful of businesses on a lane that led to the wood-yard of the carpenter who had patiently helped her with the stock for the spring knives. Strange! Her ever-exploring eye saw a windowless weatherboarded addition to the rear of the Lime merchant. Tubs of lime-wash and mortar could be stored outside or under an open shed. A workshop would need windows for light and ventilation, especially lime dust...

Her business in Fullers Row was merely to thank the carpenter personally for his help with the stick-of-flying-spring-knives which she hadn't been able to do before due to her abrupt departure. She honestly told him Mister Trentchard had confiscated the weapon as being too dangerous which they agreed was proof that it had been worthwhile.

"You've grown Minda, and you look like a proper duke's daughter."

"I've been out everywhere finding out about the world John. Looking at the land, talking to people. I don't know how many miles I've ridden." Actually she did know since she'd been out with Mister Trentchard as the time and distance of journeys, as well as possible problems on the way were one of the things she had to record. She asked after John's family and then casually discovered what was being built and who was paying.

"I must go John. Thank you again." She gave him one of her silver fish ear rings.

"Only Dunstin and you and me and Mister Trentchard know about the spring knives. If somebody brings you a little fish like this then they come from me. We mustn't let the secret out or bad people might use it against us."

Walking back she wondered again about the new windowless extension and tried to fix a picture of its dimensions, construction and connections to the road and landscape behind. How strange she should give John one of her horrid earrings? She knew enough to tell any carpenter exactly how to make the slots in the stock so why

would she ever need to send a messenger to him to make more in a secret hurry? What had she brought with her piece of silver? Even though she didn't quite understand it she was pleased with the transaction.

## Brotherhood of smiths

The forge was busy and Minda wasn't dressed for smithing so she promised to tell Dunstin what she'd been doing later then sat with May for an hour of gossip. This was the first time Minda had been the one with the news. At Trowstead there was nobody she could completely relax with. In this tiny kitchen she could say what she liked about people. How Delphia was a silly girl but keen to help. How Lewin was like a warm brick in a bed. How Henry was good at anything clerical, drawing and accounting and measuring but had no personality. How Mister Trentchard was sure and unsure, powerful and yet unable to use it. How Mistress Marline was a beautiful and correct lady and a practical and loving mother.

"Who's bed does she share?"

"Not just one I think – Not my business really. Mister Trentchard is often away for sometimes weeks and when he returns there's no great embracing. Excitement at what lovely thing he may have brought as a present, happiness and contentment but somehow Mister Trentchard doesn't seem to be the wife-taking sort of person." Gossiping about Selenden and Trowstead was as refreshing as the mid-summer's horse-trough bath. Grime washed away leaving scrubbed pink skin to bathe again in the sun. Minda was used to collecting dirt and wished there was more than one horse-trough bath each year.

There were no sounds from the forge. Minda realised it had been quiet for some minutes while they'd been talking in the kitchen. 'Who's-where-doing-what' training brought her back to her new life of out-guessing enemies to stay alive. She could see the long shadow of the top of a man on the path outside. Dunstin must be sitting on the bench by the door. Her first thought was to surprise him but realised that was not right. Now she was getting suspicious in her own village! Why couldn't he sit and eavesdrop. "Dunstin." she called softly. "Don't be kept out of your own home by your womenfolk."

Somewhat sheepishly he filled the doorway. "I know you don't get much time to gossip so I thought I better let you get on with it. Isn't she grown May. Can you still wield a hammer?"

Trust Dunstin to get straight to the point. Thredvald the new smith at Trowstead was fussy and nervous so Minda didn't know how to work with him as a team. She didn't have much spare time or spare energy. Now she was out of practice and Lewin had balanced her strength for other things. "No. My fire has gone out. But I'm not afraid of horses any more. If I had time I would love to be back in the forge but now my strength must be used for other things."

"Sad to hear that Minda. But look at you! You're a fine woman. I'm so proud to see you glowing strong. Can I have her a minute May?"

"I should be getting back to the Hesquerys. It's been so lovely to talk without worrying what I say May. I will send that recipe for the ham."

Dunstin led the way into the forge, sat on the anvil, pulled Minda onto his lap and hugged her. "Are you safe daughter?"

"Yes. Mister Trentchard and Mister Hesquery think I'm going to be a leader who's job it will be to upset a lot of nasty people. I'm learning how to shoot, how to bind wounds, how to tell the health of a village, how to – May will tell you all about it – Until talking to May I hadn't realised all the responsibility."

"How do you tell the health of a village?"

"I'll have to tell you another time. One bad sign is a run-down smithy. I have a message from Smith Brawter at Rokwold: 'The maid you made well and can he have one.'"

They laughed. "Poor Brawter. He's a widower twice. Fine smith. What's the health of Rokwold like?"

"Fading."

Dunstin thought. "What is Barrington's health?"

"I have only been once about a month ago. I couldn't speak with the smith because he was ill. The village is thriving. Roads well kept. The lord is promoting the quarry and a lime kiln. The people are well fed and the land is rich."

"Can you take a message for me?"

"Yes. Who to?"

"Smith Rowsing at Barrington is dying, perhaps dead – Off you get. Dunstin went to the back of the forge and started digging at the earth floor with a chisel. Soon he came back with a leather purse which he emptied into his hand. It was an irregular nut of black metal the size of a goose egg. "Star iron. More precious than gold." He let Minda hold it. "It comes from falling stars – You know the ones in August."

"Awesome. This comes from stars!" Minda held it up imagining the flickering white heat of the hottest iron making pinpricks of starlight. She felt the weight and texture of its scars and hollows.

"Here is my plan Minda. Barrington is not much of a detour for you. Find out the health of the Smith Rowsing's wife – or widow – and see if she's minded to take another smith. Deliver this to Smith Brawter with the message – um – 'Warm bed of coals in Barrington.' "

"Can't I just say what the plan is?"

"Oh no. Smiths have always sent messages by riddling."

"Not much of a riddle."

"But it's how we like it."

"What's the star iron for?"

"Make a wedding ring of course."

"Oh."

"I'll keep it safe... If I ever get married I want a ring of star iron."

"Tell that to Smith Brawter and he'll understand."

"Understand?"

"Smith's secrets. Don't be cross Minda. There are some secrets that must remain secret – even to you. I've had lots of messages like the one from Smith Brawter about you. If you ever need a roof to sleep under then here's what you do." Dunstin showed her a secret sign and made her practise until it was perfect.

"Why not just ask?"

"Because if you just ask you may be refused, but a smith will never refuse the sign."

"Is it a general distress sign or simply 'please may I stay the night'?"

"Good question Minda. You really have grow up. Um – It is what it is."

"I might find myself in a strange place and need somewhere to stay for the night. I don't want to give a distress sign when the floor of a warm forge is better than under a dripping hedge."

"Oh I see. All the smiths know of you so you won't be turned away if you just ask. Now I know you can make a shoe and knife and a needle but you haven't yet 'put your hand on the anvil', you're not a true Brother smith but I solemnly charge you to recognise that sign. Do you solemnly recognise it?"

"I do." She smacked her on the anvil as smiths make an oath.

"Do you promise to give a smith your help if he gives the sign?"

"I do." Another smack.

"Do you swear to house and feed the smith that gives the sign?"

"I do." Another smack.

"Forever?"

"Forever. Another smack."

"Er – Now you should be stripped, covered with ashes then drenched with noxious quench-water. Come and have a kiss instead."

## Cider!

Minda would remember the whole day of her homecoming. The quiet evening meal and talk with Mister and Mrs Hesquery would forever mark that moment of subdued emotions when her parents were ready for her to leave the nest to fly on her own journey. When she admitted extorting two bottles of spirits from the Reeve the Hesquerys were as perfectly happy together as they'd ever been. Not because they secretly hated the Reeve, not because they liked extortion, but because arbitrary exercise of power was what made people powerful and their Minda had flown the nest not as a robin or a pigeon but an eagle. "Mister Trentchard can have them, I've found he likes spirits."

"What about you Minda?" Asked Mrs Hesquery.

"I have seen drunk men and I don't want to be like that. Mister Trentchard will bring wines back from his journeys sometimes and I have some with water but it makes me dizzy. Mistress Marline says I should get used to the feeling as wines and spirits are too easy to drink. She says the two most evil words are 'have another' and the four most evil words are 'I think I will'. Beer is alright if I stop after two pints but cider – don't ever mention cider! Oh no I remember only too well – Me, Brand, Flor and Henry. We lost our weather-wager and took shelter under a windmill. The miller was a jolly sort and invited us into the house. It was creaking and rocking as the wind got up. He says 'Can you two hang on the brake rope while the other two help get the sails off? Then we'll have some cider eh?' So the miller, Brand and me got soaked getting those blasted sails taken off. As you can't have a fire in a mill, all we had was cider to warm us up until the rain passed. Blast that Henry! He may be wet as a puddle but he wasn't affected. When the storm had gone we went down to collect the poor horses but before I could mount Stefan the world started rolling. I thought the sails had picked me up! I couldn't stand up – not even leaning against the main

post. I wasn't the only one who was sick. Flor was definitely ill and I think Brand wasn't steady. Only Henry – blast him! – had any senses left. I'll never drink cider 'till I grow a beard."

Minda asked Mister Hesquery about the Lime merchant. "Strange you should ask. There's a fishy smell there."

"Will you mind if I tell Mister Trentchard? A King's collector might investigate as a result. If you need any lime-wash or plaster it might be best to get it quickly."

It was a bit of a shock to have this in his own village but Mister Hesquery realised that keeping the law and rooting out wrongdoers applied here as much as in the lawless lands and might as well start at home. "The rotten tooth must be pulled Minda."

## Matchmaker at Barrington

Riding alone back to Trowstead in the August early morning was a relaxing way to enjoy a bit of carefree contentment. The last time she'd made this journey was the night of the fake ambush in the moonlight. Then she was only fifteen and keen to kill with her spring knives; determined to fight no matter how much sleeping in the snow was required. Now she knew what fighting was all about it gave her confidence but knew she hadn't been tested in a real ambush with a real chance of being wounded or killed. How wise of Mister Trentchard to teach her other ways of doing her duty. What was her duty? It seemed to be smoke out the smugglers. Frighten the Duke's subjects by being his daughter who shouldn't be crossed if they didn't want a ducal summons? She felt this page in her journal was about to be turned, just like it was here last November.

Mister Trentchard was not expected back at Trowstead until the evening so she extended her leave and rode out to Barrington. Everyone for many miles around knew of the girl with the eyepatch who had caught a runaway horse, or shot dead three outlaws escaping across the river, or lifted the remains of a runaway cart off a carrier, or sometimes it was an old man and his wife going to market round Dragstone way, or snatched a child from the runaway's path with seconds to spare on Prowsten hill. When she arrived at the smithy it didn't take long for children to appear, gawking at this marvellous stranger that, according to one, had strangled a lion that was worrying sheep. She'd discovered that children make excellent camouflage and introductions so she lifted two of them onto her horse being careful not to let them fall off. She had them put one hand over an eye like her patch. "Charge!" She cried waving her own knife while leading Stefan round in front of the smithy. "Charge!" they cried and waved their imaginary swords. "Kill the lion" shouted the one who knew about sheep-worrying. "Kill the lion!" they all cried. The good thing about carrots was if you didn't find children to treat then the horse appreciated them. There was an unspoken law that a handout of carrots signalled the end of games.

The smith's wife watched the circus. The innocent fun and loving way Minda carefully encouraged the children made her smile for the first time in weeks. When the carrots had been given away to happy and respectful children Minda came to her. Without being asked she said "Smith Rowsing died three days ago." Minda said



nothing but threw Stefan's reins over the hitch post and fetched a leather purse from her saddlebag. Then without looking at the other doorways which she knew held spectators she said "Let us sit on this bench, the sun's hot but sometimes it is best to do important business where people can see."

"Important business?" There was a note of worry in the widow's voice.

"Smithing is always important business. Do you know of Smith Dunstin of Selenden?"

"My husband told me about him."

"Well it was Dunstin who taught me and he sent me here to see you."

"When my husband learned you were here last month he wished he could have seen you. He chuckled about a girl making a sword and said Smith Dunstin was the cleverest fool he ever knew."

"I would have liked to have met Smith Rowsing. I have it from Smith Dunstin that he was very skilled and honest."

"Honest but no good at business. If it wasn't for me he would never have got a penny. He was always giving credit or doing a favour for a friend."

"Dunstin sent me here to speak to you. I am to ask you a question. While smiths talk to smiths in their riddles he sent me here not to forge iron but to forge the happy and prosperous future."

"That sounds like a riddle."

"Sorry it's catching... Mrs – er – widow/"

"/Call me Katey."

"Dunstin asks would you consider marrying another smith. I have met the man and he's good at his job, thirty years old and not morose. He is a widower twice, no children and in his heart needs a wife."

"You mean Smith Brawter!"

"I do. Well Dunstin does. I am only a messenger in these matters."

"Half an hour ago I was wondering what to do after selling the smithy and now you have brought the sun. It has been worrying me for weeks. Excuse me if I'm a little drawn."

"Let me show you this Katey." She untied the purse and took out the precious nut of metal. "Star iron!"

"What's star iron?"

"When you look up at night and see the stars, each one of them is a forge of white-hot iron, so hot it melts in drops. Sometimes they fall to earth and this is what you find. So rare it is more precious than gold." She handed it to Katey. "Dunstin has asked me – with your permission – to give it to Smith Brawter to make a ring with. Shall I?"

"Yes please. And how do I thank Dunstin."

"I should leave that for now – you haven't even met Smith Brawter."

"If you say he's healthy then he will do. I'm minded to visit Rokwold tomorrow and ask him."

"I have to take this to him now so why not stay here, bake a welcome-cake and I will tell him that you are expecting him tomorrow before shadow-fall. It is at least ten miles I reckon."

The shadows were still in the doorways. The children were playing their games in the dry dust taking care to stay within sight in case there should be another treat. "Have you a drink of water for me please Katey?"

"Oh of course. Come inside in the shade."

"No I must go on to Rokwold and bear the heat like I bear the cold."

After filling herself and her water pouch she walked Stefan to the pond for his drink. This time the doorway shadows emerged as the children gathered round. She easily picked two of the children up and lodged them one on each hip. She didn't really know what she was doing but being an angel of happiness was so... Happy. The culmination of two days of freedom from suspicion, probing and instant fighting. She addressed the half dozen mothers with more children attached. "There are bad things going on beyond the horizon. If they begin to creep in here let me know."

"What bad things?"

Minda didn't know herself but unknowns were more frightening. "You will know a bad thing when you see it – If you see it – It may never happen." This didn't feel enough. "There are people like me trying to stop bad things happening. Just remember bad goes to worse. Are you bad?" she said cheerfully to one of her hip-riders. An awed face looked into hers. "No of course you're not. You're just a little mischief. And you're a little mischief too." Lifting the children down she said to them "Now grow up big and strong. I have thirty miles to go before I reach my bed and the weather may break before then. Bye bye." She said a few words to Stefan to calm herself, mounted and galloped off.

The weather might well break. The birds were silent where the road passed through woods and across commons and through meadows. The faces on the harvesters showed the usual parched fatigue with an added touch of weather's whip. Dunstin's magic had worked again! Widow Rowsing, Katey, had only needed a spark to catch fire. She guessed Smith Brawter would be just as delighted. Hadn't she been clever to scheme the meeting for tomorrow? And a cake! She's heard of storks bringing babies but now she was bringing marriage rings.

At Rokwold she found Smith Brawter fully engaged in repairing reaping hooks and cart furnishings for the harvesters. In desperation she used her new smith brotherhood knowledge to interrupt.

"Quick!" She handed him the purse. "Dunstin gave me this for you to make into a ring for Smith Rowsing's widow. I have come from there and she's baking a welcome cake and expects you before dusk tomorrow. Sorry about using the sign but I have ten miles to go before the storm."

"Did he give you a message?"

"Yes – sorry – 'Warm bed of coals in Barrington.' "

"Thank you miss. And thank Dunstin."

"I might not see him for months. He also said something which I don't understand. He said to tell you what I said to him: 'If I ever get married I want a ring of star iron.' "

Brawter burst out laughing. Minda was confused.

"Why is it funny? Did I say something stupid. Is there a reason why I shouldn't get married."

"Why no dear. It's a smith's secret and if you live to be a hundred you will never know the secret. It's something that married smiths know but women will never know. There's no harm in it so that's the way it will stay."

Goaded, Minda replied. "We women know all the important secrets about you men. You keep thinking you have found them out but don't believe it. Don't forget! And I must go. I can almost hear the pat pat of the first drops now but give me a kiss and I promise to come to your wedding." She decided Brawter wasn't the quickest brain but show a dog a rabbit...

Sore-eyed but content she got back to Trowstead as the sunset turned everything red and golden and brown. The storm threatened for so long never came to them although a string of angry lightning displays spat across the southern sky then rumbled off elsewhere.

## Secrets with Mister Trentchard

After her long dusty day Minda was hoping for a quick meal and then bed but Mister Trentchard had returned and she needed to discuss Selenden with him. After a few quick questions about her travels he said "You must be tired. Is there anything we need to do now that can't wait until morning?"

"I have something to report about Selenden. It can wait until morning."

"Is everything alright Minda?"

"Yes Mister Trentchard. I have had two very happy days."

"Well shall we drink a toast to happy days?"

"Oh I forgot! I extorted two bottles of spirits for you from the Reeve. He's a small time rogue but not bad."

"In my name?"

"No. All on my own account."

Mister Trentchard laughed. "You are the most brazen girl I have ever known." He took two ornate glass goblets from a cabinet and poured a very dark wine into them. "Here is a toast to you. Minda – My favourite trouble maker."

"Here's a toast to tomorrow." replied Minda. She drained her goblet, stretched out to Mister Trentchard and then holding his hand came close. "Mister Trentchard I have been a messenger of marriage once already today and one day you may want to settle down with Mistress Marline."

Mister Trentchard sighed. I have thought about it. But it's too complicated to explain."

Next morning Mister Trentchard held a conference with Minda. He had seen her as an unusual and useful lever in the struggles he expected to come but now she had become more than simply an icon for lusty men to follow. She was a much more powerful piece on the board than Henry would ever have been. How was he to stop her showing her real strength until it was needed for the real crisis? A mighty lioness – he would have to keep her well fed.

She proudly described how she caught the Reeve. Mister Trentchard was suitably impressed. "There are only a very few people with your talent Minda. Please use it sparingly. There is a line between impressing people with your power and making enemies of them. What greedy people hate is other greedy people but they will recognise and respect a restrained use of power."

"I'm suspicious of something else I saw. Why does a lime merchant build a windowless extension? A workshop would have windows and ventilation. A roof-over would keep casks of lime dry. There was something wrong. When I asked Mister Hesquery he gave a poor reference."

"What exactly did he say?"

"There was a fishy smell there. And he didn't mind me discussing it with you."

"Anything else suspicious?"

"There may have been a track at the back away from the village. It didn't look like a thriving business somehow – Bits of clutter around. Too many weeds growing perhaps."

"So what do you think?"

"Firstly I'm curious, and secondly as I can't work out the reasons I become suspicious. Mister Hesquery did nothing to allay my suspicions. I wonder if he is storing smuggled goods there. That's as far as I've got."

"Well done. You have been very observant and produced a thoughtful report. Now what do you suggest we do?"

"I don't know. I'm just the eyes and ears."

## Tax collecting as a job

"It's time to talk about the King's law. You know a bit about the tax Collector and the tax Office: The *Collector* computes dues from a land-owner. His job is relatively easy because the land is there for all to see and doesn't get moved about at night. We've been over measuring lands and counting stock by eye. Now you know very well how account books are kept so they look honest to an outsider but lie to somebody's advantage. As a tax collector you would get to visit lots of places and be able to enquire into lots of things with the King's law behind you. We might still use that plan, you'd make a really good collector as you could turn a blind eye or turn the screw as required." Minda sagged. Being a tax collector wasn't very adventurous, and she would never be anybody's real friend. Mister Trentchard saw her reaction. "Don't worry. You're far too good to be a collector. But it might be a useful temporary disguise and a way to earn money. Why stop at two bottles of spirits from a petty criminal when you could have two hundred Marks from Lord Frobart for failing to notice he is the actual owner of his lands not his imaginary brother supposedly away fighting somewhere."

She perked up. "You're saying that a collector is like a leaky bucket. You get some water from the well but some gets lost on the way."

"That's very well put Minda – The best summary I can think of. So long as it's only a small leak the bucket doesn't get replaced."

"Now the tax *Office* is separate and has a more difficult task. Law-abiding traders are supposed to pay taxes on certain goods. Of course they forget or make a mistake counting or claim to be shipping something of a lower tax rate, so the Office has to catch as many as it can and fine them severely or even send them to trial in a place

where their friends aren't judges. As you can imagine traders are none too happy about being troubled by nosy investigators from the Office so they tend to work at night, bribe the officers and are prepared to use force if surprised. Dead men don't point fingers. Let me list the evils. Firstly honest traders will be driven out of business by tax cheats. Secondly a little bit of cheating leads to more cheating and more cheats. Thirdly the more cheating there is the more money can be spent bribing or defying the officers of the Office. Fourthly when outlawry is profitable it recruits more outlaws and buys the silence of previously honest people. Fifthly outlaws don't obey any laws. When authority is weak they can do what they like."

This was a lot of information. "That was too many evils to remember in one go Mister Trentchard but you're telling me that the tax Office is the protection we have against bands of roaming outlaws."

"Again you have it in a nutshell. Now round here you don't see much outlawry because people like me have people like you and Brand to knock on people's doors in the middle of the night and do what needs to be done."

"What's that?"

"Whatever is necessary. Killing was necessary once, and it may be again when memories fade. Now who wants Minda knocking on their door in the daylight with a certain horrible smile on her face? You are my lovely dream Minda but you also make a very good nightmare. The best sort of nightmare, the sort that can't be shooed away. The nightmare that could be lurking round any corner, talking to any servant or asking children where the ponies go at night."

Minda could see things beginning to appear out of the fog. She needed time to think. What were her strengths? Mister Trentchard's love would do. "I have nightmares sometimes Mister Trentchard."

"We all do. It's natural."

"Do you have nightmares about owls?"

"No."

"I'm scared of Owls Mister Trentchard." She shook her head to try and shake the images out of her head. Mister Trentchard wasn't prepared to confess his worst nightmares, being a woman Minda wouldn't understand. Anyway she was hardly likely to take a lover to bed and...

Minda thought. Mister Trentchard was someone who lived in the future. "Henry – He'd make a good Collector wouldn't he?"

"Yes I think he will. And you'd make a good Officer."

"I seem to have arrived without knowing."

Mister Trentchard laughed. "You've arrived in a lot of places Minda. Although perhaps 'arrived' isn't the right word. Hmm – perhaps a lot of places have heard you'll be arriving! You're not quite there yet. Like a sword that's made but is yet to be polished and sharpened. You have the hardness and strength but you're not yet a proper blade."

This made sense to Minda. You couldn't put an edge on a bit of raw iron. "I'm ready to be polished as you have made me."

"You are star-iron Minda."

She nearly gave away that she knew the secret but recovered. "Star-iron? What's that?"

"It is iron that falls from stars so they say."

"Is it special?"

"Yes. It's very rare."

"Is it like real iron?"

"I think so. You'll have to ask the smiths."

"What's special about it?"

"That it comes from stars."

"But otherwise it's the same."

"I think so. Ask the smiths."

"So why am I like star-iron and not just ordinary iron?"

Deep in Mister Trentchard's sub-conscious his nightmare and dream were arguing 'I told you so!'. By desperate luck he said "Because you sparkle with the brightness of another world. White heat in the cold night." It was Minda's turn to have sub-conscious confusion. She was an ugly cripple but people saw her as a sparkling star – hot and cold at the same time. "Minda. I think in times of peace you will visit friends and enemies alike to reassure them that law and order is safe in your hands – whether they like it or not. In times of unrest I expect you will be sending your men to slit the gizzards of outlaws. Now to do this there are some steps we have to take. One is to lead you gently into the job so softly that nobody is aware what's happening until it is too late."

"Too late?"

"Too late to stop you becoming the a Officer."

"But from what you've said nobody would want the job."

"Perhaps I didn't explain. There are so many opportunities for a profit that every important trader has some servant they want as their puppet."

"And you want me as your puppet."

The stark logic of this hit Mister Trentchard, it wasn't what he meant at all. "If I wanted a puppet I could have Henry as Officer. He would carefully detect and possibly, if prompted by rivals, investigate blatant smugglers but I would be his backbone. I want you as Officer as a step to bigger things."

"What bigger things?"

"How about King's treasurer?"

"Would the King let a woman look after his money?"

"I don't see why not. Most happy men I know let their wives look after the money." Minda saw the general truth and specific untruth in this but was satisfied that she was on a road to further places.

"Now let's see where the Selenden smuggling lime merchant fits into this Minda."

"We don't know he's up to no good."

"Correct. It's only a girl's whimsey." Mister Trentchard smiled. "So we need to get more information."

"How do we do that?"

"I have ways."

"Tell me."

"Normally I wouldn't tell anyone my secrets. Otherwise they don't stay secrets long. But with you Minda I feel I can explain. Unfortunately Selenden is your home village. You might find yourself in an awkward situation."

"Can you not trust me?"

"It isn't a matter of trust but a matter of danger. You could be in danger if you knew."

"How can knowledge be dangerous?" Minda realised as soon as she'd said it that knowledge was dangerous in many ways. "Sorry – of course knowledge means power over other people and some might object to that."

"Perhaps object with a stab in the night. But also if some bad person thought you knew who had betrayed them they or their surviving brothers might be keen for you to tell them who. That would mean horrible pain and death for you that would make owls look like doves. Do I take it that Mister Hesquery is the only person in Selenden who knows you have an interest in the lime merchant?"

"Yes." Minda was relieved her training in never giving any suspicion away had worked.

"Good. Well done. You may live another week."

"Week!"

"Don't worry I was only making you properly afraid of saying what you think. Selenden isn't a threat to you yet. Now you understand why you have had my best man teaching you how to stay alive."

"If the Selenden lime merchant is smuggling then what?"

"Good question Minda. Is it the Collector or the Office who should deal with it?"

"The Office."

"Correct. I'm pleased to say that although the holder of the Office for this district is not my puppet he is a nice enough sort of fellow and I'm sure he would be happy to meet a young girl who knows exactly what is going on. If you shoot that smile of yours which says 'avoid dark alleys if you make a mess of my hard work' I'm sure there will be an exciting night for Selenden soon."

"But I don't know exactly what's going on. What happens if he turns up suddenly and finds nothing there?"

"The worst that can happen is that there's nothing there. He knows it is good to have an excuse to show people he has spies everywhere."

"Surely the worst is that the merchant has a perfectly good reason for his building and I'll be made to look a fool."

"That's why I'll do a little checking first. With any luck we can tell the Officer when there's likely to be a good haul or catch some of the rest of the gang."

"Oh a gang?"

"Just as you and me and Brand and the others don't do things alone so smuggling needs various people. The lime merchant may just be storeman and do local deliveries pretending to deliver dirty tubs of wash or mortar when they have something else inside. It's a good scheme."

"Could the gang be violent?"

"They probably could be. The more the better."

"Why is that better?"

"Because it's more important they are eliminated. We don't want that sort of criminal loose gnawing at authority."

"Who's authority?"

"Mine and the King's."

## Mister Trentchard's spying

Mister Trentchard unlocked his desk and took out his battered writing case. "Tell me how I would find the place."

"It is just after the harness maker in Fullers row."

"If I sent you to a strange village with directions to – say the house after the physician's in Stamson Lane how would you find it?"

"I would ask."

"And now at night in secret."

"Um – That's not very useful is it. I would need more basic instructions."

"Exactly. What is an obvious landmark for a stranger in Selenden that we could start from?"

"The church is on the mount in the middle."

"Good. How to go from there to the next mark?"

"Go downhill."

"Isn't it downhill whatever way you go from a mount?"

"Oh yes. Um – From the door go two hundred paces right to the pond."

"Good."

"Now take the left road. That is Fullers row. There is a barn then two houses on right."

"Are you sure it's two?"

"Two separate houses. One is a cottage. Then on the other side – the left – is a cottage. Then you come to a big Elm tree. Then the Lime merchant's built sideways with a track alongside leading from the road to the yard. The track continues through a coppice to meet with the high road. After that is the carpenter's cottage, work-shed and wood yard and the lane ends."

"How many paces from pond to the merchant's?"

"Two hundred and er seventy."

"Are there any other tracks leading from Fuller's Row?"

"No."

"So we could give the following directions and be sure to find the right place."

'Church. Right 200 paces pond. Left road 270 paces. House on right after side track'."

"Yes."

"I'll write that it down. Watch."

Mister Trentchard pared his nib, opened his ink horn and wrote right at the edge of a piece of paper.



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"Can you read that?"

"Cross is for church? Right two hundred. Is O the pond? Left two hundred and seventy. Y? I don't know."

"Tree. The elm tree you noted. Look at the shape."

"Oh yes. I see it now. Then that's the side track and house. That's clever but why not write 'pond' and 'tree'?"

"Firstly my agent may not be a reader. Shapes will be clearer to him. Secondly the shapes only mean something when you are there. Y could be a fork in the road or a bush."

"Why is that useful."

"If somebody else finds it they won't know what it means so our secret can't be spread by prying eyes. There are a lot of prying eyes around in this business. You've done very well Minda. It may just be a fish's nest but there's no harm in finding out some more. Now I'm going to have a word with Brand about this. We may well be visiting the Officer in a few days so make sure you write down all you've told me and give it to me to lock away in my desk. And thank you for those two bottles – they mean the world to me."

# 5 Ambush

Brand and Minda had practised the art of knife throwing and enjoyed throwing anything they came across that could be thrown. She could shoot quickly once she'd put on an over-glove made by the harness-maker for holding the bow. She knew how to wield a sword against a straw dummy. With Brand's approval she supervised the making of four different knives for throwing to see which would serve the best. They all had their good and bad points. The largest one, the one that couldn't really be thrown accurately was curved and looked very wicked. Smith Thredvald had no imagination so Brand and Minda drew outlines on his wax tablet with notches and wavy edges. There was to be no doubt in anybody's mind that if Minda wished she could slice, stab, smash, gouge and rip, probably all at once if you upset her.

But she was still easily pushed over by simple shoving in hand-to-hand combat. Not as easily as before, but a big man who bulled her would knock her straight down. Brand had thrown leather balls at her to dodge and there had been wrestling and sessions with wool covered sticks for blades, but the plain fact was that in a serious battle she shouldn't be left to defend herself. Although they'd hunted and butchered deer they'd avoided boar as Minda could be caught if one charged. As Brand and Mister Trentchard agreed, practice with wool was not the same thing as being attacked in the dark or slashing a man across the neck for real.

"I don't think there's much more we can do Mister Trentchard."

"What about attack at night? If anyone was made for shadows it was Minda. Just imagine if a rumour goes round that she had been seen lurking in a wood, or arrives at an Inn at noon asking to be woken and fed at dusk. Why would she be about at night if not to say a steely hello to someone who should be in bed."

"We could do some more night work. I'll use Flor and Henry."

"Good because there may be some action in a week or two."

"May I use Flor as her personal guard? I think Henry is less important now."

"I had the same thought. He's ideal – A faithful servant, good in the field but no ideas of his own. She shouldn't be looking after her own horse when she has writing and plotting to do."

During the next week Brand and Minda would alternately try to surprise Flor and Henry. They would practise kidnaps and ambushes, whistle signals, look and listen, crossing country without being seen. One lesson that impressed Minda was that you should face the direction of most danger. So if you were hiding on the edge of a wood you faced into the wood as you could easily scan the fields behind you. Somehow this felt wrong the first time but after she'd had a turn at stalking it was one of those things that are obvious to the expert.

They were no strangers to the moon and the stars. It was a pleasure to be the only ones about in a world of shadows breathing the scents of the warm nights. As the lead scout Henry heard them, horribly close, clopping on the flint track that followed the edge of the wood. "Pack horses!"

"Block them Minda!" whispered Brand and she was alone.

Without thinking about it she found a tree to lean against, reached for her large knife and measured the arena. She knew exactly how the sinking quarter moon played against her but there was nothing she could do. The lead came round the corner. Surely he could see her now. He didn't seem to. How many men were there? Well if he wasn't going to stop...

"Good evening." He jumped with shock and looked for the source of the voice. It was obvious he still hadn't seen her and yet she was only nine paces away. "I'm over here."

"Show yourself."

"Open your sleepy eyes. I haven't got all night. Get down and show me what's on horse number three."

"What's up John?" came a voice from the back.

"Go on tell him."

"Nothing Nat just a girl. We're carrying on now." He gee-d up his horse. "Good night lady."

Minda reached back to throw. Straight in the face an easy target at this range. Suddenly she couldn't move her arm. Her wrist was gripped. Brand called loudly from close behind. "Stop or die." The lead stopped instantly. "Dismount on the far side." Slowly the rider obeyed. "Look at your feet. That's where your body would be lying now mister Lucky if I hadn't saved your life." He let go of Minda's wrist slowly. "Now be more polite and we can all get back to our beds. What was it you wanted Minda?"

"I'd like to see what is on horse number three."

"Nat!" he called back along the string but there was no answer.

"I expect he's having a rest." said Brand, still hidden behind the tree. Knowing where Flor and Henry were Minda guessed the situation straight away but this man was confused. Brand seemed to know what he was doing.

"Nat! Come here!" shouted the leader.

"Terrible isn't it? Just when you need him he's off riding on a moon beam. Now lead on three lengths mister lucky." As the horses began clopping Brand whispered to Minda. "There may be more men so don't move." As the third horse came by Brand called. "Stop! Now come back mister and show us."

"These are all sacks of dried plants the dyers along Brookling use. I don't know their names lady."

"I know Brookling." said Minda. "Is that where you're bound for?"

"You watch for us Minda." whispered Brand as he emerged from behind the tree.

"Yes your ladyship."

"They make some fine cloth there. Is that what you'll be bringing back?"

Brand used a needle dagger to probe the three sausage-sacks draped over the horse's back.

"Yes your ladyship."

Brand intervened in the chit chat. "Mister lucky the lady would like a new habit. We'll have the cloth hidden in the middle sack." Mister lucky hesitated but knew when he was lucky to be alive and started untying the sack. Brand coshed him from behind and he collapsed. "Stay on watch Minda." Two whistles and in a few moments Flor and Henry came running round the bend.

"There was only one. He's bound and gagged."

"Well done Henry. Leave him. Bind this one, flop him over his horse then you and Flor take this lot to Trowstead as fast as you can. We'll see you at breakfast. The third horse has cloth inside the sacks."

## Violent deaths

Brand said to Minda "We'll stay around for a while. I want to make sure we really are alone. Keep hidden and silent. We'll watch Nat from the edge of the trees."

"Tell me/"

"/Shssh - Later."

Nothing happened. The minutes went by with only sounds of the night, a fox barking, a brace of owls alternately calling 'twit' and 'twoo' as they made their way through the wood. The scrunching of a patrolling badger became a grunting distraction as it pushed its way through the sticks on the woodland floor. It was nice to think of these animals going about their business without/

Brand interrupted her dreaming with a whisper. "I'll have a talk with Nat – Keep a really good lookout – especially along the track. We have been caught asleep once already tonight. Stay exactly in this spot unless I say." The moon was sinking but the sky was already lightening so she could see the general line of the track skirting the wood.

"Hello Nat." The bundle on the track shook and grunted. "Let's get those ropes off you shall we. Eating your hat. Did those nasty men gag you?" As he stooped to cut free he carefully checked for any weapon and removed a rough sword and ordinary knife.

"You don't seem to have many friends Nat. Lucky I was passing. It looks like I'm the only friend you have."

"Undo my hands as well."

"Not yet. Get some circulation in your legs first. Not that you can run faster than my arrow. Now I know it's not very nice being jumped on in the middle of the night when you're not being paid."

"Of course I'm being paid. Do you think I do this for fun?"

"Who pays you Nat?"

"I can't say."

"That's a shame as I was going to let you go."

"I daren't say."

"It's not nice being betrayed by your friends is it. I wonder how much they were paid to betray you?"

"Sam would never..."

"But Sam did. Now that's something you'll have to sort out between you two. I don't want to see you within ten miles of Trowstead ever again is that clear Nat."

"Yes."

"I'll let you find your own way back. Do you know where you are?"

"Not rightly."

"Hotkin wood."

"That doesn't mean anything to me."

"Where is your home?"

"Kentling."

"Oh that's easy. Walk into the dawn until –" A low-high whistle from Minda! Brand disappeared back into the wood and crashed off away into the deep darkness. Minda was about to follow but remembered her 'stay put' order. A trotting horse could be heard coming along the track in the same direction as the pack train had come from.

Nat called as the horse came clear. "Mister Yorrel! I've been ambushed."

The horse stopped, the rider dismounted and walked his horse away from the place where Minda was hidden. Even though the sky was getting lighter she couldn't see his features under his hood, but he unsheathed his sword and was carefully searching the track and the wood edge.

"It's alright he's gone."

"He!"

"There were a whole gang to start with Mister Yorrel."

"A whole gang of one man! – Do you think I'm a fool Nat?"

"No sir. The string stopped and as John started again I was knocked off my horse and bound."

"Shut up! I pay you to protect my valuables not sit like a sack waiting to be carefully tied up. Thanks to your lazy stupidity I've lost a small fortune. I don't like the smell of this. And I don't like the look on your face. Innocent."

"Sam betrayed us. He just told me."

"Who told you?"

"The man who just untied me."

"Very convenient. Some nice men gently tie you up and an even nicer man unties you and shows you the way home I expect." Yorrel punched Nat in the stomach. Nat folded up, then Yorrel kicked him in the face. Minda was horrified and reached for her knife in case it became murder – Six paces – Nat groaned on the floor.

"I've lost hundreds. Were you asleep?"

Nat groaned. "No sir. Sam betrayed us."

"You betrayed me. I don't like that Nat. Getting your cut were you from the nice man? Or are you going to tell me it was that foxy Minda that bewitched you."

"Sir! John said it was a girl."

"So John is in this plot too." Another kick at Nat kneeling on the track.

"No sir. Please sir. It was Sam."

"So there is a plot. You – kick – and Sam and John. You won't betray me again will you Nat?"

"No sir. Never. Nooo..." The sword smashed into Nat's head with a horrible crunch. Minda had never been this angry before. It took her a moment to force herself to focus on the shadowy face of Yorrel and calculate the best throwing position. He kicked the body of Nat with all the force he could find then wiped the blood from his sword on a tussock just four and a half paces from her. She had a perfect shot. Straight to the top of the head. She reached back half expecting Brand to grasp her wrist again. The surge of anger was over and now this was target practice. She hesitated, there were some moments to spare and this was death. Orders! Brand had stopped her killing earlier. Yorrel remounted his horse, still only eight paces. Before she could decide a bow shot twanged from her right and Yorrel clutched his throat. A second later Minda's knife sliced into his hood where she judged the ear would be. Slowly, with a sighing groan he toppled off the horse with a grunt onto the ground. Minda didn't know what to do.

"Come on miss. Let's clear up this mess and go. Get your weapon and then jump on his horse ready." She was energised with relief at having orders to obey. Shaking her knife to un wedge it from a dead man's head is unpleasant, seeing gobbets of brain in the red light of dawn is worse, but being ordered to do it makes it bearable. Brand searched him by ripping his cape for purse and anything else then jumped up behind. "Straight to the high road. Go!"

After a mile and a bit of the wood-edge track they approached the high road. By habit they slowed, stopped and surveyed the road from a distance before making an entrance into the honest world. "Let's walk. Minda, you have done really well tonight. We have all made mistakes also and we need to talk about them. Amongst ourselves. I will tell Mister Trentchard what's happened and how I'm really proud of you. Just one thing. Why didn't you throw to kill that man?"

"I was thinking."

"There's a time for thinking and a time for action Minda."

"I had a few moments to think. He wasn't going to go far in five seconds."

"A perfect target and you hesitated. Are you sure you could kill him?"

"I was waiting for your order. You stopped me earlier and I would have smashed the first one's nose through the back of his head if you'd let me. So I left it to you to decide. You could have said 'kill him' and I would have thrown."

"Oh. Um. I see. Bad of me Minda to think you a coward. Sorry."

"Don't be sorry Brand. You have lead me truly in everything and it is my duty to obey. When you ran away after my whistle I stayed there all on my own, I didn't know if there were one or five coming but I stuck."

"I hadn't thought of that. Yes you did. Brave girl."

"Should I have thrown?"

"You did the right thing and I wasn't expecting it."

"Did you know that was going to happen tonight?"

"No. Honestly. My plan was to convince Nat he'd been betrayed and let him go back to wherever he'd come from and have a possibly fatal quarrel with another member of his gang. There is nothing so disruptive as suspicion. It's like grease on the chin, rub it and it just spreads – I wish I knew who that man was."

"Mister Yorrel."

"How did you know that?"

"While you were making your noisy escape – It was obvious you were trying to lead the hounds astray when I thought of it."

"Was it?"

"To me, but it fooled them."

"While you were creeping back Nat called him Mister Yorrel. Does that mean anything to you?"

"No but that's what I wanted from Nat."

"You knew he was coming didn't you?"

"No. If I'd suspected I would have set up a proper ambush for the pack train and captured him alive."

"Poor Nat he didn't have many friends really did he? Yorrel deserved to die."

"Nat was one of life's losers. If he had brains he'd be dangerous... ..Unlike Yorrel the boss. He was dangerous because he had brains."

Minda was reminded of the red worms of brains on her knife and her stomach turned over. "I want to be sick"

"Go on pal. I'll keep watch."

They walked carefully back to Trowstead.

"Are you feeling better now Minda?"

"Yes it was just – well anyway that's a night I won't forget in a hurry."

"Me neither. I shall remember it forever as the first time the 'foxy lady' showed her teeth and made the rest of us look like cubs."

"But it was you that waited and watched."

"But it was you that would have killed two men if I hadn't stopped you."

"But it was you who trained me."

"But it was you who stood calm in the moonlight in front of any number of men in the darkness."

"For me calm comes in the middle of the storm not before it. If I'm to fight and survive I must stay clear headed – You taught me that... ..But I did get angry tonight. I nearly threw at Yorrel when he kicked Nat."

"In the end it worked out alright."

"But won't I be a murderer?"

"There's a dozen reasons say no and a couple that say yes. Best not say anything to anybody. We'll have a conference after breakfast with Mister Trentchard."

"When the owls flew by tonight I wasn't afraid of them."

"Owls?"

"We were waiting to see if anything happened before you talked to Nat. Poor man he didn't deserve to die."

"Owls?"

"A brace were leapfrogging through the wood."

"Leapfrogging?"

"He would move on and call then after a minute she would fly past him and then she would call and he would fly past her and so on."

"Why would you be frightened?"

"Owls are horrible! I have nightmares."

"But no harm done tonight?"

"Not to me, but death came to that track a few minutes later. Two owls, two deaths. Owls-death. Raw red flesh from crushed bodies."

"But you weren't afraid of them?"

"No. Somehow they seemed to have other business and ignored me."

"Let's hope they stay that way. I tell you what – let's see if Lewin is in the stables before we get our well-earned breakfast. It's always nice to see a friendly face."

The friendly warmth of the stables lured them into a moment of blank relaxation. This soft end to the sharp shocks of the night was denied: The yard was crowded with horses.

Henry rushed up to them. "Brand! The rake is loaded."

"Is it legal?"

"Never in a hundred years. We're rich."

"Good. Where's Flor?"

"I don't know."

Brand grabbed Henry by the arm and pulled him close. "Find him NOW!" Henry ran off. Minda was a bit confused. "Why be so harsh on Henry?"

"Flor and Henry are supposed to be a close team until I say they can go off duty."

"Does it matter?"

"Yes it does!" Hmm There's a lot of valuable stuff here. A lot of temptation to steal. The front-man – err John, he may know a bit – More likely he's telling Flor how he could make a year's pay just by visiting a certain place in Lostnock with a package under his arm and no questions asked."

"Surely finding out that detail is important?"

"I want the facts first. Henry and Flor are supposed to stick together."

"Shouldn't we report to Mister Trentchard?"

"I'll report to him when I've found Flor. You will report to Lewin then Marline then get your head down."

"Lewin?"

"Explain the good and the bad bits of tonight and see if he has anything to say."

"What does he know?"

"/Minda! You have been doing mischief in the night I hear." Lewin had emerged from the confusion of the stable yard."

"We were surprised/"



"/She's going to tell you the bit at the end that only she and I know about. Then she's going to bed. If you hear a scream of pain ignore it – it'll only be Flor. I want somebody to kick from the moon to the stars."

## Aftermath

"What have you got to tell me Minda? Come into my hutch. Sit down there. Now where does it hurt? Look at me."

"Nothing hurts. Just the usual ache in the foot."

"What was Brand saying? You're going to tell me a secret."

"The leader of the convoy was bound by Henry and Flor. Brand sent them here in a hurry and we stayed to see if there were any other strange things happening. The boss came along a few minutes later so he couldn't be caught red-handed. I watched as he smashed the other man's head with a sword just six paces from me while I was hidden in the wood's edge. It was horrible. I was going to throw my knife in the top of his head as he wiped the blood off his sword but hesitated. Brand had stopped me earlier so I waited for orders. Then Brand shot him in the throat. So I threw straight to the side of the head. I was so calm throwing but getting the knife out was – not nice."

"Is that it?" Lewin was gently massaging her neck and shoulders.

"Yes."

"Would you do it again?"

"Yes."

"You're not hurt inside then Minda. You've done a nasty thing for a good reason. Many people wouldn't understand. Best not tell them. Anything else?"

"Am I a murderer?"

"More of an executioner. The man needed executing and you did it."

"But should I decide?"

"No. Not yet. Sometimes I have to decide when a horse should be given a merciful death. These are my friends. Your job will be much easier."

"Do you get used to it?"

"In time it's less of a shock – And more of a responsibility... You're in fine health Minda, but killing is nothing to boast about because there are always people who take it as a challenge to do better. I have work to do. You have to see Mistress Marline. If you can't sleep come to me." It was like rolling in a bed of nettles and being tickled instead of stung! The sweet and sharp scents of the stables flowed through her. Lewin hadn't done anything except massage a few muscles. She didn't really need to visit Lewin but it was nice. Perhaps that was just a practice...

Mistress Marline was not usually up this early but when Henry and Flor arrived at dawn with only half a story and Minda and Brand were missing she couldn't sleep.

"Are you safe Minda?"

"Yes Mistress."

"Are you hurt?"

"No."

"Any other trouble?"

"No thank you. Lewin has seen me and is happy. It's been an exciting night. I'm feeling a bit tired. I helped Brand to kill a man but he was a turd. Brand says I won't get into trouble. Henry did well. He spotted them first."

"What happened?"

"I can't tell you Mistress. I have promised Brand not to tell anyone until I have told Mister Trentchard. I may have said too much already. Please don't tell about the killing, it's a secret."

"Brand told me about it."

Minda might be tired but she could still recognise a naked fishhook! "My orders are not to tell."

"Good girl. Have some porridge then get some sleep. The excitement is only just beginning and if everything goes well it will be the finish of harvest today." To Minda the last harvest cart wasn't all that exciting. She had her own mixed-up happiness, satisfaction, excitement and flashbacks echoing inside her enough for a dozen harvest-homes.

Contrary to mistress Marline's prediction Minda's day was quite placid. There was a conference with Mister Trentchard to tie up loose ends. The tax Officer would be called. In the meantime it wasn't to be generally known that Minda was involved. "Let's keep that bit up our sleeve. Boasting is for braggarts. When the time comes we might let it be known that you were sheltering orphans or taking messages for a widow when using your owl-like senses led you to discover smuggling." He smiled. "Remember you're the cripple girl that beat all the archers in Selenden. Smelling pack horses a couple of miles away should be easy for you. You are a legend already and we are going to use that to make life difficult for those that creep about at night. The next stage is to find the frauds in daytime – Tomorrow hopefully you'll meet the Officer."

The gang rode out to inspect the scene of the ambush in daylight. First they discussed their preparedness, then Minda's polite 'good evening' that nearly ended in sudden death. Moving round the bend in the track they found the bodies slumped in pools of black blood oozed from smashed skulls. Flies had found them in the August heat. Brand asked Minda to show them the spot she'd been kneeling then had Flor and Henry occupy it while describing the events. Henry had his eyes closed.

"Henry! Would you take the horses round the next bend and find a place for lunch."

"Yes Brand." The relief in his voice was obvious.

When he was on his way Brand continued emphasising the pressure on Minda and how calm she was. How she obeyed orders to stay put. How she didn't kill as a reflex action. How she guessed the order not to throw. How she kept a clear head when it mattered. Minda couldn't believe it was her he was talking about less than twelve hours past. Then it was twilight and she was mingling with the shades of the dawn. Now it was full daylight and it was somebody else hiding in that bole – disjointed by seeing the results before doing the deed. When Brand had finished the gruesome story he had Flor come out onto the track. "What do you think Flor?"

"I don't know what to say."

"Could you have done as well as Minda?"

"No. I don't know what I'd have done."

Minda asked. "Would you have followed Brand when he ran away."

"Err. Yes."

"So would I if I thought I could catch him up. For a second until I remembered my specific order. I know that Brand doesn't give orders without a reason."

"Sometimes events overtake orders."

Brand interjected. "Not when your commander is right beside you Flor."

## Flor becomes Minda's servant

Brand continued. "Now Flor I have a job for you. Mister Trentchard has a job for you. The whole Kingdom has a job for you. Your job is to think before you act and to act before Minda's enemies. You are to be her personal guard."

"Me?"

"Yes Flor. This morning Minda started making real enemies. I hope she will make lots more. Enemies with money. Enemies with swords. Enemies who will want Minda killed. The more they want her killed the better she will be serving the Kingdom. You may have to die to save her. Is that clear?"

"Yes Brand. I'd prefer not to die."

"So would I. I'm sure Minda wouldn't want to have to go to the trouble of finding another servant. But Minda is worth ten of you. You have done well with Henry but from now the knives are out. You are to follow her and let her sleep while you watch. Find her food while she prises out criminals and bribe for information amongst the servants while Minda is being lied-to by the nobility. Oh and dying is the least of your worries if I find you've fallen asleep on watch or taken a bribe without reason or be the littlest bit lazy I'll roast you alive."

The silence was broken by Minda for whom this was news as well. "Come on Flor. You are a slow shirker but you'll have to do... ..Are you going to be my servant?"

"Yes miss."

"Good. I didn't mean that about being a good-for-nothing. I'm sure I'll soon be relying on you."

"It's true miss. You are a gem and I'll make sure you continue to shine. I only hope I can do my job as you wish."

"I've never had a servant before and never a personal guard. Let's hope we'll learn how it goes before long."

"Minda, would you send your servant ahead to lunch."

There was a hesitation as Flor and Minda realised this brutal change of hierarchy.

"Flor. Go ahead and make sure Henry is friendly. We'll be along soon."

He trotted off along the track. Brand and Minda linked arms and followed.

"Minda, you know what it's like waiting for orders?"

"Yes. How could I forget those seconds."

"Well now it is Flor who will be waiting for your order. He's better at not thinking for himself and forgetting orders than being a smart servant but it's up to you to train

him. Ask Lewin or me or Mister Trentchard about training. You've seen him work well when you tell him and I'm sure he will want to please you but if you don't tell him exactly what you want him to do then he won't know how."

"This is new country for me Brand. I don't know where to start."

"Mister Trentchard is the man behind it all. He will start you off."

"Am I really in danger?"

"Possibly. The leader who was the only one that saw you is in a cellar somewhere not talking to anyone so any rumours will be just that. A lot of rich traders will be very upset that their goods have been impounded by the Office and enquiries will be made to find out how it happened. That Sam whoever he is – the one Nat thought might have been the betrayer – would be well advised to flee or he may face some people who make Yorrel look like a saint. Or – and I'm sure Mister Trentchard is following this up – if we can find Sam first we may learn some more. We know Nat's comes from Kentling so with luck Sam should live close by."

The three youngsters and Brand enjoyed their lunch of bread, beef and ale. August was warm. The shade of the wood was cool. The view across the wide valley was peaceful. There was hardly a breath of wind. All of them were conscious of a milestone reached and this was their last meal of Minda's training together. They talked about the contents found on the pack horses and how much they might get as reward.

Henry described the late Nat's village. "There are upper, middle and lower Kentlings with half a mile between them. The upper bit is well kept and respectable. The chief trade is weaving. The middle bit is where the spinners are. Their houses are small and often the family does other things but there's no real poverty. The lower is basic cottages spread along the stream. That's where the dyers are. Scrag-end. Do I need to say more? We can guess Nat came from the bottom end. I'd really like to find out where Sam lives and Yorrel if he's local fit into the village."

"Let's hope Mister Trentchard's agent finds Sam before 'his friends'." said Brand.

After the leisurely meal they all felt sleepy. As at the beginning of her training she refused to be conquered by fatigue or pain so now, killer, legend and confident wanderer she reviewed the situation. "Flor is now my servant. But haven't you all been servants to me? I will keep watch while you sleep on this lovely afternoon. It is only a little I can repay. Is that alright Brand?"

"Yes mistress." He looked at the sun. "Until that oak's shadow touches the track."

## Harvest home

That afternoon Trowstead was busy as the last cart from the fields returned early with jubilant, tired and already tipsy workers singing songs to the time of clashing scythes. The succulent smell of sizzling roasting pig promised a celebration. At dusk a hundred lanterns were lit in the branches of the oaks on the green. There was music from pipes, drums, horns and even a viol played, much to Minda's surprise, by Smith Thredvald.

She was tired already and she couldn't join in the dancing. Flor wasn't yet an attentive servant, and had joined in the spirit of the feast, but when she commanded him to fetch something for her to sit on he brought a bench. "Will this do miss?"

"Thank you Flor. I can't dance with my foot so in future a seat is something to think about. I knew you were tired this afternoon so I looked after you. I need you to use your brains now to look after me. Enjoy tonight's beer but I think I'll be leaving here tomorrow before noon. Please be with me – I may be in a hurry to do two things in the time for one."

She found herself looking after the children as their mothers left them to join in with the frolic. She could be nice to children but mother-in-charge was something new. "Come here Sally. What have you got Peter? Don't do that Geoffrey." She'd seen it done many times so it couldn't be that hard to pat a choking toddler on the back. Yuk! Even with a child on each knee she got them to clap and stomp with the dance like little grinning owls changing from one foot to the other. What? No she wouldn't! "Sally take Geoffrey to do the necessary". In the dark behind she heard nine year-old boys arguing. How did she know the girls were watching! Without thinking she called. "You boys behind me come here." There was silence and they came into the lamp light. "There's no arguing tonight boys." "It was him miss." "No it was/"

"/Be quiet! Run off and ask Flor if you can have a rope for a tug of war." When they'd gone she called the clutch of girls from behind. "Lillia, Twooly and Swase. Go to Lewin and ask him how to dance."

"Please miss I know how to dance."

"Well Twooly, why aren't you dancing?"

"I got trodden on miss."

"Go back and tell the clumsy so-and-so not to tread on you. Being trodden on isn't the end of the world. If somebody does something silly then tell them."

"Please miss, why aren't you dancing?"

"Because Swase –" She realised she'd started off on the wrong defiant beat. A curious nine year-old shouldn't be spoken to like that. "A very good question Swase. I wish I could dance but I have a crippled foot. I lose my balance."

"But miss when you walk you don't lose your balance. I watch you and see you stride like an ox." Minda was conscious a trap door had opened beneath her and was silent. Guilty silence. "Miss. Would you like to dance?"

" – Yes I would Swase."

Swase turned and ran off leaving a confused Minda looking at the other two girls and a the two wide-eyed toddlers on her knees silently and intently staring at her like horrid baby owls waiting for their next meal. Oh no! How was she trapped in a nightmare of explaining and excuses by an innocent child? Eventually a long-submerged embarrassment surfaced and had to be faced. She knew the rule: Always face danger. If she could shoot she could dance but nobody was brave enough to ask her because she was so ugly.

Swase returned pulling a man behind. "My dad will show you how to dance miss."

Clearly 'my dad' had been making the most of this feast, but Minda knew when to take the field. "You girls mind the children." Lillia and Twooly were each handed a toddler. Then with a smug smile for their benefit "I'm going to learn how to dance." She took 'my dads' hand and headed towards the dancing. Little knives were spinning in the back of her mind looking for a target but just now they were being

fogged away by good-will and honest company. As was only to be expected, Minda wasn't an athletic dancer but as she was sober and the dances were slow and simple there were no complaints. Afterwards Minda wondered why nobody had been shocked to see her appear as a temporary partner.

## Meeting the Tax Officer

Next day started a lot later than the previous. Allowances were made for well-earned sore heads and the gleaning-bell wouldn't be rung until noon. Trowstead breathed a collective sigh of relief, remembered that it ought to face the world again, found a bucket of cold water to wash in, searched for some cold scraps to eat and staggered out to see what had to be cleared up.

Bit by bit Minda was acquiring responsibilities. She had resolved to visit Barrington to see how widow Rowsing was getting on with Smith Brawter – it was only ten miles away half a day there and back if she got a move-on. But first she knew there were two serious matters of business to be done with the Officer. She made a point of being dressed in her rough-road clothes to impress the Officer with her toughness, and being prominent when he arrived which was not difficult given that there were very few people that could care. Where was the best place to wait? On the outskirts of the village perhaps.

She heard them clanking a half mile away. The Officer and his seven guards with pikes and shining breastplates came into view and the convoy turned from bodies into men with faces and then faces that could be recognised. She stood alone in the middle of the road but too late she realised that two columns could pass either side of her. Some 'Good evening' was needed!

"Welcome to Trowstead Officer." The Officer's party naturally came to a halt to hear the full address. How stupid of them to sit there as dumb targets. "I'd like to welcome you to Trowstead. Please may I ask you to proceed quietly as last night was Harvest-home and there will be some painful heads. I wonder if the Officer would care to help a duke's daughter whilst the guard proceed." Instinctively the Officer knew the voice of command when he heard it. It spoke the unavoidable. So he dismounted.

Anyway here was an opportunity to talk to this girl of knives he'd heard about. As the guard continued into the village Minda took the Officer's arm. He was tall, spare and thin, clean-shaven, possibly fifty with a beaky nose and pale skin. His limbs seemed to be too long. "Would you like me to train your guards what to do in an ambush? They failed just now. The ones at the back sat there like sacks. A day ago that cost a sack-sitter his life."

"You were part of the party that captured the contraband?"

"No. I wasn't part of it I was the head of it. I stopped them like I stopped you just now. If that doesn't give you a chill down your back then it ought to. A few minutes later I smashed a dagger into a skull. Here it is." She pulled her knife out and tossed it in the sunlight to impress the Officer. "I've cleaned his brains off now of course. How much is my share?" The Officer was grateful for being delivered back to his own ground. "I get a quarter for capturing don't I?"

"Officially yes."

"Excellent. We are going to do this officially aren't we?"

"Of course lady..." Minda didn't offer her name. "Minda?"

"Yes that's me, now don't go believing all the tales you've heard about me they are fantasy. What is your name?"

"Howard Robert Edward Richard Levendale. Baron Levendale"

The names before 'Baron' were news to Minda who had made a point of knowing something about 'her guest'. She forced herself to memorise his full name. "So then Howard," shockingly abusing her rank as a duke's daughter "Mister Trentchard tells me you might have room for an apprentice. I can start at midnight if you like."

Although rather taken aback by being called by his first name, this precocious girl had ambushed him by her directness. "If I say no I think you'll appear on my doorstep anyway. Let's discuss this serious matter with Mister Trentchard – he usually has long sight and wise words."

Mister Trentchard came out to meet them as they entered the hall courtyard. He shook his head and smiled seeing Minda linking arms with the Officer.

"Mister Trentchard let me introduce Howard Robert Edward Richard Levendale, Baron Levendale, Tax Officer from Lostnock."

He laughed. "Welcome Bob. I see you've been captured. Better count your limbs as she can be a bit bloodthirsty."

"I'm alright Harry. Things are hotting up and your bantam here seems to be in the middle."

"Come in and we'll sort things out. You too Minda."

"One moment Harry. Can I set my clerk to itemise the goods?"

"Yes. My son Henry has made a proper ledger. I'll send him out and they can check it through together." Bob smiled inside at how the old fox was not going to be defrauded by any cunning clerk.

While men were being told their duties Minda slipped inside. "Quick Raysell. Give me a hand. Help me into my nice clothes. I'm going to change into a lady-like duke's daughter to impress the Officer... Should I have my hair up or down?"

"Borrow my gilt girdle Minda... Come on I'll tie it for you.... Now sit still while I powder your face..."

"Thank you Raysell you are a dear. I stood in the road and his little army stopped for me. Then I cheeked him called by calling him 'Howard' instead of 'Officer'. So I ought to make it up by being polite now. Will you help me with this glove, I don't want to tear the silk."

"Mother says you're a danger to men but don't know it. Well I think you know very well how to be dangerous in every way."

"I hope so. Fun isn't it!"

Minda intercepted the servant bringing warm cakes and a flagon to Mister Trentchard's study and taking them herself entered demurely. The men exchanged glances of surprise. Mister Trentchard's anger at Minda's late arrival soaked away as he knew very well you didn't argue with a woman who had dressed and powdered specially.

"Thank you Minda."

"That's a pretty girdle lady." said the Officer.

"It's not mine really. Raysell lent it to me. And she tied it up as well." Bob, being unused to Minda's way of directing the conversation, let a confused expression cover his face for a moment. Minda pounced gently. "You see I can't tie it myself with my bad hand."

He couldn't help asking. "Bad hand?"

"Oh sorry, Didn't you know." Minda began taking the padded glove off her bad hand.

"That's enough Minda!" Interrupted Mister Trentchard. She stopped immediately.

"Minda has a crippled hand, crippled leg and, as you can see for yourself, only one good eye. In all other respects she has accuracy, determination, courage and luck. She may not be able to dance but/"

"/I can! I danced last night Mister Trentchard. I didn't fall over once!"

"I stand corrected. She can dance and she can remember your name..."

Minda thought for a second. "Howard Robert Edward Richard Levendale."

"Oh and she can throw a knife so hard into a man's head it has to be levered out."

There was a little silence. Minda broke it. "Please Lord Levendale?"

"I tell you what. Call me 'Mister Bob' and we'll call it evens eh?"

"Alright Mister Bob. Please what is your background?" Bob's defences, such as they were, had long ago been demolished. "I was a knight bodyguard to your father the Duke in the War of Northern Invasions. My father and the Duke's father were killed together after being lured to battle in a bog. I was watching from high dry ground beside your father. Then we retreated and the war seemed to fizzle out. Your father counted me as one of his best friends, but I always liked figures and my family were really wool merchants so that was the end of my military career and the cause of me being the tax Officer – Someone the Duke and King could trust."

"Did my father tell you about me?"

"Yes – I recall he did. Once. That you were so ugly you should have been strangled...  
...That's not nice is it. And I'm sure he would be proud of you now."

Mister Trentchard called for their attention. "Before we talk about the Selenden smuggling operation and the seizure of the pack train let me ask openly and honestly Bob. Could you cope with Minda helping you out?"

"I have no idea how I'll keep her out of trouble Harry."

"I have been training Minda to look after herself. She now needs to see some of the rich-dressed merchants and what weapons they use. I can show her night ambushes but it is daylight robbery by respectable burghers and aldermen that you can show her."

"Yes Harry. I know your plan. It's a heavy responsibility but I'll take it. Besides which Minda is a charming young lady."

"I have never lived in a town before Mister Bob. I'm so excited. – Oh and I promise not to get you in trouble." The men laughed. Minda smiled. This was how conferences should be: Relaxed, positive, informed and a prelude to action.



They discussed the events of the ambush. Mister Trentchard confirmed it was entirely a matter of good fortune. He praised 'one of his servants' for finding out more about the origins of the people. It wasn't general knowledge that there was a lead man still alive, nor what had happened to the others. The lead man was secreted but available for questioning when they'd discussed what they wanted to ask and what to do with him. "I think I should make it clear that as far as all witnesses are concerned – if it should ever be made known that is – Minda only hastened the death of a man who was already dying slowly and painfully. She didn't deliver a fatal blow." Minda was a bit put out by this. It didn't seem to be a proper acknowledgement for the breathless risk of the night and extreme jolt of calculated death. "Minda acted very bravely and intelligently and obeyed orders when most men would have thought of an excuse not to. One day I hope she will use this experience to give orders to frightened or cocky men."

He outlined the follow-up intelligence operation. He had an agent investigating.

"I have never seen this agent." said Minda.

"That is the point. Not seen by you and more importantly not seen by others. Um – Perhaps it is time to tell you. Obviously you can't send a man to stand on the village green and cry 'criminals and outlaws come here and tell me your names and what crimes you are doing'. People like Bob need another way to get that information so they can make arrests and levy fines. In short you pay people who are good at listening to gossip, get petty criminals drunk in order to get the names of bigger criminals, and even join gangs. They tell you – for a fee of course – where and when to look and who and what to watch."

"Who are these listeners?"

"They are people like you who make friends easily and can go anywhere and find out information without arousing suspicion. They have good memories and can remember facts. Very much like you." Minda understood the implication and wondered how she might be unobtrusive. "I have three travelling tradesmen who know I pay for information and will do little jobs for me. For example there are more suspicions about Selenden. I checked the Reeve and his operation is small, occasional and local. It probably does more good than bad. On the other hand your lime merchant is a lot more secretive and has more strange visitors than you'd expect. I don't know if Bob has any more information?"

"Only a little. His wash and plaster are considered poor quality by tradesmen. He has three pack horses rather than a cart to carry his tubs. I sent some roadmenders – or rather men who were paid to do some mending and also some watching – to see if there was a routine. He seems to take his products to customers himself two tubs per pony. One roadmender claimed to get the smell of spirits as the string went by but that could be moonshine."

"Moonshine?"

"Imagination. So all-in-all we don't have any evidence." Silence followed this rather gloomy analysis.

Minda spoke up. "Can you not simply knock on his door and ask to see what he's got Mister Bob?"

"Legally I can, but I have to have a good reason, which has to stand in a court with a judge who benefits from smuggling and may be tempted by a parcel left at his back door the night before. I have to be sure of getting a result. Even if he says 'yes I'm a terrible smuggler, I do it all the time' to my face that's no good if I can't find anything."

Believe me they are very very good at hiding things." Eventually Mister Bob continued. "There is another thing. Who are his customers? Who is the supplier? It may be more useful to find those things out than rush in and arrest him with false tubs full of spirits or whatever else he is smuggling."

Minda had an idea. "Why not send another lime merchant in disguise. He would spot what wasn't right immediately."

"Because men in the same trade know each other straight away. I guess that the white of lime in deep in every wrinkle and how it smooths away finger lines would be obvious."

Mister Trentchard had been fascinated by Minda's interest and suggestions. "It's a problem that needs more thought. And Minda I don't want you to get involved without a direct order from Bob. I'm sure he will discuss developments with you but you will learn that these things sometimes take years. I mean years. During that time a single word at the wrong time in the wrong place can turn a carefully grown plan into cinders."

"I understand Mister Trentchard."

"And loyal servants may disappear unpleasantly."

After Minda was dismissed she returned to the girls' room to undress where Raysell was stitching. "Minda! Have you won his heart?"

"I've got what I wanted and a bit more. I'm going to live in Lostnock. A town! Mister Bob said what a pretty girdle and I said it was yours and how kind you were to lend it to me."

"It looks very pretty on you Minda. You may not be pretty but I love you. Shall I untie it for you?"

"Did you see me dance last night Raysell. I have never danced because I thought I couldn't but now I know I can."

"That's lovely. Why did you think you couldn't?"

"I just thought it I suppose." Inside Minda knew it was fear of being rejected for her ugliness. Her ready-made lameness excuse demolished by a child. How humiliating. Still, life is for learning whatever the lesson. "I could be rich Raysell. I might get a share of the reward. Henry thought the value of the goods was at least a thousand Marks. A quarter goes to us for capturing it, a quarter less expenses to the Officer and the rest to the King. My share could be over fifty Marks!"

"What did you do? What happened?"

"Henry, Brand, Flor and me were practising the things you have to practise when you're about in the dark –"

"– What things?"

"Silence, listening for tell-tale sounds, moving without casting a shadow or silhouette. Two of you going ahead then the other two leapfrog fashion. Testing shadows for lurking felons – that sort of thing."

"It sounds scary."

"Not really. The secret is you have to be more awake at night."

"And did you do any fighting?"

"No. When the string of horses came round the corner I called on them to stop and be searched and eventually we got the cooperation of the leader. The guard at the back

didn't cause any trouble. I stood about mostly. Brand was in charge. Henry and Flor took charge of the string while Brand asked Nat –"

"Who's Nat?"

"I shouldn't have told you that. Swear you won't tell a soul! He was the guard at the back. Henry got him to cooperate. Brand asked him a few questions and that was about it."

"What is like talking to ghostly men in the middle of the night Minda?"

"Oh – You get used to it." Ghosts! She realised that two ghosts would forever haunt that stretch of pre-dawn track. Gradually it occurred to her, that as far as her part in the ambush was concerned, she also was becoming invisible yet with a definite hint of being present and hurtful. She shivered at the thought. Imagine meeting your own ghost!

Minda took a quick lesson in owning a servant from mistress Marline. Reward with money and reward with praise. Be reasonable but expect occasional extra efforts in return. Every servant was different. Keep them occupied. Minda should start by giving Flor a routine and some trust. Now all she had to do was ask Mister Trentchard if she could have some money. The thought struck her that now she may need to pay for her lodgings and food. In the event it was decided that Mister Bob would pay her expenses as required. She left the matter of buying a girdle like Raysell's from her share until she'd settled down in Lostnock.

Minda had more important things to do than get involved with the details of the contraband. All she gathered was it was a lot, there would be a reward in due course but the reward would go to Mister Trentchard. There was something disappointing about not having gold coins in your purse but as Minda had never had more than a tiny allowance it wasn't a hardship. When she asked if she could visit the widow Rowsing at Barrington before going to Lostnock it was warmly approved by Mister Trentchard and Mister Bob. "Be seen in the daylight as much as possible Minda." said Mister Bob. "But don't mention any of these events. If anyone asks you lead them on and find out more about who they are. Only our enemies will know something has gone wrong with the convoy and we believe it was heading in that direction. As a rule smiths don't say much but they can get very angry if there is dishonesty. Keep your ear to the anvil." This last encouragement was meant well but Minda thought you'd go deaf on the first hammer blow.

## Happy Barrington trip

The general view was that the weather would slowly cool and they might have a little rain by tomorrow or tomorrow night. Minda commanded Flor to get the horses ready for a return journey to Barrington and they departed before anyone could change their minds about letting them go.

After a brief gallop along the lower road they slowed to a walk. It was lovely, lined with elms giving a gently scented shadow. The gleaners were stooped like flocks of birds in the fields.

"Isn't this lovely Flor?"

"Yes miss."

"We're going to live in a town Flor. How exciting."

"Yes miss."

"They say there are ships and churches and a whole street for a market."

"Yes miss."

"Flor, you don't have to agree with me all the time."

"Yes miss."

"Has somebody told you that you have to stick to 'no miss' or 'yes miss'?"

"Yes miss."

"Who?"

"Spiten miss."

"Spiten!"

"Yes miss."

"Well you've done better than me by getting Spiten to talk. But perhaps we'll do things differently."

"Yes miss."

"I see why Mister Trentchard prefers a silent Spiten – 'yes' and 'no' are not very helpful." Flor was silent. "Are they Flor?"

"No miss."

They continued through a relaxed countryside while Minda tried to solve this latest puzzle. "Mister Trentchard has assigned you to be my personal guard. Why did he do that do you think Flor?"

"I don't know miss."

"Suggest something."

"Er – Because he doesn't want anything to happen to you."

"What sorts of thing?"

"Bad things."

"What bad things."

"Robbed by bandits."

"Do you really think I'm going to let myself be robbed by some wandering thug?"

"No miss."

"So try again. If you don't know what you're supposed to be guarding me against how can you guard me."

"Enemies miss."

"If you call me 'miss' one more time you will be crow-food. – Is that clear Flor?"

"Yes Minda."

"That's better. 'Miss' is fine when we're on business in public. Then we'll either be formal or need to use nods and hand signals instead of our whistles. Today I may be invited to stay the night and much as I would love to enjoy their happiness I must leave to get back to Trowstead by nightfall. Then you can address me as miss. Is that clear?"

"Yes m—"

"When we're on the road or dealing with strange people at inns we need to use all our eyes and ears together. Mister Trentchard clearly thinks there is a real threat and neither of us know much about it so we will need to compare notes and share our plans. If you see danger then there's no point in you respectfully saying 'please miss but there's a man hidden behind that tree on the left do you have any order?' We can do that and be dead or do what we've been trained to do. Did Brand ever train you to ask what to do in an ambush?"

"No miss."

"No *what*?"

"Just no. Sorry."

"What's got into you Flor? You're good at all those crafty hunting and shooting things, you are strong and brave. If I ever get in a sword fight I'll need more luck than I'm entitled to if I'm going to survive but you will kill or stun with as few blows as possible. If there are enemies out there then they could pick us off one at a time. But if we fight together we may be a bit too much for them. Together is the word. Together means we have discussed the strategy and practised tactics. If you are being attacked down a dark lane should I rescue you or run away?"

"I don't know."

"Well we'll need to decide. I have been expecting you to tell me about the person following us since the mill."

"What man!"

"Did I say man? Could be a woman."

"Woman?"

"Flor! If I want an echo I will go to the well. What shall we do Flor if we're being followed?"

"I don't know miss."

"Yes you do! Use your brains. What has Brand told us?"

"Go a little bit faster slowly then a little bit faster."

"Shall we do that? You're the general."

"Yes miss."

"Right. Let's do that. Now while you're thinking what to do next I'll keep an eye out behind."

"Yes miss."

"If we ever make it to Barrington then I'll take a penny from your wages for every time you say 'yes', 'no' and 'miss'. Now who would dare to follow us in daylight?"

"I don't know."

"I'd like to find out. Suppose I stop and you hide. They won't win a fight and we'd be a lot wiser."

"Good thinking Minda."

"What about this cottage? Can you nip behind that wall and I'll innocently adjust my harness. The usual whistles."

They only had to wait a minute. Minda was apparently engrossed with harness adjustments when Raysell appeared. "It's alright Flor." followed by a high-low whistle. "Raysell!"

"Minda! Can I come with you."

"Er – Yes of course."

"You don't mind a silly girl being with you?"

"No Raysell. Um – have you told anyone at Trowstead where you are?"

"No. Sorry. I want to come and live in a town with you and go on adventures."

"Did you leave a note?"

"No. Sorry. Should I have?"

"Yes of course. Your mother will be wondering where you've got to."

"I'm not going back!"

"I'm not saying you should – Flor why aren't you watching the road?"

"Sorry miss."

"One penny! – It should be threepence for failing to guard."

"I'm going to Barrington and then returning to Trowstead tonight. Tomorrow I'll be going to Lostnock."

It was a blow to Raysell. "I'll be back in Trowstead tonight?"

"I'm afraid so. It's up to you. That's my plan and you are welcome to come with me."

"Can I?"

"Of course."

"Really?"

"Yes. This evening we should have a talk with your mother and Mister Trentchard they have always been good listeners and very sensible."

"And I'm running away from them . The people that love me." Raysell burst into tears.

"Now you have been silly not leaving a note or telling Delphia."

"Oh I told Delphia."

"Why didn't you say? What did you tell her?"

"That I was going to join you."

"Good. Now dry-up and let's get going." One low and two high whistles signalled 'let's go' to Flor and they mounted and continued with Flor behind and the girls together. "Is there anyone following us Flor? Be careful how you answer."

"Not as I can tell."

"If it's Brand he's probably following us from ahead."

"Why all this worry about being followed Minda?"

"My path in life seems to be to kill bad people. They don't like that so try to kill me first."

"What bad people?"

"Smugglers and bandits and outlaws miss Raysell"

"As Flor says – Hey! Well done Flor."

"And miss they lurk in the dark and if we are to catch them we must hunt silently."

"And in secret." Added Minda. "Nobody knows I was involved on the night of the ambush. From now on I am going to appear innocent in the daylight."

"But everybody assumes you were there. When that cart on Worten Hill overturned you rescued the trapped driver by brute strength. How many times have I heard of you catching a runaway horse? I don't even know where Worten Hill is and you've never said anything about it."

"I know where it is but it's just a legend."

"Miss – Minda you are a legend. Brand puts them about. His latest is that you made a tax collector eat his hat – actually eat it – for trying to take sixpence too much tax off an old weaver's widow."

All this was news to Minda. "I have never met a tax collector – or a weaver's widow."

"You try telling that to the people of Trowstead or Barrington Minda."

"They believe anything! So long as they don't think I fly on a broomstick and can cure warts. Raysell, I'm sorry but my world is one of secrets and absolute loyalty. As you and Flor have just told me it is also a world where things are not what they seem. This is the land of the fairies. Death in dark places. People trapped in cages without bars. Knowledge trapped in your head you must never tell anyone about. Not ever."

The three of them cantered on peacefully. Raysell confused and elated. Flor feeling more at ease and Minda trying to come to terms with her other faerie self. How odd that only this morning she'd been wondering about meeting her own ghost and now she and her legend would be competing. The difficulties kept multiplying with every attempt to deal with them. The more she denied something the more people would disbelieve her denials!

Just before they reached Barrington Minda and Flor stopped from habit in the hedgerow's shadow to take a survey. Flor observed: "The harvest here is late. Look there's still half a field."

"This will be a happy village tonight. You can stay if you wish Flor. Raysell and I—"

"—Not unless you are miss. If we stayed when would we get back to Trowstead?"

"You come to me with a thumb sideways at decision time Flor. I may be in the middle of business but you are right to interrupt. Raysell you can come back with myself and Flor or I will see you stay safely. But we are tough birds of the night and the moon is late and nearly half so you if you are drunk you will be left."

"I want to be like you Minda." said Raysell.

"Right. You know the rules. We don't break rules except for life and death and even then not much."

"I'll do my best."

"Good girl. Is that alright with you Flor?"

"Yes Minda."

"Lets go. I have to talk to the smith's widow and I'll find an excuse to talk to the Lord. Flor will you explain to Raysell about secrecy and how anyone asking about the ambush is an enemy. In short Raysell – if the subject of me and recent events comes up go to Flor and do not say a word. Remember not a single word."

"A single word could bring a dagger in the dark miss Raysell." added Flor.

"What! Someone would kill me for a single word."

There was a funny silence. Minda spoke for herself and Flor. "Every man carries a knife. Some may think they could use it on us for profit. Stick like glue to Flor. This is a safe village but we've just upset some very rich people who might be more than angry."

"What? For killing their men?"

"No silly. Dead men earn no pay. The contraband on those horses – Remember you haven't seen anything or heard anything or heard any rumours. Not a tiny bit."

"Stick close with me miss Raysell. Minda can look after herself. I think we'll leave before the feast but just follow me anyway."

"Well said Flor. The plan is to leave about two and a half hours before dusk unless we change the plan."

With this they arrived at a deserted village green. Even the urchins were with their mothers out in the fields. Barrington Hall was a quarter of a mile from the village and it wasn't too difficult to make out preparations for Harvest Home outside the two huge barns. "Raysell, you go and introduce yourself at the hall. Lord Risket is crotchety but the ladies are very friendly. If you meet him say I'm looking forward to seeing him later. Flor your job is to look after the horses. We have about two hours. Which way should we go back Flor?"

"Don't know miss."

"Decide before we start. Take my horse, I'll walk and only be here or the hall."

Despite the deserted appearance of the village her arrival hadn't gone unnoticed.

"Hello Minda. Welcome to Barrington." Widow Rowsing came out of the forge cottage.

"Hello Widow Rowsing."

"Not a widow for much longer dear."

"So who is it to be Katey?"

"Why Smith Brawter of course. We're married tomorrow."

"I'm so pleased. That's why I came. I know Dunstin will be pleased as well. I will tell him."

She was caught unawares by a voice from out of the smithy's gloom. "Minda!" The eye-patched Dunstin emerged from the gloom but she was already racing towards his open arms. For a moment she was a small girl who had woken from a nightmare. The temptation to enjoy that state of innocent warm love couldn't be resisted. Killing and servants and responsibilities and witchery could be forgotten. A hug of a hundred years calmed her unknown fears. The steadiness of a hundred strong arms quelled her night where strange things flew. The calm of a silent smile reheated her inner star-iron. There was nothing to say... When she emerged from this moment of enchantment Smith Brawter and widow Rowsing were holding hands while May had an arm around Dunstin with a smile to carry through the darkest night. Just for a moment she was drained, emptied, shining, freshly cleaned. 'Light headed' was no longer a phrase – she actually felt she could float in the air... Like a fairy... Like a



spirit ghost... like a being from another world. She tried to say something but no words came.

Like feather-down May said "Our lucky charm".

Like thistledown widow Rowsing said "Blown to bless us on the breeze."

Like creaky hinges Brawter said "I'll be blown".

Like coals settling in a cooling hearth Dunstin said "The best blade is the one with the sharp edge, the springy inside and shines so bright it never has to cut."

There was so much temptation to stay with the happy smiths and enjoy the village's feast and dance but when Flor found her she made up her mind that taking Raysell home was the best thing. Every day seemed longer than the last.

"Run and get the horses we're going Flor."

"Yes miss."

"I have my own servant now Dunstin. He's supposed to stop me getting into trouble."

"You've got you hands full there boy!" said Dunstin.

"Yes sir I know."

"Well look after her won't you. She's very dear to us."

Flor ran off to collect Raysell and the horses from the hall.

"Any messages for the smith of Lostnock?"

Dunstin replied "There are two brothers there called Jiller. Another is Watts. The older Jiller is mute. The Jiller's don't speak to each other." He realised what a silly thing he'd said. "Oh! If the older Jiller could speak to his brother he wouldn't."

A serious Flor and a happy Raysell with her blond hair now flowing loose trotted over to the smithy. By now word had got around the urchins that their fighting princess had returned and were waiting hopefully at a respectful distance.

"Come here. Who wants a ride." They all ran up shouting. "Flor, you can have these two. Don't drop them." She handed them up to sit ahead of him. "Raysell have this little girl - What's your name little one?"

"Jane."

"Right up you go Jane." They'd remembered the one hand over the eye and the other waving a sword action. "Round the pond and back." Minda kissed and hugged the smiths, mounted, and the rides were repeated until everyone had had a go. When there was no way to stretch the moment further Minda took out her shiny knife, waved it in the air and addressed the surrounding children: "Is anybody afraid of lions that worry the sheep?" There was a chorus of muttered 'No's and shaking heads. She tossed the knife spinning in the air, caught it and sheathed it in one smooth motion. "Until next time my hearty babes!" A high-low-low whistle and Flor smartly lead away.

At the edge of the green Minda halted for a moment. Without looking back she unsheathed her knife and held it up at full stretch as she hoped silhouetting the sun for the smiths. "What's the plan Flor?"

"Back the way we came is the quickest miss."

"That's a one penny fine for the 'miss'. Good plan. Alright you can have your penny back. You did well this afternoon. You even smiled with the children. See! You can smile if you want to."

"Will you ladies ride in front?"

Raysell said "Does it matter?"

Minda and Flor replied together "Yes."

Flor explained: "I ride behind because that's the danger point of a party on horseback. I can see ahead and if any serious ambush is planned you always attack horsemen from the rear because they might take ten seconds to turn around and find out what's happening."

Minda interrupted "You can die twice in ten seconds."

Flor continued: "If you attack from the front they can charge you and of course see you and shoot you."

Raysell looked around nervously. "Are we going to be attacked?"

The silence was broken by Minda "What do you think Flor?"

"No miss. Hmm." He made a point of looking about nervously "Still too much light yet I think."

After a long breath Minda relented. "It's alright Raysell, Flor is trying to scare you. You wicked man! Well done Flor. That's a penny I owe you I think. Fear is a good teacher."

"So we're not going to get ambushed?"

"Yes we are miss Raysell... ..but we don't know when. One starry night a hundred miles away we might be riding hard to bring important news before dawn but someone has betrayed us and just as we reach the ford we meet arrows and swords."

"It makes me shiver" said Raysell.

"So it should. I am the bird of prey that small birds mob. You've seen a bird being flustered?"

"Yes. An owl or Goshawk"

"I am the owl preying on smugglers. They will try to mob me."

"And if I may add miss Raysell, this may be on the road or in the chamber. It may be by force or cunning."

"That reminds me Flor. You're going to learn to read and write."

"Yes miss."

"Don't 'yes miss' me in that tone! I'll teach you like you and Brand taught me fighting and defence."

"How was your afternoon Raysell?"

"I played shuttlecock. Richard showed me how." Minda recalled Richard was eldest of four children. He would be a good match for Raysell perhaps. "He's training to be a lawyer."

"Oh well you can't have everything Raysell."

"I'm sure Richard isn't like that. He recited a lovely poem about a rose to me."

"Did you pass my respects to Lord Rasket?"

"Yes Minda. He said the wild stories of you were a ray of sunshine in his dull life. He chuckled at the idea of Lions worrying sheep. That's the same thing you said to the children!"

Minda laughed. "Actually I made Flor dress up in an old sack and make a roaring sound then chased him off to impress the peasants." Flor joined in the joke with a low modulated growl.

"So it's all a sham! That's cruel Minda."

"What is? I'm not cruel to Flor – he makes a very good lion. And I let him keep half the sheep. You should have heard him crunching the bones."

"Grrr!"

"No. It's a cruel joke to play on simple peasants."

"Promise me you won't tell anyone Raysell. Flor is a master of disguise."

"Grrr!"

"Oh all right I promise."

Minda and Flor exchanged smiles.

After a while Raysell said "I could teach Flor to read and write."

To Minda this was like the cracking of a branch before it fell. You couldn't stop it falling you just had to get out of the way. Caught unawares she dredged up her first answer to Raysell's 'does it matter?' to change the subject. "The real reason for 'does it matter that we follow Flor's suggestion' is that I trust him to look after us. If he wants us riding in front then he knows his business and we should obey. If he has to keep chivvying us he can't be looking out for people following us or tell-tale signs or listening out for that fast rider approaching from Trowstead."

"It could be Brand miss."

Minda had done enough of being nice today. A low-high whistle and Raysell was alone in the road with two empty horses. Raysell sat still awaiting whatever was coming. By the time she thought of following Minda and Flor it was too late. It was Brand. He rolled off his horse into the hedge as he pulled it up. Raysell looked around at three empty horses and an otherwise empty road. A whistle – it sounded like a signal – caused everyone to appear from the verge. Minda emerged fighting an imaginary assailant with her sword. Flor jumped out and pointed an empty bow at space and shouted "Twang! Twang" Twang!" Brand climbed out from behind a tree and put his hands on his hips crying "Ow! Ow! Ow! That's my big toe! That's my ear! You have stabbed me in my purse!" Raysell was stunned. Clowning! So this was what they did. Playing at soldiers!

Flor kept watch while Minda and Brand knotted loose ends.

"Were you after Raysell Brand?"

"Yes. Delphia said she'd decided to run away with you."

"Raysell is safe. We're on our way back as you can see."

"Come on then children. The sooner we get back the smaller the storm."

Minda gave the high-low-low and they mounted and trotted briskly for the half-hour stint to Trowstead under a red and gold sky. Minda and Raysell took the lead together.

"Don't worry Raysell. You'll get told off but it won't be the end of the world. People don't like to lose their jewels."

"I'm not sure about anything. You might throw your sword in the air but you just stood around when you caught the smugglers."

Minda had forgotten her modest denial of involvement earlier. "It was me who stopped the string that allowed the others to decide what to do and do it. Then later I split a man's skull apart with my knife."

"This morning you said you stood around. I don't know when you are telling me tales Minda. All this nonsense of being attacked as we ride home is fairy fantasy. Now I can see you're all playing games. Scaring yourselves by going out at night and inventing enemies."

Silence.

"Haven't you got anything better to do?"

Silence.

Eventually Brand spoke. "Who looks after you when you're asleep Raysell?"

"You are all serious aren't you?"

Minda replied softly. "Very" She drew out her knife. "Look at this Raysell. This isn't a toy. Go on hold it." She carefully offered it hilt first to Raysell. "Are you minding that road behind Flor!" Raysell took the sword. It felt smooth like a greyhound. "That's forged and tempered steel. Just a lump of metal to you but it was death to a man two nights ago." Minda had difficulty connecting herself to that scene on the track all that time ago. Was it really her? Did it really happen? Was the rose pre-dawn light the same rose sunset light now? After another silence Minda had to continue. "I was sick later when I wiped his brains off. Is that playing soldiers Raysell?"

"No Minda. It feels like it wants to jump out of my hand. It's so smooth."

The idea of a knife with it's own life was strange to Minda. She was confused. What were her strengths? Flor and Brand of course. "Flor! Could you take my knife from Raysell and see if it wants to jump out of your hand."

With their old fluency of working as a team Flor silently rode up and took the knife from Raysell. He felt it in his hand. "It's like Raysell says. This is a living knife."

"No it isn't! I made it myself. It's just a knife!"

"But miss, you asked me and I have answered truthfully. It is an eel of silver in the moonlight and a circling crow in the daylight."

"Really! So you're a poet now Flor."

"Minda! Don't you dare abuse your servant." Brand's rebuke caught Minda square. She recovered slowly.

"Sorry Flor. Your descriptions shocked me as fanciful. I owe you a penny fine and a sweet-cake."

"Well said Minda. Flor, could I hold Minda's knife?" Flor passed the knife across to Brand. Minda was getting irritated by this charade about her knife. Everyone knew it was the skill of the thrower that mattered not silveriness of the knife. Brand gave his opinion. "Ah yes. So balanced and the silky hilt is a hand waiting for a glove."

It was perhaps just as well that by now they had arrived at Trowstead. Except for Flor their nerves were a little ragged. None of the party were sure of anything anymore. Whether it was the life in Minda's knife or the seriousness of the soldiering or had Raysell vanished of her own accord or would he really get a sweet-cake and if so what for? As the shadows from the setting sun merged into dusk so the certainties they started the day with became blurred. There wasn't a thread of fear amongst them. There was no animosity, just confusion. Raysell had found the world was a lot more complicated than she had imagined. The others grew closer under pressure of the vague unknown. Raysell's day-dream had turned out to be a real dream full of oddities which couldn't be made to keep still long enough to be touched and tested. She was a bit shamefaced and a bit relieved to be returning. Nobody was mean enough to point out to Raysell that a bit more planning, say for a bit of rain and money to lodge at an inn would have been useful. Annoyance at having to search for her was carefully hidden. Explaining the lion joke to her really would have been cruelty so nothing was said.

Minda was quickly realising that Raysell would be a hindrance. Until now she hadn't taken time to think of the implications. Suddenly her priority was to keep Raysell at Trowstead at all costs. Before Flor and Brand could hurry away to stable the horses leaving Minda and Raysell to face whatever awaited them Minda commanded Flor "Please go to the smith and tell him that Smith Brawter and Widow Rowsing are welded tomorrow at Trowstead and Dunstin is there."

"Yes Minda."

She hung back as mistress Marline met Raysell with her little bundle, then she merged into the shadows round the back. She didn't want to have anything to do with an emotional home-coming after a pleasant afternoon. The quiet of the wash house and cool of the smooth well water on her dusty skin brought her the first peace for what seemed like a week. Was it only two nights ago they were on that track? And she could dance! And when she danced nobody was revolted by having an ugly cripple to dance with. Raysell and Delphia danced prettily and no doubt tempted the boys. Richard Risket at Barrington! Of course that was the answer!

Delphia had learned that Minda would hide in the wash house to be with her own thoughts but took care not to intrude. Eventually she entered. "Can I get you anything to eat or drink Minda?"

"Thank you for asking Delphia but I will come inside now. You did well to tell where Raysell went. We had a lovely afternoon at Barrington. You would have enjoyed it too. But I don't think Raysell is suited to travelling with me. She played shuttlecock with Richard Risket he's the oldest son of Lord Risket and he seems to have fallen in love with her. He could be very rich one day."

"Oh how exciting."

"I have never met him myself so I shouldn't say anything but between ourselves I think it would be a good match."

"How exciting. Did he read poetry to her."

"Yes. I don't have any details I wasn't there at the time. You'll have to ask her yourself."

"I will."

"Could you do me a favour tomorrow Delphia?"

"Yes Minda."

"I won't be taking Raysell with me tomorrow. When I've gone will you tell her from me that we were fooling her about the Flor as a lion. We made it up to make her look stupid."

Delphia was confused at the strangeness of the request and why someone should want to make Raysell look stupid. Minda explained in whispers all about the lion worrying sheep all the way from the child's imagination to Flor crunching bones. "But that will upset her."

"I know. Why would I do that?"

"I don't know."

"Come on think! She isn't suited to following me so if she hates my mean and cruel ways perhaps she'll stay here waiting for Richard."

"But what if Richard doesn't come?"

"Leave that to me. I'll find a way. Now I'd better go and make my peace with your mother."

"Are you really going to leave us tomorrow?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Can I come with you? – You're so savoury inside and so sweet outside and everyone here is so evenly pleasant there's no excitement. It's like having nothing but best bread to live on."

"Er – " This was unexpected. Actually Delphia was useful as a clerk. She would often write Minda's journal to her dictation. "Sorry Delphia I had to think there for a minute."

"That's all right Minda I like it when you stop and think. I wish I could do that but while you're thinking my mind just goes white."

"I was thinking that now is not the right time but I may need a clerk in the future. It might be a year but did you see today the Officer had a clerk. If I do officering then I'll need one and ..." Minda drifted into thinking about what information would need collecting. Delphia was always thrilled to see a thought-egg, as she called it, forming and an idea hatching. "...A clerk of secrets who can patiently collect stitches to sew a complete picture and can ask tired people what they've seen to get a useful answer. I have to learn myself but you will be my first choice for a clerk. And if it is convenient I will invite you to Lostnock town when I am settled in. Tomorrow is the start of a new life for me. This one has been wonderful." Minda felt the start of tears as all the love, attention and understanding she'd had at Trowstead flushed out her practical thoughts for the future.

## Leaving Trowstead

Mister Trentchard, Henry, Raysell and Delphia accompanied Minda and Flor as they started their journey. Many villagers waved to Minda as they left. Minda was embarrassed. Flor was proud now he could show everyone he had responsibility. Thredvald smiled and winked encouragingly. His holding a hammer at hip height with shaft pointing forwards was lost on her.

Brand and Lewin found themselves at a loose end with happy faces and watery eyes to watch their little princess ride out and face the future. "Come on Lewin. It seems the Officer overlooked a couple of bottles. How careless!"

"Of him or you? You rascal Brand."

"I learned a lesson from naughty Minda. Extortion can be fun! I made it clear to the clerk that as I'd protected the whole against pilfering that would cost nobody two bottles to me and one or two to him and the Officer. Anyone can go around filching things when there's no moon but honesty in thieving requires poise."

"And how many other bottles did you pinch?"

"None. Honestly. And later the clerk and I had just settled-down in a private place when I was called to find Raysell. Blast her."

"Well soldier – Let's retire to my hutch and enjoy the spoils of war." The cork was pulled. The strange bottle contained some red fruity fortified wine. Brand had the foresight to bring drinking cups so there was nothing to do but to stretch out in the oily aromatic half-light of Lewin's workshop and start the toasts. "Here's to the girl of iron and steel" toasted Lewin.

"Here's to the eel of silver in the hand of the girl of gold" toasted Brand.

"Eel of silver?"

"That's what Flor called her knife. 'Eel of silver in the moonlight and circling crow in the sunlight.'"

"That's a funny thing to say. Very good. I'm getting slow. It makes me shiver."

"It makes me shiver. I was standing right behind her when she reached back with it in her hand about to murder an innocent smuggler. There was so much life in that blade it was a struggle to hold her wrist back."

"So much 'life' in a knife that was going to kill? Don't you mean so much death in the blade?"

"No. I was there. It was inches from my eyes in the scratchy moonlight. That knife knew how to fly by itself."

"Is this witchcraft?"

"Never!" Brand didn't know anything particular about witchcraft but he knew Minda's magic was a non-witchcrafty sort. "She has luck and charm and strength – and vision but that's just her talent."

"We both know she's something special. Here's a toast to a special star."

"To a very special star with you Lewin. Long may she shine."

"I know something of witchcraft Brand. It isn't nice."

"How do you mean?"

"I have skill and knowledge to cure horses so some people think I have the skill and knowledge to make their horse go sick or their grandmother die or make their cow go dry. They are afraid and would rather everyone was as ignorant as themselves. They would rather blame innocent people than have some cures in a world of many ills. There's people that think I've bewitched Minda. You know the rumours – anything is possible."

"Er – I admit have been starting those rumours Lewin. For a very good reason. A toast to the lady who kills the lions that worry sheep."

"Lions that worry sheep! There are no Lions round here."

"Exactly. So Minda must be keeping them away!"

"All right Brand you win. 'To the lady who kills lions' You don't believe/"

"/No of course not but if you ask people if lions exist they will say yes even though they have never seen one or heard about one in the neighbourhood. Ask them to describe a lion and you will probably get a yellow sheep with a ruff. It's all fantasy."

"Are people that easily fooled Brand?"

"They want to be fooled. They can't wait to be first with the news to impress the others."

"Yes. The further a rumour goes the more it throws shoots and the more 'it must be true'.

"Now here is a funny thing: The more unbelievable the story the more people insist it is true."

"Lewin, your horse-cure secrets are valuable to you and coveted by a hundred people. If you walked round the country you could sell potions for foot-rot, brain-rot and knee-rot."

"Heh heh Brand. I'll give you a toast to show what little you know. Fill your cup...  
...Now here is a toast to droop. Prick and tit – may it continue."

"What! Prick-droop? Continue."

"Makes me a penny or two. Shows what you know. It's always the women who ask if I know anyone who might know someone as they have a friend who has a friend who has a certain problem. Now just as it happens I will have a tincture left to me by a passing doctor who never came back to collect it but warned me against ever using more than three drops in a week. There is a small fee of course but it's only pennies unless they can afford more."

"All right Lewin. To prick-droop may it continue."

"I wish I could cure brain-rot."

"What – You mean stupidity? Can't see the sheep for the wool?"

"Yes that mostly. But I'm too old to go round with cures. I want people to see how to do it then try it themselves. If they keep relying on magic it will get lost."

"Have you got an apprentice?"

"No he died last year of a fit."

"But you can cure fits in horses Lewin."

"No I can't. I can calm a shook-up horse but a fit is death or death's friend telling you he will be along in person himself another time."

"Lewin, you are beginning to depress me. This is our personal Harvest-home and we are talking about disease and death."

"It's a sad moment as well as happy".

Brand was silent. Lewin was right.

"What about the rest of your flock Brand? They seem steady."

"Henry loves watching the world but hates getting involved. He can measure a man in all ways and he can tell at a glance who belongs where. But when things are out



of place – like a beggar claiming to be blind or a priest claiming to be from a certain village he won't argue and force the point."

"Like a mouse. Investigates dark corners behind walls but runs away."

"This wine is doing you good Lewin. 'Mouse' is a good description. He's a strong lad and works at his fighting skills but I'm pleased we have the lioness."

"Forgive my ignorance Brand, but what is the point of teaching Minda soldiering?"

"Mister Trentchard believes hard times breed human rats and we have to be prepared for occasional plagues of them. The smugglers we caught were tiny ones but they only have to gnaw a few threads and the whole cloth starts to come apart. If each man keeps them down then they will only be a nuisance, but if they breed in one place they will spread and keep spreading. War, famine, corruption are always just over the horizon."

"Shouldn't the two smugglers you killed on the path have been tried in court?"

"One was killed by the other. I shot the murderer, Minda followed my lead. Justice was done. If we went to court he would deny it and say we were the murderers."

"What about empty-head Flor? Has he still got boy's brains? "

"Truthfully Lewin he is an excellent hearty soldier. He will help if asked but won't think for himself."

"Is Minda safe with him?"

"Ha ha. You joke! Is he safe with her! I know he will be loyal and I suspect Minda knows his weaknesses and won't let him slack. If anyone can teach him to be a man it will be Minda. A week with her should give him a sackful of responsibilities to think about."

"Well she has the necessary patience and persistence."

"Goodness! It's like marriage." They laughed as Brand emptied the bottle into their cups. "Yes. That's a woman's way alright. 'Come here husband! If I have to stand tapping my foot for more than a moment I shall be so patient, so very patient, that nettles will be like balm."

Lewin proposed a toast : "Fine wine for fine toasts. Here's a toast. Erm – May Minda continue to be patient in a hurry."

"Hurrah!"

"Hurrah!"

There was no doubt the fine weather was gently turning sour. High mare's tails told of rain to come, perhaps at the end of tonight. The farewell convoy made its way along the high road in a cloud of dust from the horse's hooves. There were many mixed thoughts cutting across a pleasant family outing. Although Flor tried to play the role of guard at the rear he was not able to stay as a humble and inconspicuous servant. Mister Trentchard jested with him about pretending to dress up as a lion and promised to send a supply of fresh sheep's heads. He'd known Flor since he was a ragged child playing on the green with Henry and today Mister Trentchard allowed himself to be a father rather than a master. "I'm proud to see a boy like you grow up to be such a fine fighter and honest servant. You leave our village as still a boy but I look forward to welcoming you back as a man."

"Thank you Mister Trentchard. You have been very good to me and I promise to look after Minda with my life."

"And will she do the same for you?"

"She says it is something we have to discuss master."

Mister Trentchard laughed loud and chuckled long. Flor was a bit bemused but smiled and felt Mister Trentchard's good humour must be a good thing. Then Mister Trentchard whispered to him. "If Minda dies and you return then... then I will understand you did your best."

"She also said I had to know who we were fighting and I don't."

"Neither do any of us. That's why you and her are going to spend time in Lostnock finding out how to find out." Flor frowned in confusion. "It's all right young Flor. Minda knows how to stir a pot. I'm sure you'll find out soon."

"She does Mister Trentchard! When she's about things happen."

"I wouldn't be sending you to look after her if I thought the wind was always going to be fair. There will be squalls and storms and you and Minda have to be alone together. Good luck."

Henry wanted someone to help survey the road all the way to Lostnock but Flor now had his job as guard. Minda wasn't interested either, but used the 'what are my strengths' method to realise that Henry was the ideal person to do the job himself and that would mean he would come to see her. Poor Henry. He had no purpose in life other than to find out facts. Where you could ford the river normally, what the trade was to and from a district. Why there were foreign people settled in an area. How many sheep should be folded on a particular lord's lands. Henry had an affinity with millers like she had with smiths but his interest was in the details of the gears not the millers and their families.

Raysell trotted beside Minda. Minda already knew that Raysell had another dream to follow than Her. "I'm sorry for throwing myself onto you yesterday Minda."

"Why? We had fun. No harm was done. Life is for living!"

Raysell was set back by this. "But I came uninvited."

"Look at me Raysell. Am I upset? No It was lovely – And I only wish I had time to visit the hall as well. I would have liked to meet err – "

"Richard." Raysell paused "I think I want to marry him."

"You've only met him for an hour."

"He showed me how to hold my racquet for shuttlecock and recited a love poem in a bower."

"What's a bower?"

"A hidden part of the garden hedged-off by sweet smelling roses where lovers meet."

"I'm sorry you won't be coming with me and Flor. We had a good time yesterday and why not many more. Ho hum. But I understand. We are crows in the day looking for carrion to pick the eyes out of and owls at night sharpening our talons. You are more of a turtle dove." Raysell wasn't sure how to take this but it sounded friendly. "When I'm settled in Lostnock – If I ever get settled – Then when I know what is interesting to see and where to avoid you can come and visit me."

"Yes please Minda. I promise not to be any trouble."

"Can I ask you a favour Raysell?"

"Yes Minda of course."

"I think it would be best if you never mentioned Flor disguised as a lion."

"Why?"

"Because – Well because if you did nobody would believe you."

"But that's their fault if they don't believe it."

"Just promise me you won't repeat it ever again."

"Oh alright I promise. I expect you have your reasons. Mister Trentchard told me there were some things that I shouldn't enquire about too deeply."

Delphia and Mister Trentchard rode side by side for a while. Mister Trentchard mentally compared her with Minda. She had grown up – children did when you were away for weeks at a time – in an odd way. She was the quiet shadow of Minda. She was smaller and demure but had an inner heartwood developing. How interesting that Minda's strength of purpose had rubbed-off onto Delphia but not Raysell. Mister Trentchard guessed Delphia must know a lot about Minda but his gentle probing gave no clues. If only he could be intimate with Marline. Delphia was polite but stopped at the line that separates men and women before telling Mister Trentchard what he really wanted to know.

They arrived at Sokenbridge. This was the parting of hugs, kisses and handshakes. Delphia almost missed the moment. "Stop!" She managed to extract carefully packed cakes from her saddlebag. "Mother sends these with her love. She said to tell you 'all her love'." On the way back while Henry and Raysell were ahead Delphia whispered to Mister Trentchard "Mother made those cakes herself Mister Trentchard. She put a spell on Minda's 'for a family' and she put a spell on yours. She said you were a cat's cradle that should unknot."

## 6 Lostnock

Lostnock appeared unexpectedly as the road crested the brow of a hill. They automatically stopped to survey it but this was a very different sight to the one of Barrington they viewed only yesterday.

"I've never seen a proper town before."

"Me neither Flor. Its – big! With a castle on top."

"Look! Two... Three! churches."

"Acres of orchards and gardens. How many houses to you reckon?"

"More than a hundred."

They covered the last two miles with a bit of trepidation. Flor thought they must get lost in the maze. They had badly underestimated the number of houses as they were narrow and wedged together. As they climbed towards the castle there were shops with all sorts of goods. Brooms, rush mats, shoes, horse harness, candles, baskets, soap, vegetables. With butchers and bakers it was like market day every day here! The varied smells and sounds of commerce were everywhere. Carts were being loaded and unloaded or crawling through the confused streets made more confused by being clogged by driven animals, stalls, arguments, traders shouting their wares and children playing games. It smelled of all the disgusting things they could think of combined and some new ones as well.

"How do we find the Officer's house Minda?"

"Ask."

"Right you are." Flor's worry came alive.

"Little Wyre. Where's that please?"

"Past St Giles church peasant."

"Peasant!"

"Cheer up Flor. Wait until we get these townies into a wood. A few wolf howls might be fun also."

This did indeed cheer up Flor and he grinned at Minda. Unfortunately as they came into the main market area it appeared there was a church at either end. "Pardon me sir." he addressed what he took to be the best dressed man around. "I am but a poor peasant driven here with the snow-wolves snapping at my heels. Can you tell me which is Saint Giles church?"

The man pointed. "Over there." Then continued without a further word.

Minda laughed. "Lions are eating all the villagers in the North shire. Lucky we found the 'magic lion stone' that protected us. Come on Flor before we get into trouble." But already the close anonymity of towns had allowed two people to overhear her.

## Unconventional entrance

When, after further interrogations they arrived at Little Wyre street their troubles were not yet over. There were twenty houses, any one of which could be the Officer's. "You make sure there are no lions about, I don't want to be ripped limb from limb like the rest of my poor family. I'll ask at this house." This private jest was heard through four open windows. Minda wasn't used to houses overhanging the street. She soon had the necessary information and was able to knock on Mister Bob's door. His house was three stories high! The door was opened by a house servant boy dressed in some livery.

"Hello. I am Minda come to see Mister Bob."

"Mister Bob?"

"Does Lord Levendale live here?"

"Yes."

"Well I have come to see him."

"He is at the Office."

"Well run and tell him I am here."

The door was shut in her face! What were her strengths? Flor. Her patience. Not losing her temper. There were three smiths she could rely on. Looking for alternatives. Impressing people with her boldness. The house was easy to enter by other means. "Flor. There must be a back courtyard. I'd like you to take the horses round and make it clear you are staying until given a direct order by me. If I stood on your shoulders I could reach that window. When I'm invited I intend to stay and may heaven help that runt." Flor looked around, gave the high-low-low whistle, reached down, pulled her so she was standing on the saddle. She stabbed a beam with her knife to give her a steadying hand-hold then was on his shoulders and suddenly Flor was alone. A high-low came from above and he innocently trotted on.

Much of this had been seen and more heard by neighbours. Flor and Minda would never have believed how many unseen eyes and ears there were. The spectators and eaves-droppers were thrilled: A young girl climbing in through a first floor window seemed more like scandal than something to call the watch for. Flor's training never to be a static target paid off and he was round the corner smartly before any questions could be asked.

Climbing in between the bars of the window was easy enough. She was in a corridor. A low-high to Flor and it was only a matter of making herself frightening then finding where the servants were cowering to upset the household to her will. She marched with a deliberate step along the corridor. Behind her a woman's voice called.

"Are you Minda?"

Already turned round with hand on knife hilt Minda relaxed when she saw it was a high status lady. "Yes - I am. The door was closed in my face and I have come too far to be insulted."

"I know. I gave the order. Get out!"

This caught Minda completely off-guard. What were her strengths? Ugliness. Honest mission. Twisted opponent. Strength. "Madam. When you look in the mirror do you see an one-eyed animal face? No. But I do. – Now what I see in your face is 'mistress sour' and empty space overgrown with twisted thorns. And then you wonder your husband spends so long away from home. Pretty but poisoned." The lady was shocked and so was Minda. How had she murdered somebody with words so easily? "I'm sorry to be so blunt lady but you know what I'm talking about. Your husband is safe from me. I have a job to do."

"I still won't have you in this house no matter how repulsive you are."

"I do not wish to share your bed of flints but I and my servant have had a long journey and require refreshment and a bed for tonight." The lady was silent. "Which one of us will arrange that?"

"Get out of my house!"

"That'll be me then. SERVANT! You at the top of the stairs! Get your arse here!"

"Stay there Pike!"

Minda turned and stomped to the end of the corridor by the stairs. The liveried house servant who had opened the door was in a quivering kneeling position at the top of the staircase. With one hand she lifted the boy bodily by the collar of his jacket. Unfortunately he was frozen with fear. "Pike! Put your feet on the floor!" His legs fell in a confused flutter. "Fetch your master." There was no response. "Do you understand? Fetch your master."

"Yes miss."

She let him go. He stood there in a dream. Gently she turned him round, bent over and hissed in his ear. "Fetch your master now he is at the Office." She could light a fire without a flint, she could make steel from iron but she couldn't get this tiny servant to wake up. She drew her knife in her practised menacing fashion. . "NOW!" He tumbled down the staircase and vanished. Before following, anger came to the boil: "I can never fix my face but you can fix yours lady. Thanks for the wooden nipple! I'm going to find a beating heart." She hurried down the stairs and followed the direction the servant had vanished in. This took her to the kitchen. Flor was chatting at ease to another servant as if he'd been there a hundred times before. This domestic calm was so different from the scene upstairs that Minda was lost. "Flor!"

"Yes miss."

"Is everything under control?"

"Yes miss."

"Really?"

"Yes miss."

Minda sat down, having run out of forward momentum.

"Please miss this is Chef-de-household Giomme or Jerome as he likes to be called."

"I don't think we'll be staying long Jerome as your mistress has decided to dislike me. Nevertheless since you master invited me I will await his appearance."

"Your servant has told me the same and may I say miss Minda in the war of discomfits your entrance will go down in history and be celebrated in song."

"I wasn't going to be snubbed."

"But that's the point Miss Minda – everyone else put up with it. You have broken her spell."

"Does she treat everyone like this?"

"Most visitors get the long nose of disapproval as a matter of course – and we servants suffer between Lord Robert's desire to entertain and her unpleasantness."

During the following understanding silence Minda and Flor had nothing to communicate. There was no decision to be made, no action to be taken.

"Refreshment is what we need. And I expect Mister Bob would like some too. Can that be arranged Jerome?"

"Why yes miss Minda. I should have thought of that before. Cakes and ale?"

"What do you say Flor? He's only been my servant for a week Jerome and as he's done so well in finding warmth and decent hospitality while I only found the weevil I like to have his agreement." Flor flushed inside with pride. "It's how we do things in the countryside Jerome. Servants are the legs we stand on. A good servant is worth a bushel of respect."

These were long words for Jerome but he knew some of the praise was meant for him.

"Miss Minda please let me fetch you cakes and ale. The Office is five minutes away so let's expect – Err 'Mister Bob' – Lord Robert we call him – soon.

Jerome went to the buttery. Flor whispered to Minda "The horses are tethered together facing out six paces from that door. Once outside left goes to the market square."

"Well done. That's what I pay you for."

"What happened upstairs?"

"Later! But if she's nice to you run away as fast as you can."

Mister Bob appeared to have been running as he strolled through the front door and popped his head into the kitchen. "Ah Minda."

"Mister Bob." Silence. Clearly Mister Bob wasn't a sharp thinker or one to prepare. "Mister Bob I came and was refused entrance and your wife thinks you brought me here to share your bed."

"She's difficult."

"Are you going to feed and shelter me and my servant tonight or will we find somewhere else to stay?"

"Stay here of course."

"Your wife disagrees strongly."

"I will speak with her."

Minda realised he was going into battle without armour. "Mister Bob, come with me to the courtyard first." They exited the kitchen into the most cramped courtyard of a rich house she'd ever seen. "Let's stand where she can see us from upstairs Mister Bob so she can see there's nothing underhand... ..I'm sorry you have a bitch for wife Mister Bob but there's nothing I can do today except stay elsewhere." She waited to see how this would be received. More silence. "Another time under the stars far away we may discuss your problem but my urgent problem is somewhere safe to sleep tonight."

"Let me talk with Steela."

"I may come from the country but I know words of mist when I hear them. Please tell me where Flor and I can lodge."

"I'll get Giomme to arrange it."

"Thank you Mister Bob." Minda was in no mood to be snubbed before but now she'd had to beat her way through a flock of buffoons just to get a bed for the night. So far town manners didn't agree with her.

## First day at the Office

Lodging at an inn was arranged. Minda begged the use of Pike for an hour to show them the town. The sooner they found out about this strange place the happier she'd be. Anything might happen. Tomorrow Flor would be wandering and mingling while she was being introduced to the work of the Office. They swapped observations, made up their minds to see what the next day would bring apart from rain.

Despite yet another long day Minda found it difficult to get to sleep. The strange noises, the bell that rang every hour, the smells and constant small comings and goings were distractions gnawing at her confidence. Even asleep she dreamt of owls mocking their husbands and shutting doors in her face. The morning came too slow but facing the new day came too quickly. Flor seemed to have landed on his feet. From the moment Minda found him with Jerome his confidence had blossomed. Survival in the town was full of interesting little challenges like where to get hot water and how to avoid paying too much. There appeared to be layers of servants

and traders who in the main were looking to be paid for the simplest service with loyalty to nobody but themselves. Flor could handle this but knew that Minda's currency was trust. She'd probably cut somebody's ears off as a lesson to others. Now he knew he had a useful and important role he was happy and determined to play his part well.

After a conference at which Flor convinced Minda to leave all domestic arrangements to him it was time to split. He would accompany her to the Office then see about more permanent lodgings and survey the town and its inhabitants. He would make a note of where the smiths Dunstin had named were and also customs and habits of the natives. They walked in the rain along very mused-up streets with nowhere to avoid splashes thrown by carts and horses. Uneven slippery stones made Minda more irritated.

"Give me your arm Minda. We can't have you falling in the mud on your first day."

She allowed herself to be supported. It was nice having a servant you could trust.

"Thank you Flor that is very thoughtful."

"Cheer up Minda you'll get used to it. There are all sorts of lovely foods on sale. Cakes, sweetmeats, pies, strange sausages."

"I'd rather be on that smuggling track again."

"Shsh miss. We can be overheard."

Minda slowly looked around. "I can't see anyone" she whispered.

"Houses have windows and doors with people behind them. I've already been asked about lions."

"I don't like the town Flor. It's spying on us, it smells and it's dirty."

"They stopped by habit as they came to the vista of the market square only to be shouted at for blocking the street by a man pushing a barrow of hot roast birds. A nice smell for a change! The castle gatehouse was enormous. Each tower was more massive than a church's tower and as tall as an elm. The castle on the mound above was an even larger black rain soaked block with all the weight and charm of a stone tree stump. Across the square stood the grey three storey tax Office. Smooth finished stone walls with solid arches and columns that framed wide street doors strapped with iron. Windows had grids of iron bars. Streams teemed off the black lead roof through spouts in a cornice topped with spikes.

"It looks like a little castle itself Flor."

"Every castle needs a princess."

Minda was charmed. She smiled at him. "Shsh. Do you want everyone to know I'm really a princess?"

"Sorry m//your highness."

Quietly she said: "If the town wants to spy on us then we will give them plenty of whispers. Since we can't hide honestly we must deceive in the open. Hmm. Already I'm beginning to see why Mister Trentchard sent us here. Now how do we get in?"

Mister Bob had not yet arrived but Minda was expected and a servant took her cape and rain hat. Minda was puzzled by him and looked sideways at Flor who had assumed a deferential pose out of the way.



"Pike's brother" he suggested. Of course!

"Thank you Flor."

When he returned she said "Are you Pike?"

"Yes miss. You nearly killed my little brother yesterday."

"It's a nasty habit I have Pike but I'm told that it's not really allowed in the town. We – this is my personal servant Flor – are only used to country ways. Still I'm always sorry afterwards aren't I Flor?"

"It's all right Pike. She's never hurt anyone innocent yet and is only teasing."

"Sorry Pike. Your brother was very helpful yesterday." She and Flor exchanged smiles, she gave the high-low-low hand sign and he departed into the rain.

"As Mister Bob is not here yet will you show me around Pike."

"Lord Robert said for you to wait in the ante-room."

"Well I don't like waiting so why not tell me what is on each floor."

"On this floor miss is the storehouse for contraband."

"Show me." Pike hesitated. She acted. "Through this door?" In the gloom the pungent smells of fresh cloth and spirits made the most impression. Labels and seals were attached to many items. "What happens to this stuff?"

"It usually gets auctioned miss."

In the grey light of a half-open door two men were carrying goods to a waggon supervised by a third keeping a tally and giving instructions. She'd seen the clerk before at Trowstead.

"Good morning again. I am Minda and I will be working with Mister Bob – Lord Robert – Strange he isn't here yet."

"He should be Mistress Minda. Perhaps you should wait in the ante-room. We try to keep people out of this store to stop pilfering."

"That's a very good idea but don't worry about me. If I want something I will take it in daylight with everyone's knowledge. Now if you men are going to be working with me it would be useful to know your names. My name is Minda, I have already been out at night spilling smuggler's blood and I am here to learn more."

"Err I'm Killick mistress. I am chief ledger-clerk. This is Danico and this is Davey. They are the only ones usually allowed in this room unsupervised. They live on the top floor and take it in turns to be watchman."

"Hello Danico. Hello Davey. If you need help carrying or watching I will help out."

"Lifting goods and rolling is a dirty job mistress. With pardon your fine dress is not suitable."

"Are you lifting on Monday?"

"Yes mistress."

"I'll come dressed for some honest sweat. Come here Pike... ..stand in front of me." She picked him up under the armpits, strode to the cart and sat him down without straining and smiled at Danico and Davey who were not expecting a girl to lift a young man, let alone carry him steadily. "I need to keep strong by practise. Will twice a week be alright with you?"

"Err yes Mistress thank you." said Danico.

"I better be seeing what else goes on here gentlemen. Pike! Get down off there. If Mister Bob turns up tell him I'm in a good mood."

"Yes Mistress." said Killick. "Yes Mistress." echoed Danico and Davey.

"Lead on Pike – To business!"

Upstairs was divided into smaller rooms and the general office with a counter stretching across one end which was where traders came to pay their duties. Two clerks were sitting hunched over their desks surrounded by boxes of papers. There were cabinets with many divisions around the walls. Pike explained that the spare front desk was Killick's and that this office handled general trade and regular payments. The clerks knew nearly all the traders by sight and could quickly check the status of any of them as burgesses didn't pay market taxes but outsiders did. But they all paid Kingscot.

"So you deal with the Market dues here as well as the Kingdom-wide tax on trade?"

"No miss this is a Royal tax house. But it is as well to know the standing of the people so that somebody who operated in the open market could be checked upon. If they were selling a lot of something that should have been taxed when it arrived then we want to see the tax receipt or the money."

She was about to interrogate the clerks when the door from the public stairs opened and two men and a woman came in. The clerks left their desks without haste to attend to them. Pike whispered "The one on the left and the lady are married but of poor character. He trades in various heavy goods like iron and she keeps the Kings head." To Minda there seemed something wrong. Why was the man on the left so alert and the woman so hugging of the middle man? What were her strengths? Did the clerks know their job? Were they complicit? Her strengths were... ..She had a single knife to show or throw. She knew in her heart they were up to no good. It was hopeless! She didn't know the fraud or the layout or the law. She nearly whistled high-low-high before remembering. "Follow me" she whispered to Pike and left by the back door connecting to the other offices. "Shut the door... ..Now tell me what you think is going on with those three."

"Please Mistress."

"You don't have to call me mistress when we are in close conference. I need to know what you think not what you think I want to know."

"I'm lost mistress."

"Never mind, we'll sort that out later. What's going on out there?"

"The man in the middle may be giving a forged receipt of tax already paid. Or he may be claiming the goods were of lesser quality than assayed or the goods were rotten when opened."

"Would I be right to think that he's been put up to it by the man on the left and given drink by the wife?"

"Probably miss."

"Do you know any names?"

"Frewsell. John Frewsell and Frances Frewsell of the King's head inn."

"If their fraud is found out what's the penalty?"

"I don't know miss."

Minda thought. The men downstairs were strong. "Pike. Get Danio and Davey to go in the public entrance and lock themselves in. Get Killick to come up here and advise me. Don't explain just get them to do it. She reached into her boot and extracted her knife so he could see it. "I've never killed an innocent person yet. Run!" How long would it take? If only she had Flor here. She tried to play out the possible scenes. Were the clerks armed? Were they reliable? Were they false? Killick raced up with alarm plain on his face.

"What's going on!"

"Calm down Killick. There's a fraud going on in the general office. The middle one is a decoy for John and Frances Frewsell."

"What both of them!" He reached for the door.

"Not so fast Killick. We need a plan. Their strength is innocence. If the dummy is found out then they get away. The decoy is no good to us."

"Yes he is."

"No he isn't. Do you have orders not to arrest the Frewsells?"

"No mistress."

"Then let's frighten them and see if they make a mistake. Will Danio and Davey be at the door by now?"

"Yes."

"Right. Here is the plan. You find out from the clerks what's going on. I'll take it from there."

"Don't kill anybody"

"Not unless I have to."

"Go!" She opened the door.

"Is everything in order Will?" asked Killick.

"This gentleman..." While the technicalities were being discussed Minda glided in and made eye-contact with John Frewsell and smiled. His face gave away confusion. She began casually tossing her knife while maintaining eye contact and smiling. This was fun. He was now showing an edge of brittle fear. Apparently a document had been submitted.

"Show me!"

Killick brought it over to Minda..

"This is/"

"/I know what it is. Let me have a look." While pretending to examine the document by feel and the window light she was watching John Frewsell. He was definitely looking for his escape route. Mrs Frewsell was more defiant. The decoy was curiously indifferent. With their retreat trapped she could take her time. Brand would be proud of her. "Come and look at this Killick." While pretending to point out defects she stood hard on his toe. Making sure she was overheard: "As I thought. Bent as an eel. Cheap. I'm surprised whoever forged is still alive after producing this stuff." She turned to the clerks. "Well done men for spotting the forgery so quickly. It would have got past most clerks but you knew straight away and you raised the alarm." It was amazing how the decoy was now nothing to do with the Frewsells. Minda had an idea. Their strength was their organisation so she should disrupt it...

"Pike! come here." From somewhere hiding just out of sight came Pike. "Will you please escort this gentleman and Mrs Frewsell to the door for me."

Mrs Frewsell fought back. "We can find our own way out!"

"If you say so Frances... ..No not you John." replied Minda calmly.

"Come on John! We're all going. We're not going to stand here and be accused of forgery."

"As you wish. Off you go then." The clerks looked at Minda. She winked back. They didn't know the punch in a wink from Minda but gathered from Killick's reaction that they should stay calm. The moment of silence was short-lived as angry voices from downstairs were heard. "Pike. Shout down that John is to come back then the other two can go."

"Yes miss." He opened the door and called down the stairway.

"Stay there Pike. If there's a problem I will come and make Mrs Frewsell clean her husband's brains off the walls. Tell them that. Also tell Danio and Davey they get special sweet cakes for doing their duty today." In due course a fuming John Frewsell returned. "Do we have private room Killick?"

"Yes miss."

"A private interview with John is in order."

"Yes miss."

"Well get on with it! I will be there in a moment." Killick ushered a resentful Frewsell to the testing chamber as they called it. "Pike. Is this enough to buy sweet cakes for us all?"

"Yes miss."

"Off you go then. Get two each for Danio and Davey and don't forget to count yourself." When he was on his way she congratulated the clerks. "Well done you kept cool. I'm Minda. You are not to leave this building until I say is that clear?"

"Err."

"Not for any reason whatsoever. If you need to leave get my permission first. I must go and squeeze John Frewsell." After the action she got irritable and needed to unblock it. It always happened. "Is that clear?"

"Yes miss."

"And you?"

"Yes miss."

"Sorry about the excitement but I'm new here. Enjoy your cakes. I'll be friendly later but see that handle on the door? See the jamb beside it?" THUD! Her knife appeared quivering there. "I haven't killed an innocent man yet boys! Don't let it fall into evil hands while I have a job to do."

She found the testing chamber. Where was Mister Bob? What were her strengths? She didn't know anything! She must turn that into a strength. She could guess the relationship between the three of them. That was a start. "Good news John" she said as she strode into the room. "I haven't got my knife. Even if you make me lose my temper you'll leave this room alive."

"I know my rights."

"But I don't. No truly I don't it is my first day here – and I'm the one who can let you go... ..Free. Completely free. I want to help you John – and your wife – she stands by you as I expect you stand by her." Where was Mister Bob? "I don't even know what the penalty for trying to hoodwink us with that crude forgery was. Do you?"

"I was only trying to help a friend. I had nothing to do with it."

"Mister John. We're both grown up... We'll you're grown up and – I killed two smugglers less than a week ago. My knife went in just at the top of his ear. Do you know what that does John?" Silence. "Go on. Guess."

"Kills him?"

"It makes me very angry when I have to stand on his bloody head to lever my knife out and even angrier when he's left wriggly red brains all over it." Silence. "It's disgusting." If Minda had let her one-eyed gaze stray from John she would have seen a rather white Killick failing to look brave. "Iron – Tell me about Iron – What's the tax on iron?"

"There are three sorts of Iron. Virgin iron, rent iron and steely iron."

"And what's the fourth?"

"Fourth?"

"What's the fourth sort of iron?"

"There isn't a fourth sort."

"There is. But perhaps it is too precious to tax. Do you sell your iron to the local smiths?" Silence. "I can check up and you can leave here alive. By the way that forgery was obvious I expect better next time."

"Sorry miss Luke has a/"

"/Luke! Luke usually does better than that!"

Silence.

"Can I go now miss?"

"No! Killick. Would you be a dear and retrieve my knife from the general office." Hesitation clouded his face but a stare from Minda encouraged him. "Now then John, between the two of us which local smiths have you been supplying?"

"I don't have to tell you."

"Yes you do."

"No I don't."

"You do if you want to live long enough to revenge whoever sold you a bad forgery."

"Luke."

"I don't believe you for a minute. You're a dead man unless you tell me who you sell iron to."

"And then will you let me go?"

"Yes."

Frewsell considered his options. Killick considered this was a good time to reappear. "Oh thank you Killick. Would you take it to the private office so I can't use it. I understand murder frowned upon here. Now John I can't remember. Did you say you did want to see another dawn or you didn't."

"I didn't."

"Oh dear, that gives me a problem. I don't want blood spilled in the office but if I let you go it might take me an hour to find you tonight and another to arrange an accident."

"No. I didn't say anything."

"Oh? Do you want to see another dawn?"

"Yes."

"Each to their own I suppose. I like to be climbing into bed just before dawn after a night in the shadows. Now then John I'm losing my patience. Are you going to declare your taxes in future and tell me the smiths in this town you've supplied or not?" Silence. "Look at this from my point of view. I can have my men follow you and see who your friends are. How boring. After a week I'd probably have you killed anyway. Or I can kill you tonight. That would be more fun – I need to keep in practice. Or you could continue to breathe and tell me what I want to know."

"Tunnet."

"Tunnet?"

"Smith Tunnet."

"I haven't heard of Smith Tunnet. Where does he work?"

"On the quay."

"Is there a smith Tunnet on the quay Killick?"

"Not to my knowledge miss."

"Where is this iron Frewsell?"

"I don't know miss it's nothing to do with me."

"Thank you for being so polite John. That will be all. I'm sorry if I threatened you with having your guts ripped out but I'm not used to the ways of the town yet and it's four nights since my last killing. My men will escort you off the premises."

"Pike! Pike come here."

"Yes miss."

"Find Mister Bob and get him here immediately. If he's at his home then drag him out of bed. Understand?"

"No miss."

"Oh alright. Find out where he is and let me know and I'll drag him here by his ear." It was the reaction to action again. She's been so patient with Frewsell but it ended with violence. She really wanted him on the loose doing damage to the forger but she also wanted cooperation about the smiths. Still for the first hour of her first day she hadn't done too badly. What about those clerks? Was one or both corrupt?

Sweet cakes filled the gap between finding out that Mister Bob was dealing with lawyers and his arrival. Had he deliberately left her alone to see what would happen? Surely not. Minda had expected to be checking columns of figures with a possibility of news about suspects.

When he arrived explanations took longer than the actions. Mister Bob didn't appear to be very quick and would have to be taken through events slowly. So Minda went

through them quickly not giving him a chance to express an opinion. He was very quiet after the telling.

Killick added his bit "It was Minda that spotted it as a forgery sir."

"How did you tell?"

"I guessed. I haven't any idea what it is supposed to look like. It was a bluff."

"Fetch it Killick."

"I am supposed to run an orderly establishment on behalf of the King with the King's dignity Minda. We have to obey rules and not let our suspicions get out of hand."

"Here it is Sir. Once you know it's a forgery you can see the flaws."

Mister Bob looked at it. "Pretty good."

Minda said "It was obviously something incriminating because the Frewsells daren't offer it themselves. They used a dummy who needed stiffening. If a man goes into a wood with an axe then you know he's going to chop a tree down."

"Still Minda we need to be more careful."

"What would you have done Mister Bob?"

"Err – Well I would have asked the clerk to check the details in the ledger."

"Hmm. Why did both clerks attend to this one bit of business? Is that unusual?"

"Yes let's ask them. Killick ask them to/"

"/No. Let's not ask them. Let's find out instead."

"Exactly."

"No not exactly Mister Bob. It is their job to spot a forgery I suppose but neither of them did. Asking them if they are dishonest will only set you back. There is nothing you can learn like that."

"What do you suggest Minda?"

"Test their honesty and see if they visit the King's head this evening."

"We can't lurk outside an inn on the off-chance and even if they do it's not a crime."

"I think my servant will be happy to lurk inside. As for testing we'll have to think of something tempting."

"But if they're found to be dishonest then it will reflect badly on me."

"Which do you want? The respect of honest people or the sneers of dishonest ones?" Clearly Mister Bob was worried about this and Minda guessed his domestic situation was prickly and not sleep-inducing. "Killick. Could I ask you to leave Mister Bob and myself for a while."

"Yes mistress."

"I am sorry Mister Bob. I have upset your home life and caused a whirlwind in a flower bed here. Should I return to Trowstead?"

"Trouble is what you bring alright. Harry warned me to keep you tight under my wing and so it's my fault. The trouble at home wasn't your doing and you have done more good than harm here. I have become complacent."

"Did I do the right thing?"

"You did I suppose. It's about time we shook-up the criminals. I like the way you told him the forger had let him down. Let's hope it doesn't end in bloodshed."

"Bloodshed?"

"Henry told me about the deaths on the track. Frewsell is a mild rogue but Mrs Frewsell may not be so charitable. Your forger is likely to have an uncomfortable surprise."

"I have been lucky. I'm guessing in the dark. I need to know how taxes are collected and avoided and who avoids them and what other mischief they are up to."

"Let me start by showing you round the office then. We can start downstairs. Come on." He shouldn't have been surprised that Mina had not only introduced herself to Danio and Davey but they were on best friend terms. They thanked her for the cakes and she thanked them for dealing with the Frewsells. Feeling command slipping away Mister Bob felt he had to say something. "Is everything alright here men?"

"Yes sir" they replied. Danio spoke up. "Er – If you please sir – would you please tell the lady that she's not to take anything from the store when I can see her... ..I don't want to be the one to try and stop her."

Davey hid behind Danio as both grinned at the jest. "I'll hide behind Dan sir".

There hadn't been a lot of laughter in Mister Bob's life recently so this happy family was where he wanted to be. Minda's spell! "Ask her for a dance Dan and I'm sure you'll be alright."

This caught Minda unawares. Mister Bob had found a weak spot. Still, they were all happy and loyal which was what mattered now. "I'm a terrible dancer. And I promise not to take things from your store."

On their way upstairs Mister Bob wondered if his wife didn't have a point. Minda could bewitch anyone. Upstairs he showed her the private offices full of closets with papers in boxes and shelves of ledgers. Mister Bob roughly described what documents were and how the filing system should work. Although the details were too much for Minda to comprehend in one go it was clear that in practice the system was in a bit of a mess.

The strong room appeared to be just a small square door in the wall. "I'll show it to you another time. That's where we keep valuables and money. "Inside a weight hangs on a chain that goes up to the watchman's room above. When the door is closed the watchman pulls up on the chain and the weight lodges on the top of the door. Now when the door is opened the weight is dislodged and it pulls on a bell as it falls."

"That's very clever. Was it your idea?"

"No. Too clever for me. It's been there as long as anyone can remember."

"Do Dan and Davey live upstairs?"

"Yes. And there are lodgings available for other staff. There are two night watchmen as well, and there's supposed to be a door guard at all times we are open."

"Where is he?"

"That's a good question. There are spare rooms upstairs you could lodge there if you like?"

"Can I think about your offer later Mister Bob?"

"Of course."



"Will you introduce me to the clerks gently Mister Bob. How many are there? I saw two spare desks."

"You're very observant. Adrion is on business with my agent in the country and Ralph is at the hythe with counters."

"Agent?"

"Chief intelligencer."

"What's the hythe?"

"Where ships tie up." Mister Bob realised Minda's ignorance. "Goods are loaded and unloaded into warehouses or direct to carts. One ship can have fifty waggon-loads."

"What are counters"

"Men who tally the amount of goods so we can charge the right amount of tax."

Mister Bob introduced her formally to the clerks Will and Corbin. They were properly respectful and thanked her for the cakes but there was none of the camaraderie of downstairs. He told them she was learning the system so that she could deal with the day-to-day tax matters according to the rules. The plan was she would return to the country and police trade in remote parts without throwing knives and frightening the lights out of everyone. "Having seen her in action this morning I'm sure you'd agree with me that someone with Mistress Minda's spirit will do well in the wilder parts of the Kingdom." They agreed with a hint of relief in their enthusiasm.

For the rest of the working day Killick began teaching her what they did and how to begin verifying things. Even with her practice at memorising she found it difficult. Eventually she had to call a halt to his enthusiasm for tiny details and suggested that she actually tried to do a simple job. This established a pattern for the next two weeks. Most of the work was extremely routine but made complicated by confused records.

Late in the afternoon Flor returned as arranged and Minda introduced him to the Office. To Mister Bob and Killick she said "Flor is my servant and guard for only a few days and already he has shown himself to be efficient and resourceful. I have known him for two years and he is completely loyal, can keep his mouth shut and I trust him with my life. We have trained together."

Killick asked "Trained together?"

"Survival. Marching through the night. Ambushes, archery, sword attack, defence and retreat."

"Retreat?"

"Tell Killick why we retreat Flor."

"To stay alive to fight another day."

The clerks acknowledged Flor and were about to return to their desks. "There's one more thing Will and Corbin." If Flor asks you to do something take it as an order from me. To you Flor is just a country yokel but if you're ever walking the streets in the dark and hear creeping footsteps behind you it won't be him – He's completely silent. On the other hand if you do see him at say an inn then he will be there on duty – Probably to look after you when there is other trouble around the corner."

"I don't understand mistress" said Will.

"Let us suppose there are people in – um – the Kings head who want to ask tax clerks some questions and you visit innocently for some ale. That could be an awkward situation"... Flor guessed the pattern of pressure and innocently watched the escape and ambush routes as best he could in this unfamiliar situation.

The horrible pause was broken by Will who was definitely going pale and had strained voice. "Miss?"

"Wouldn't you be lucky to have a friend like Flor there Will?"

"Yes mistress."

"And if you were being followed back to your lodging wouldn't you like to think that the follower was himself being followed?"

"Err – Yes miss."

"And you Corbin? No miss. Yes miss!" he squealed.

"Good I'm glad we've got that straight... Come here Corbin." She said softly. He stepped forward to find her gloved hand resting under his chin fixed by one steady brown eye. "I was going to have you followed tonight to look after you. I've seen three murders in the last week between criminals with my own eyes and I will give you and Will a second chance. Do you understand?"

"Yes miss."

"And you Will?"

"I don't know what you're talking about miss."

"That's fine by me. You can be the one that goes to the Kings Head and lets it be know there will be no more cooperation from the tax office."

"It's nothing to do with me."

"What's nothing to do with you?" Silently looking at the floor he was beaten. "Right you two. At finish time you will both accompany Flor to the Kings Head. He will speak on your behalf. Tomorrow you will be interviewed by Mister Bob. I will suggest to him you don't lose your jobs if you are honest with him. You have been tempted – Was it Frances Frewsell?" Minda's hand was still touching Corbin's chin.

"Yes Mistress." volunteered Will.

"If you keep your jobs then Flor will teach you what to do if you're followed in the dark... So that's a deal then Will?"

"Yes mistress. Thank you miss." Corbin hesitated.

"Corbin?" She felt his desperate reaction long before he could make his clerk's muscles work and grabbed his hand in plenty of time as it came up to try and push her away. Pain bent him over as his wrist was broken and arm twisted into his back. For Minda every desperate lesson in control with Brand in the barn came together in a moment of shining satisfaction. There was a low-high-high from Flor and she dropped Corbin on the floor. She realised he was screaming but now she had to follow Flor's retreat signal. He stood steady with an upheld hand. Mister Bob and Killick entered.

"Alright Minda I'll deal with it."

"They've admitted it Mister Bob!"

"Yes Killick and I were in the corridor watching the whole thing."

Flor looked at Minda for permission with a glance at Corbin. She stepped back. He put a hand over Corbin's mouth to stop him screaming and lifted him to his feet. A

few careful words whispered into his ear and Corbin was allowed to nurse his injury unaided.

"He's all yours Mister Bob."

Dan and Davey had raced upstairs. To Minda's surprise they had swords and looked efficient. She whispered to a stunned Will. "Good boy. We'll look after you." There was silence. "What next Mister Bob?"

"You've broken his arm Minda!"

"Best you can do with a broken wrist is cold water then see a physician."

"Killick! See his employment here is finished."

"Yes sir."

"Excuse me Mister Bob. Should I pay for the physician?"

"Have you got a florin in your purse Minda?"

"Yes."

"Then that will be all Corbin ever gets from this office. Corbin will soon tell the town his lesson that cooperating with Minda is the only way." After Killick had marched Corbin down the stairs to oblivion everyone looked at Mister Bob. "More cakes?"

Minda remembered lovely aroma from the rude street seller's barrow. "A couple of roast birds perhaps?" She reached again for her purse.

"No Minda. I'll pay. Pike!"

The frightened boy crept round the corner of the corridor. "Here. Fetch four roast birds quick as you can. And mustard and pickles." Pike disappeared. "Well done Minda. Thank you Flor. Thank you Dan and Davey."

Minda interrupted. "This is Dan and this is Davey. This is Flor my personal guard. We'll share a bird together downstairs."

Mister Bob addressed a frightened Will. "You have betrayed my trust but you are forgiven. We will talk later. Right then! Everyone about your business. Flor – would you come and see me when convenient."

Flor looked at Minda to get approval then followed Mister Bob to his office.

"Sit down Flor. I have just seen what a clever and valuable person you are. You knew Killick and I were there in the corridor and kept us from interfering until needed. You have your mistress's knack of pinning people in a tingle-spell."

"I am only following my training sir."

"Why do you think Mister Trentchard spent time and money training Minda?"

"Because she will be worth it in the end."

"And why do you think he spent time and money training you Flor?"

"Ah. I see what you mean. He thought I was worth it."

"It appears I am the first to tell you that Mister Trentchard was right." Silence. "It will give me great pleasure to write to Mister Trentchard and tell him so." Silence. "Can I give you a bit of advice young man?"

"Please sir."

"You are a young, strong, virile man who will love his drink and the ladies even more. I know, I was a young man not so very long ago and I couldn't get enough drink or

sex. Now you will succumb. You will. It might even be as soon as tonight! Yes really. Towns are wicked places after dark. I will suggest a plan."

"Yes sir."

"This plan is called 'postpone temptation'. You know you can't resist but you delay by reporting back to me or my servants or the Office watchmen then go off and indulge. I'm a tax man I know all the temptations. Pretty legs, a lovely smile and your brains melt. Don't let them melt completely until you've told us that Minda is unguarded. We'll look after her while you're in a bed of pleasure. Just like we were standing by in the corridor just now so we will work together."

"I promise."

"Or take Minda with you. She will scare the clothes off – err – scare the stockings... – err scare the temptresses."

"Sir you don't know Minda. She'll be friends with them and be picking them out for me."

Mister Bob thought about this and smiled. "You're probably right." Silence. "Son. There may be odd things or questions in your mind you might want to discuss with me rather than Minda. Life can become complicated at your age..." He stopped and thought of the complications in his life of the last few hours. "...and at my age. Between you and me keep clear of my wife. She's the prettiest poison."

"Yes sir."

"And not the only one. Keep a good lookout. Now Dan and Davey downstairs are good honest chaps. Enjoy a bird with them. Could you send Will in on your way out."

"Yes sir. Thank you Mister Bob." Before Will came in Mister Bob reflected that he quite liked being called 'Mister Bob' by these energetic youngsters. It made him feel young and energetic again.

That evening saw a number of criminal relationships being straightened out. There was a venomous exchange between Mister and Mrs Bob. Killick spread the news to Mrs Killick. Danico practised with the church band. While Mrs Davey stitched by candlelight Davey looked after his four children. Flor had been successful with finding permanent lodgings and after checking with Mister Bob they would move into a widow's house tomorrow. Minda described the action that Flor had missed. Flor tried to describe the town. Minda was tired and had only seen ships in illustrated texts. Tomorrow, Saturday, was a working day and she couldn't begin to write her journal. She needed to see the town for herself. Were they safe tonight?

"I will put my bed across the door."

"Let's check the windows then I'll turn in. I'm sleepy all through."

"Hey a bed warmer! Did you do this Flor?"

"Yes miss."

"You are a dear. It's just what I want. A lovely warm bed." A while later she continued. "I'm not poor Flor. Next time order one for yourself – I insist. We're going to do this together. Well done today... You have excelled... I'm so ..."

She had meant to ask Flor what he thought of Mister Bob but sleep's soft blanket came first.

# Settling in to town life

The next day was more peaceful. Minda settled down to clerical work in the Office. Will seemed to be keen to help her when Killick left her alone. She tutted at how the filing system had been allowed to get in a muddle but resolved to leave fixing that until a windy day when the dust could be chased away through unshuttered windows. There wasn't a lot of work to do today so most of the staff had gone home or about other business.

Flor managed the move to lodgings. Davey assisted him with acquiring household essentials. This was the first time that Flor had had any domestic belongings even if they were Minda's he felt proud of their two rooms and stables. Their landlady, Widow Russel, even had a pretty daughter! He was definitely someone now. Personal servant to a duke's daughter. The constant bustle of the town was full of interest and excitement. He reflected that it was a lot more expensive and he must submit an honest account to Minda as soon as possible. Horse's stabling. Firewood. Candles. Food. Bedding. A water ewer. A night pot. And yet another thing to add to his list of expenditure. Minda would need a writing desk! Who would help him with that? Perhaps Widow Russel?

Whispering echoes of lions and wolves roaming the wilder parts of the countryside spun a web over the gossip that everyone relied on for news. With his instantly recognisable country accent Flor was asked more than once if he knew anything about it. He claimed to only have seen tracks of some large cat a number of times by the river's edge. Apparently they stole whole bullocks. "And what about the Wolves?" "Oh nothing out of the ordinary. So long as you don't let children out they just pinch a sheep or two." He casually added that when snow made tracking efficient he might have to go back to help with an organised hunt.

On Sunday morning Minda and Flor rode out of the town in first light of a slightly misty day. Although it was only just September there was a hint of autumn in the air. After galloping a mile they stopped. Minda removed her cap and unpinned her hair. "Fresh air! how can people live in that sty? I can smell the dew."

"I can smell an apple orchard. There it is."

"Tempting isn't it?"

"Yes but we're not at Trowstead now."

"Thank you Flor. I must be good."

"Especially as a King's Tax Officer. It wouldn't help your reputation."

"I think my reputation has already flown around where it matters."

"Mister Bob said to me to try to stop you being willful unless real good would come of it."

"Why didn't he tell me himself?"

"I don't know. Perhaps he's afraid of being beaten by a broom. His wife you see..."

"Do you think I need a nursemaid Flor?"

"You've thrown a stone in the duck pond and the birds have taken fright but we have to stalk our prey carefully if we're to get them in the pot."

"I suppose you're right. Before we left Brand told me to remember I was general not a pikeman. A general looks and listens and leads he doesn't get into brawls."

"And a general needs nursemaids of a kind."

"How so?"

"To watch their back while they deal with the front. To feed them. To put them to bed when they've done the work of ten men. And nurse the horses."

"I see your point Flor. Let's ride!"

This set a pattern. When the weather was dry they would ride into the country before breakfast. The galloping girl with the flying hair and eyepatch together with her servant became familiar to those who regularly carried produce to the town. "Watch out for Lions!" was often called by her or Flor and soon it was understood by all to be a jest. It became one of Flor's jobs to buy food and make friends with villagers. He soon managed to buy more than required and sell the excess at a profit. He admitted this to Minda. Using her new knowledge she pointed out that strictly speaking some of his activities might be illegal as various laws were supposed to stop speculative free-lance trading, but so long as it was done quietly and not interfere with his first loyalty he should enjoy the profit himself. She sat down each evening to teach him how to cast his daily transactions into a proper running account. Motivated by the lure of profit he soon learned. Minda was proud of him and said so.

At the Office Minda made a note of interesting addresses and trades and would leave the office an hour before the others to find out about the localities and talk to the traders. Nobody liked paying taxes but Minda, already a legend, was scrupulously polite and pleasant, going out of her way to find nice things to say. In this way she learned more about trade in a couple of weeks than most people did in a lifetime. She thought it strange that everyone said how bad trade was but there were signs of prosperity everywhere. She was often asked why a girl was working in the Tax Office and she would explain it was so she could return to the country as a roving officer where taxes on trade tended to get forgotten. Every penny of tax raised there was one less the town traders had to find. Put like this, other people paying taxes seemed a very good idea. She went on to say that the King didn't like smuggling because that led to crime of all sorts and that in turn lead to fear and disruption of trade. Many felt compelled to offer her some little present. "Oh no I'm on the King's duty. Thank you. I know you mean well but while the King pays me I can't serve another." Some were uncommunicative so she left them alone and made a note to find a competitor to speak to and see if she could pick up more information.

## The smiths of Lostnock

Her plan was to visit the smiths as soon she'd felt the pulse of the town. Watts was a jolly squat man who was alternately energetic in getting the work underway, mostly by driving his three sons and then relaxed with his customers. After introducing herself and giving the brother's friendship sign she was immediately invited to eat dinner with them on the next Sunday. "I know about you star-iron girl."

"Minda."

"Welcome to Lostnock Minda."

"Thank you for your welcome Smith Watts. I don't find the town very welcoming. This is a big smithy."

"Pod. Call me Pod. Three forges, a cast furnace and a tilt hammer Minda. The finest smithy for a hundred miles. Cain! Here!"

A young smith hurried across to them. "Yes father?"

"Minda the star-iron girl."

She was used to this moment where her one-eyed deformed face froze even the best-mannered person. "Don't worry Cain. It comes as a shock to everyone." Though her smile was twisted it was definitely friendly and cheerful.

"Your servant miss."

"Cain is the oldest. The others are Edwin and Tom who work here and Terence who is at the grammar school"

"What's a grammar school?"

"School for boys to be gentlemen who can read write and dispute."

"Dispute?"

"Argue."

"All boys can argue."

"Make speeches against each other. The one what uses the longest word wins."

"I must go and say hello to the Jiller Smiths."

"A word in your ear Min."

"Please say what's on your mind Pod."

"Toggy Jiller is a disgrace."

"Which is Toggy?"

"The speaking one. If he were dumb like his brother 'twould be better. He does nothing but drink and swear. Some say he organises rigged gambling."

Minda thought about the smuggled iron and the silence of Frewsell. Perhaps it did exist after all. "I will tell you when I know for certain Smith Watts. I am working in the Tax Office and I have my suspicions."

"Yours and mine Min."

"Ted! Can you spare a minute."

"One moment father."

"Edwin will take you to Toggy Jiller's place."

"Next to the quay?"

"Yes. That's it."

"My servant discovered it. He says I'm not to go there without him."

"Min! You have a servant! – Err so you should."

"A bodyguard. I make enemies as well as friends."

"It's alright Ted!"

"Yes father."

"Ahem. Min. Solitary star-iron girl. Can I take you myself? I'd like to give him a piece of my mind."

"I can deal with anyone on my own Pod. It is my rule." Pod was flattened by this refusal. "It's the power of star-iron Pod."

"Yes I suppose so. Sorry Min. Star-iron. Your path is alone through the heavens."

"I am a messenger not a hammer."

Pod paused, his heart and mind swept over by this accurate finishing blow. "Daughter of all the smiths." Pod hugged Minda. "I've always been pleased that I've had four sons. But now perhaps I think different."

After extracting herself from Pod's happy embrace Minda promised to join them for Sunday dinner but insisted she would meet Smith Jiller by herself. Smith Watts now knew from personal experience how star-iron was harder than the hardest and smoother than the smoothest.

Flor was waiting inconspicuously in the street and they walked on. He had observed Minda and Watts from a distance without concern. Seeing the sweep of her stride and happy expression – the innocent glowing happiness of a child, nobody ever saw an adult with that split and squashed face, he wanted to be a father.

"Let's go to young Jiller. They call him Toggy."

"Yes miss. Less than five minutes. There is a man in a blue coat who is following us."

"Oh good. Shall we catch him?"

"We mustn't hurt him if we do."

"Good practice eh?"

"If you say so."

"Have you a plan?"

"Yes. You see that corner? Turn right and one hundred and twenty paces brings you to Jiller's."

"Can we bring him to the smithy?"

"I'll try miss. Can I have your knife."

"Yes. Now or round the corner?"

"Round the corner."

In a natural movement invisible to all but a focussed observer Minda reached into her boot pocket, removed the knife and passed it to Flor and carried on walking as if he had never been close beside her.

"Toggy Jiller?" The smithy looked closed to ordinary business but not quite locked. A smithy unlocked by half an inch of door sticking out raised the same sort of questions as a deliberate leak in a roof. She reminded herself that this was a smith who she must treat with respect. She would have to make up her own mind not rely on jealousy and gossip. Prising the door open with her good hand she made a point of folding both doors fully back to give maximum light inside as there was nobody inside. Memories of that awful abandoned smithy at Trowstead made her cautious. There were lots of things that weren't right. The floor was littered with hoop-iron. The forge was stone cold. Tools were in all orders. The anvil was covered with a heap of rusty chains. Unbelievable! She shouted "Smith Jiller! Fire! Iron! Shear and Punch!" There was no answer. Empty bottles filled the quench trough where water should be. Food bones lay in every corner. Disgusting. "Smith Jiller! White is my



heat and black is my strength!" Still no answer. Scratches and blood-stains blotched the floor inside a chalked circle. "Smith Jiller! Show your strength. Show your skill. Show yourself!" Dunstin had told her that if God was angry he'd hit the world three times with his hammer. She found a long-handled four pounder hammer and smashed it with bitter rage into the chimney bricks three times, each time with more disgust and venom. She arranged three hammers in a triangle on the floor each one's head lying on the haft of another then strode out still boiling with disgust.

She'd completely forgotten about Flor and the shadow. There they were watching in silence as this girl had a fit of madness, she met them. "Hello Shadow. Don't be strange. We know you're following us so you might as well come along. We have nothing to hide. I think we're done here."

"He was armed miss."

"You weren't going to attack us Shadow?"

"No Mistress Minda."

"Well give the shadow his weapon back."

"Weapons miss."

"Go on!"

"Yes miss". Flor handed over a dagger, a knife and a thin sword."

"A walking ironmonger! Leave the dagger at home tomorrow. Do you know how to use that sword?"

"Yes."

"Well we need practice don't we Flor. I usually practise once a week but I've been busy lately."

"Now you know my name is Minda. This is Flor. Shake hands Flor."

"Yes miss." An awkward moment was resolved by glances from Minda.

"Now Shadow. Come with us to our final place of call the elder Jiller. Where does he trade?"

"Dumpy street miss."

"Thank you Shadow. You're quite a nice shadow. Flor would you be a dear and run back to Watts to tell him I've 'Struck three' for Toggy. Then meet us at Dumpy street."

"You've 'struck three' for Toggy – Yes miss." He held out her knife, paused then tossed it spinning in the air towards Minda who caught it easily.

## Shadow

As Flor ran off Minda asked "Please hold my arm Shadow as I'm a bit unsteady on my wooden foot. I hope you don't mind." The shadow hesitated. "Come on! I'm not going to eat you."

"Sorry miss everything is unexpected."

"Yes it is isn't it. Still we'll just have to do what they do in Araby."

"What's that miss?"

"Put up with it. Now let's get going."

"I've been here less than a week Shadow – how long have you lived in the town?"

"Two years."

"Where did you come from?"

"Elmford."

"What's that like Shadow?"

"Just a village miss. With/"

"/I would rather your hands are in sight Shadow. The veins in your neck could be slashed open in – oh I don't know – half a second."

"Sorry miss I wanted a handkerchief."

"You are forgiven Shadow."

The shadow withdrew his handkerchief and sneezed twice into it then looked rheumy-eyed at Minda. "Sorry Miss."

"Bless you! Shadow. Let's hope it's only a cold."

"Please miss why do you care about me and my cold. I'm your enemy."

"No you're not. Someone has sent you to spy on me. That doesn't make you my enemy. You are just a servant of somebody who is afraid. They want a disposable body to make sure I'm not getting too close to their crimes." Silence. "You can come and spy on me any time you like."

"But miss that's not fair."

"What isn't?" Silence. She stopped. "In this town everyone will be my servant. If I say you will spy on me then that's what I expect you to do. Do you understand?"

"No miss. Achoo!"

"Bless you! Now this looks like a smithy. Is this Jiller's"

"Yes miss."

"Thank you Shadow. Now I have private business inside. When Flor arrives make friends with him as I wouldn't like him as an enemy."

"Yes miss I'll wait."

She lowered her voice "And keep watch! Didn't you see the man with the wooden leg following us?"

She strode into the flickering smithy. The elder Jiller recognised her friendship sign, nodded, finished his rivetting while she watched his technique intently. Somehow he used half the blows she'd expect. "Is that special iron?" She'd forgotten his disability but a head-shake reminded her.

A minute later Smith Jiller sat beside her on the bench provided for waiting horsemen. He swung a slate from behind to in front and wrote. "StarIm Gul?"

She nodded and squeezed his hand. He shook her off. Minda was shocked but used to rejection so wasn't upset. Think of strengths! Jiller, forty years old, surrounded by curly white beard, obviously a competent smith. Children? Wife? Why did he shake her off? "Smith Jiller I have news. Shall I tell you?" He nodded. "I have struck three for your brother". He looked at her intently. "I'm afraid so. Just now." He bent down with his head in his hands. Crying. After a decent interval she put her arm round his shoulders. Hoping that Flor had returned she waved into the air behind her to whoever was there to come. The shadow ran up and waited. "Shadow, see if there is

a Mrs Jiller and if so ask her to come out." Shadow went. Within moments Mrs Jiller arrived. She saw a witch holding her crying husband. "I'm the star-iron girl Mrs Jiller. I've just brought bad news."

"I can see it's bad news witch."

"I'm not a witch! I was born ugly. It is my duty to carry news between smiths."

Mister Jiller roused himself and nodded at Mrs Jiller who understood enough.

"Sorry star-girl. Can you come another time?"

"Yes Mrs Jiller." Minda hugged Jiller with both arms. "Keep you heat up." Unhugging him she patted him on the back. Smiled quickly at Mrs Jiller and left with Shadow and Flor.

"Thank you Shadow." Twenty slow paces along the street came to a halt and she overflowed with tears. Flor and Shadow walking on either side each put an arm round her. Flor remembered his first duty and organised a retreat safe from other attack. Shadow will you take her to our lodging in Higher Row while I guard?"

## Death of Toggy

When they reached the lodgings Minda had recovered from the shock. "Thank you Shadow. You're a nice shadow. My lucky shadow. Tomorrow I think I'll be at the office all morning but by two I may be thinking of wandering again. See you then lover boy." The expression on the shadow's face cheered her up. Going through the door she said "Cancel sword practice. I'm having dancing lessons now. Good bye."

Flor arranged for food to be sent then asked "What happened today?"

"First we went to Smith Watts. He is friendly and prosperous and wants a daughter in the family. Isn't that lovely?"

"Yes miss."

"You're not on duty now. No need to call me miss. It's times like this we need to share our thoughts. These are life's knuckle bones."

"By contrast Smith Ji//Toggy Jiller was a disgrace to the whole brotherhood. I was so angry I struck him out."

"Was that when you hit the chimney?"

"Yes."

"Is 'struck three times' a special sign?"

"I have said he isn't worthy to be a smith to his face. One smith to another. What did Watts say?"

"He thanked me and looked serious. He asked if you were left alone and I said no. Then he asked if you were going to the other Jiller and I said yes. Then he said 'Your mistress has done on her own what the rest of us should have done a time ago.' He stood there blowing in the breeze. 'I will make it up to our brave star-iron girl.' Go to her."

Minda continued "Then we went to the older Jiller – Johnny – Or perhaps that's just Pod's name for plain John. He was destroyed by the shame of having his own blood-

brother struck. I didn't think. I was stupid. He knew it was shame on him twice. Once for having a bad brother and twice for not doing anything about it."

"Three times perhaps. Watts was ashamed a girl did what men couldn't do."

"I suppose that's my fate Flor."

"He was destroyed! I kept being brave but you saw what happened afterwards." The memory brought more tears. "Friendship, anger and sorrow in my family all in a few minutes."

"Are you really a proper smith?"

"I am a Brother smith. ...It's like this I suppose... ..Smiths sense there is spirit inside the things they work with but they never see it, so when I touch their lives they understand how the innerness of things is invisibly joined. Smith Brawter of Rokwold – now Barrington – told me if all the smiths were one piece of iron then I was the spirit inside it that gave it strength and softness to make it live."

"What did Watts mean by 'star-iron'?"

"Sometimes stars fall to the ground. You must have seen shooting stars in August. They glow white-hot in the sky but when they land on the cold earth they crystallise. It's very special."

Flor eventually broke the silence. "So the queen of the smiths has just banished Toggy Jiller."

Minda hesitated but the truth couldn't be avoided. "Yes."

"What will happen to him?"

"I don't know. I don't know if I got the 'words of rage' right."

"The deeds spoke the words."

"Thank you Flor for being clever and comforting today."

"My duty – Thank you."

"Minda?"

"Yes?"

"I'm so proud to serve you. Queen of the Smiths or just Minda."

"I couldn't do it without you looking after me Flor."

"But you've only had me a few days. You managed before."

"The world grows up and we have to grow up with it."

"I must go and see the smiths after we have eaten. I don't like to cheat on our shadowy ironmonger friend. How do we find him?"

"I guess he won't be far from the Kings head or the Cock or the Angel."

"Could you get someone to arrange a hue and cry for him – 'Mister Shadow is to attend to Minda forthwith' the louder the better in those parts."

"He'll be drunk I expect."

"So what? We'll have done our side of the bargain and been seen to do it."

"Minda you are the most wicked person I ever wish to meet." They laughed as Flor went to find a brash servant. He had found that you could find just about anything in a town if you had a penny.

Twenty minutes later an apprehensive Shadow was shown into their room.

"Thank you for coming Shadow. Sorry, but I have changed my plans. I am going to see Smith Watts and Smith Jiller now. You can come with us if you wish."

A relieved Shadow replied hesitatingly. "Thank you Mistress. As you have been so gracious to ask please may I come?"

"Of course Shadow. I wouldn't have asked if I didn't want you to come."

"I promise I won't be a bother miss."

"You're no bother at all Shadow – Is he Flor?"

"No miss."

"Good so that's settled. If we are attacked, and I don't expect we will be knives should do. I want you to take the left and Flor the right is that clear? I suppose we'd better look at your knife." He handed it over. Minda tossed up it to see the balance then juggled it sideways to impress Shadow. "Flor look at this" She tossed a spinning blade over to him. "We'll have to get Shadow some proper weapons."

"It's sharp miss."

"So if we are attacked what is your place Shadow?"

"On the left miss."

"Well done. One more thing Shadow. Why do you think I'm serious about fighting?"

"Because – Um – please tell me miss."

"Do you think it is because I am afraid of shadows?"

"No miss."

"Then who would want to attack me?"

"I don't know miss."

"I do. And they're in a different league to you. But they don't know I've moved to Lostnock yet. If they do then please let me know then get out of the way because you will be dead before you can open your eyes in surprise. Sliced silently. Dead meat. Easy dead meat. When I fight I fight with the best. Come on let's go. Are you happy with the arrangements Flor?"

"Yes miss"

"Let's go to Watts first."

"Home or smithy miss?" asked Shadow.

This confused her as she'd never imagined a smith not living next to the forge. "Oh – Home please. Thank you Shadow. Lead the way."

Their journey was short. Smith Watts had established himself higher up the town both geographically and socially. A liveried serving-man answered Flor's knock. When he realised who it was he immediately invited her in. Flor and Shadow were automatically sent to the kitchen. Having heard who it was Pod, dressed to Minda's amazement in rich and fashionable velvet doublet, came to welcome her. They gazed at each other. Her questioning, broken face with the eye patch. His serious, smiling eyes and helping hand of her fathers. Step fathers.

"Mistress Minda is this smith's business?"

"John. What of him?"

"He's sad and happy. Hard crystalline and strong fibrous."

"I was so worried. Did I do right?"

"Yes."

"I cried and cried."

"You beat out the slag. We didn't."

"It was disgusting."

"I expect the Brothers will meet soon, but one hundred Brothers wouldn't change anything."

"Can we go and visit John?"

"Of course you can."

"No I mean will you accompany me to Smith Jiller"

"Which one?"

"There's only one Smith Jiller now"

"We are not really friends."

"Now you are! Pod you are going to be the good brother John never had. If you can invite me to your Sunday dinner you can do the same for Smith Jiller."

"I am your servant Miss."

"Will you bring a son or a wife? It is mild."

"Will you wait a few minutes while I manage my household?"

"I'll wait. Everything in its own time. Just you and me and Mrs Pod?"

After a hectic ten minutes the senior members of this relaxed household cast-off their luxury and they departed to the lower town. Minda's two shadows carrying lanterns tried to look tough while Minda, Pod and Mrs Watts, Denise, chatted as if they were going on a picnic. The delay was due to Pod diplomatically changing out of his velvet into more modest garb. Minda linked arms with Mrs Watts. The Watts household had decided to extend it's superior friendship to Jiller senior. Minda took advantage to gather essential knowledge from Denise. She wanted to know about Smith Jiller's family background and soon had a basketful of gossip which was clearly the spite of the successful against those they's left behind when climbing the steps of social advancement. However she was able to discover that Jiller had three daughters all of which were considered by Mrs Pod to be too keen to leave home and two at least had, according to her, dubious morals.

They were invited in to the Jiller's modest and hardly furnished cottage. Flor only needed a glance from Minda to take up station outside and Shadow followed his silent lead with a sneeze into the night. Pod opened the serious conversation. "To be honest with you Smith John I have been brought here by mistress Minda. I believe her purpose is that we be friends and brothers." John nodded then, glancing at his wife then looking at Minda extended his hand to Pod. They shook hands. Very slowly a small part of Mrs Jiller unfroze for their benefit.

"Smith Jiller I am very sorry I brought bad news this afternoon."

"She did us a good turn Johnny."

Smith Jiller slowly nodded but his face dropped. Minda went over and embraced him as a mother hugs a child to her breast. Mrs Jiller was disconcerted by this affection.

Mrs Watts was astonished. Pod would remember this moment when a brother smith was comforted like a baby for the rest of his life.

Smith Jiller wrote 'Brothr' on his slate then made a pushing away gesture. Then by pointing at Pod and then the slate indicated he now had the status.

"You are the best smith around here Johnny. Everyone says so. I am only a smasher lucky to have three sons and lucky in business. Shall we talk another day?"

John checked with his wife then nodded.

"I too am sorry your brother" –

Outside there was a huge bellow. The Jillers flinched. The latched door burst open. "So you wretches think you can strike me. I'll show you some striking!" Minda's reflexes propelled her to face the danger. She stepped towards the foaming oaf in the doorway. Flor would look after her. "Yes I struck you. A mere girl. What are you going to do about it disgraced smith. Unfit smith. Three times struck smith. A worm. Go on strike me if you dare – miserable worm." She took a step closer so she was inches away from his huge chest. "Go on. Hit me or get out."

"You're the witch girl. I should have known. I'll cripple you!" He raised his fist over his head to strike her. In slow motion she guessed the line of the blow, moved sideways to avoid it, twisted with both shoulders to power a sweeping slash down across his wrist. But it went wrong! There was no arm and he lurched unpredictably knocking the breath out of her as she was crushed against the wall. She fought to regain the use of her blade thinking of the escape route. In a moment the reason was clear as his arm was swinging loose from the shoulder and his expression told of extreme agony. Flor's first victim was dragged outside. Minda checked the smiths behind then leapt outside to protect the others.

His bellows became groans and then stopped. Spectators with lamps collected quickly. There were bubbles and whispers as he bled to death laying in the smithy yard. Minda didn't know how to deal with the situation so she asked Pod to take charge. Flor had a wooden expression. Minda said softly: "Do as Pod instructs but don't let anyone disarm you."

"Shadow stop fidgeting. Did you strike a blow?"

"I stabbed him in the back when I saw Flor slash."

"Don't tell anyone that. Stay here and stop fidgeting with your weapons. Only criminals run away so you were here as my guard tonight if anyone asks. Now I have to deal with three cases of shock inside."

The room was empty. At the back she found Smith Jiller looking on as the two very pale women comforted each other. Minda held his hand. "The nightmare is over. Say after me – mouth after me – 'The tooth is pulled' " He looked at her and mimed the action. And smiled! He did it again and smiled more then strode out to face the world with Pod.

Mrs Jiller didn't often see John smile. She rose to follow him but Minda stopped her. "Let him be with his brother."

"He was always causing trouble and threatening us."

"No Mrs Jiller. His new brother." Minda was about to say that this made them sisters-in-law but decided this might be a bit rough on Mrs Watts' social sensibilities. "Give me a bucket and scrubbing brush and I'll get that blood off."

"No I'll do it." insisted Mrs Jiller.

Minda forced the pace. "Come on then 'you've got to start before you finish'// No stop! Did Toggy have a wife! I didn't think!"

"Once long ago but not for many years." volunteered Mrs Jiller. "Wherever she is she's better off without him."

"We're all better off without him." declared Mrs Watts. "My husband said you were uncrowned queen of the smiths. I thought he was going to kill you."

"Ha ha! Some chance. If my guard hadn't acted I would have cut his hand off. Look I made this knife myself. As he lunged to punch I was twisted, turning and ready to smash. Blood everywhere I expect. You're safe with me ladies. Learn how to fight danger then face it." She tossed her knife with a horrible grin, kissed the blade and sheathed it in her boot."

"Are you mad?" asked Mrs Pod.

"Just light-headed. Very light headed. I've spent two years learning to fight and tonight it was like floating slowly in a dream as doom swept by. I could have taken him on my own." She tried to skip some of the dance steps she'd been practising and nearly fell over.

"Sit down a while Minda. You're over-excited."

"Well why not! I'm happy."

"Sit down! I'll get that blood washed before it dries."

In the yard outside the Town Watch had established that a respectable citizen was able to explain the circumstances. The coroner would hold a court tomorrow and would he appear and swear to present his servant Flor. "Yes of course." Fortunate he had a guard with him? "Foresight officer. He had threatened me before. Now he tried to beat my daughter to pulp." But now, here was four shillings, would they remove the body and shoo away the crowd as his wife and the Smith Jiller's wife needed to get over the shock without gawpers. "Certainly sir."

Pod pushed Flor inside and Shadow followed. "Johnny. We will profit from this shock. I am sorry I haven't been a better brother before." John pointed to his slate with Brothr still on it. As Toggy was being dragged away they hugged as true brothers. No secret signs were needed.

As they went inside their wives were scrubbing. A little bit of blood goes a long way. Mrs Pod was unimpressed with the standard of furnishing but that turned to a small blush of conscience as Minda's family-fusing magic began to sink in.

In the kitchen Flor found a cask of small beer, poured a large cup for himself then poured another and handed it to Shadow. "Who protects you Shadow?"

"Call me Zed if you like"

"Alright Zed. Who protects you?"



"Nobody I suppose."

"So if you'd killed Toggy tonight you'd be on your own before the coroner."

"Er yes."

"Or against Toggy's mates."

"For your own safety say you were unarmed and spying. Nobody but us knows you were armed tonight."

"But everyone knows I carry a dagger and an Espada."

"That's bad because if Toggy had any mates they will probably be angry and looking for blood – Yours would do. We can't say you weren't here. Remember Minda sent word round for you. Do you think Toggy had any mates?"

"Possibly."

"More beer Zed? – Use your throat while it still works." Without realising it Zed felt his throat and accepted the cup. "I'm protected by Minda who is a force of her own."

"She made me hold her arm this afternoon. She called me 'lover-boy'."

Flor smiled at the last bit. "You know she has a bad foot and a bad hand to go with her bad eye?"

"Really?"

"Yes really. And she beat her whole village at archery. And here is something to think about mister ironmonger – I would be happy to balance an apple on my head and for her to knock it off at six paces with her knife. Did you know we spoiled her show tonight? I could see she knew what to do but I couldn't let it happen. I ended up killing him and causing trouble when she would have maimed him as a lesson for others."

"No Flor. I killed him. I know you call me the ironmonger and I can't afford good blades but I know how to use them. I will show you tomorrow."

"Credit to you then Zed but the best deeds must be secret or else you will wake up dead."

"Who protects Minda?"

"I can't tell you. But you can see that she makes loyal friends wherever she goes. And she has some very mysterious friends who work in ways we don't know."

"What do we owe you for tonight Zed?" asked Flor.

"Nothing. I haven't done anything."

"Yes we do. You have been very useful. If necessary I can say it was you that used your swordsman's knowledge to kill Toggy and Minda asked you specially as an assassin." Zed was silent as the crystals of threat frosted over him. "Minda said you were a lucky shadow. I think she likes you. I'm sure she wouldn't throw you away. Don't worry. Unless she's in a horrible temper – you know what women can be like – I don't think she'll throw you to the lions."

"Lions! She's the Lion girl!"

"Didn't you know? You have to laugh. Really you have to laugh. We ride out crying 'Beware of the lions' and – people wave hello."

"Wave hello?"

"Yes they know we're having fun and like to share it."

"Share fun?"

"Laugh today for tomorrow is another day."

"Another day?"

"Zed, may I give you a bit of advice?"

"Go on."

"Don't stupidly repeat what Minda says if you want to work for her. Don't say 'Another day' or 'Wave hello' Do you get my meaning?"

"Er Yes. Do you want a swordsman?"

"It isn't for me to say Zed but in the short time we've been here we've made lots of enemies. We probably don't want a swordsman but we might train you to be a better shadow and –" Flor thought of this as he spoke " – a personal guard for Minda if I'm elsewhere. Now we may be needed to escort people back to the safety of their homes. I expect you have somebody to report back to. Remember for your own safety I got there first while you watched."

"Yes Flor."

"Flor? Why don't you ask me who is paying me to follow you and Minda?"

"Because I don't expect a truthful answer and I can't be bothered with untangling lies."

"Surely you want to know?"

"I can guess a few criminal names. If we know how does that get us forward? There is no law against following somebody? Tell your master that Minda is flattered that he should think her worth following and you have been a useful guide and confidant."

"Mistress. Not a master!"

Flor took a while to take this in. "Oh shit! – Oh shit. You mean Lady Bob?"

"Lady Bob? Lady Levendale. Steela."

"Yes. Same one. Oh shit!"

"Why is that so much shit?"

"Because she's woman stupid! It's personal. Cost doesn't come into it. Did she haggle?"

"No."

"See! She's desperate. She thinks Minda is stealing her husband."

"So what harm is done?"

"First it shows the power of jealousy. I can't have Minda distracted by that."

"Second?"

"Second you are in the deepest shit. She will use tonight's events to make Minda look bad in the most devious way possible. She will stay up all night scheming how to poison her reputation. And she will have you play whatever part she dreams up. When the fragrant lord's wife sobs a statement to the jury how much is a rag-tag mercenary going to be believed?."

"She wouldn't do that."

"Do you trust her?"

"Er – Perhaps not. Like you say she might be desperate."

"You are expendable Zed. I think we need to look after you. You need protection."

"I can look after myself."

"Against Toggy's friends and Lady Levendale?" Zed was silent. "You have done really well today Zed. You didn't do anything silly and get killed when I caught you. You helped Minda when she needed confidence. You helped us tonight even to killing a man on Minda's behalf."

"I don't get many people whispering 'come with me I'll show you how to follow Minda' in my ear while holding a blade to a vital part."

"I've had enough talk Zed. Are you with us or on your own. Tell me now."

After a slight pause "With you."

"Good. You are yet more expense but I hope to persuade Minda you are worth it. You'd better be a quick learner. Now let's get your story for Lady Bob sorted out. I better come with you and give Mister Bob the true story."

It was arranged that Pod and Mrs Pod would be collected by one of their sons in a while. Tomorrow they would meet Pod in the morning after Minda had alerted Mister Bob to the need for some legal advice. Nobody was to worry – it was right people couldn't be killed without enquiry but they had nothing to fear from the law here. What would Lewin have said to calm them? She didn't know. After hugs and kisses she left with Flor and Shadow rather more sober guards than on the way there. Minda was happy and tired.

"You are my lucky shadow mister Shadow. Brand would be proud of you Flor – And I am too. I could have coped myself – It was like a dream. I saw his weakness and would have cut his hand off with a smash. You did your job perfectly. And well done for staying dignified afterwards. Now I'm tired and want to go to bed."

"Not yet miss. Shadow or Zed as he's called has something to ask you."

"Er – Yes miss. Flor says he needs an assistant and I would be proud to be your servant." She looked at Flor who showed the high-low-low hand sign.

"Well Flor needs a drinking companion – and you're lucky to me. Hm – I think we'll give you a trial. Would a week suit?"

"Yes miss. Thank you miss."

"Is that alright with you Flor?"

"Fine miss."

"Also miss I really am a good swordsman."

"Good but the decision has been made anyway. I shall call you Lucky."

## Jealous adulteress

"Lucky has something more to tell you."

"It's Lady Levendale."

"What about her?"

"She sent me to spy on you."

"Oh. Did she." She paused to think and unusually felt the need to say something – anything – distracting. She whispered "Do you notice how Flor has his attention on that next turning?"

"No miss."

"And behind."

"No miss."

"And above?"

"No miss."

"And what about me Lucky?"

"You're – um – sort of looking right though things."

"How?"

"You're just looking without using your eyes. Eye! Very sorry miss. Earlier when I helped you along and you saw where my hands were when reaching for a handkerchief I didn't even think about where my hands were myself but you did."

"And you would have died in the street if it hadn't been a handkerchief."

Flor interrupted. "Please miss, I know that and you know that, but we don't have to frighten Lucky. He's just a penniless swordsman looking for work wherever he can find it. I think he'll be a useful servant."

"Sorry Flor. He's your assistant."

"Sorry Lucky. Where we come from we have a tradition of scaring the shit out of people to see how they react. The next day we stretch them."

"Stretch!" Lucky's voice had a tremor.

"She means days of hard work to see if you are tough enough to train."

"Oh. I'll do my best miss."

"Good! The stretching starts now. I'll get that bitch. I've freed Smith Jiller of that turd Toggy now we may be able to free Mister Bob from Steela."

"You're not going to kill her?"

"Later you'll learn that you ask questions after I've suggested the plan. We don't waste discussion on possibilities. Flor will train you – we always question ourselves first and then the plan but never each other."

"Er – Sorry I didn't understand that miss but I'll follow your orders."

"And Flor's."

"Yes of course miss."

"May I add something Minda?"

"Yes Flor."

"I will train you so that I can trust you with my life. Tonight we were brothers in arms if you like. I will train you so that Minda obeys your orders."

"I don't understand."

Minda guessed a moment before it happened and was already tense as Flor whistled high-low-high 'follow-me' and she followed Flor to the next alley and rushed down it with the invincible trust in training helping her through a muddy knotted lane. Flor soon stopped and held her. She held him back as Lucky arrived carrying his knife as if expecting something.

"Minda followed my order to follow at all costs. The sooner you can be trusted to give the same orders you receive the safer we will all be. I have half a plan miss."

"Go on Flor. You get more like Brand every minute."

"I'll explain to Mister Bob without Steela knowing what's happened. Lucky will tell Steela what happened, finishing-off with how you lured Toggy to his death then stabbed him at least ten times."

"Why?"

"The body only has two wounds."

"Two!"

"Yes miss. Lucky punctured him in the vital organs from behind."

She digested this information. "On your orders Flor?"

"No."

"I saw the whole thing close like Flor did miss. Just a few feet. When I saw Flor/"

"/Did anybody see you?"

"I don't think so Miss."

"Good we don't/"

"/I've explained to him that he wasn't involved except as a spectator. Nobody is going to call him as a witness except Steela."

"And if she does then... Oh you are wicked Flor! Now I understand. Lucky, take your orders from Flor. You can say lots of untrue things about me tomorrow in court because you're a poor servant in the pay of Steela as a false witness. You can make up how much she paid you. Not too much but at least twice what she actually paid."

"She hasn't paid me yet."

"Well tell her a good story now and you should get paid well. We will eat out well together on your profits."

"No questions miss?" said Flor.

"Any questions Lucky?"

"No miss – Er Thank you miss – I'd die for you tomorrow."

"No you'll live for me tomorrow Lucky. And the day after. Dying is for other people."

As she said this Minda stopped. The reality of dying welled up as she saw Toggy bleeding and heard his agony of groans fade. The dance in the doorway hammered a bell in her imagination of death happening to her. From Minda's earlier collapse in tears Flor had been expecting some reaction and here it came. While gently holding her hand and sheltering her against the blasts of doubt with his cape around her he thought of their talk of nursemaids and focussed on giving her little bits of encouraging praise and strong sympathy to rebuild her vital force. He realised with a start that he hadn't been keeping a lookout and his pride fell into the muddy path of an unfriendly town.

"It's alright Flor. I've been watching."

"Good man Lucky. Are you alright now Minda? We're not finished tonight."

"Thank you Flor. I've never been so close to death before."

"You did well."

"And so did you boys. Tomorrow you'll be looked after in court but saying what happened as it happened seems the best thing to me. Let's deal with Steela then. Are you ready Lucky?"

"Yes Miss."

Flor and Lucky made their separate inroads into the apparent tranquillity of the Levendale household via the servant's door. Lucky reported to Steela that Minda's servant had run Toggy through with a lance without provocation. He'd watched as Minda stabbed him ten times while he lay disabled on the ground. Apparently this was a feud between the smiths and they'd lured Minda there to do their dirty work for them.

Flor was brief with Mister Bob. "Minda has done a lot of good tonight Mister Bob. Your wife put a spy on her. If your wife gives testimony to the coroner tomorrow she will be made to look stupid. Minda is outside in the back lane. I think she would like to see you Mister Bob. She excelled in every way. When there's time I'll explain and you can be proud. She said if you left the house you should use the front door and not creep out the back way." Mister Bob wanted to know more but Flor insisted that the other details could wait until the morning.

Minda folded herself into a dark recess in the lane behind Mister Bob's house. Unquiet curtains of shadow shifted uncomfortably as the clouds played with the moon. Households going to bed made small noises: Bolts were shot, pails clanked, shutters closed. Nine bells struck clearly. In the privacy of her corner she tried to control her thoughts. Good old master of calming Lewin. She'd just killed a man who needed killing. She'd just brought two smiths together. She'd nearly been beaten to the ground or even killed. As she relived the rage of Toggy in the doorway Lewin's saying 'Only you can be still. Perfect stillness is the next best thing to a mother's care.' tingled as she conquered the urge to physically re-enact the moment in the doorway. Pure sparkling summer scented joy flushed through her as the intense clarity of Toggy's swinging punch came back. How it was going to fly. Where his weight would be. Where the escape route was. How to reach for the knife – turn – sweep the blade – stroke – disengage. The best dream ever! She found her sword hand was gripping her other wrist painfully and her breathing intense. Brand had saved her life. She wouldn't let Lewin down. Would he like a gift from the town? That was a good thought to focus on. Some decorative brass from the Lorimer? How were they in Trowstead? What about Mister Trentchard? Was he powerful or just mysterious? Surely he would be live in a town where the trade was? Raysell! She'd forgotten about her and Richard Risket...

Lucky emerged from the back entrance and walked straight past her without the slightest recognition. Either he was very calm or hadn't seen her. She resisted the childish temptation to call "Boo!". Flor emerged a minute later, quietly whistled two highs and walked off in the other direction to fade into the black clutter.

A figure, woman, poked it's head out of the courtyard. Looked around quickly then hurried-off away from Minda. It must be Steela. So she was in cahoots with others. It appeared that towns bred conspiracies like refuse bred vermin. Her sixth sense to watch for rats had paid off. Now all she had to do was follow. Flor was up ahead.

There were no trees to hide behind – that could be difficult. She would have to follow close watching the moon's unpredictable illuminations. As she separated from her shadow danger! A man appeared at the end of the alley behind her. Was it? Yes Mister Bob. She strode towards him as quickly and silence would permit and put her hand on his lips. "Follow me absolutely silently. Steela is abroad."

She held his hand to lead him and they set off in the direction Steela had gone.

Minda calculated the speed Steela was going at and so the distance between them. They had some catching up to do. Mister Bob whispered "I have to talk to you."

"Not now." They reached a side turning. Minda stopped before it and cupped her hand to Mister Bob's ear. "Walk past that entrance and see if there is anyone lurking. Don't stop. Go!" As he went she heard a faint high-low-high which could only be Flor. She caught Mister Bob. before the turning.

Flor appeared from a shadow. "She went into the first house on the left. Walked straight in by the back gate. Checked she wasn't followed then closed it."

"The wall covers us. Let's look. Flor keep watch here."

Minda and Mister Bob crept up to the back gate. Minda put her hand over Mister Bob's mouth again. She needed a moment of peace to think. She gently pushed him into the safety of the wall. "Stay here with your thoughts. If she comes out then let her know you're here but don't say anything else. Back soon." She took Flor round the corner and whispered. "If she stays for five minutes it is simple crime if she stays for an hour it is adultery. I will watch and listen with Mister Bob at the front. You stay at the back but don't be seen when she comes out." At the front Minda explained in whispers what had happened at the Jiller's, how they'd found out about the spy and who was doing it. She explained the false story reported back to Steela.

""Why make life difficult for me Minda?"

"The bull is in your field Mister Bob. Flor and me will look after ourselves with a little help from our friends. I'm sorry Mister Bob. When we're ambushed we fight hard."

"I don't know what to do."

"I have pulled one tooth today if you see my meaning and made the smiths a happy family."

"If I turn her out where will she go?"

Sounds of pleasure came from the window above. Minda pointed.

"Now we know let's find Flor and go home. Our sad troubles won't get better standing out here."

## Coroner's court

Minda had never been to a court before. It should be an interesting experience with the possibility of exposing Steela as a bonus. Flor had left her at the Office while he went to confer with Pod. Mister Bob was later than usual.

"You have to be at the Coroner's court at noon."

"What happens exactly."

"They see if the death was lawful. If you and the Smiths are believed then of course. If false witnesses appear then it isn't so certain."

"But if the wounds on the body agree with us there can be no question."

"As you say Minda, but there are people paid to trick witnesses and cover up evidence."

"Do you want to talk about Steela Mister Bob?"

"I have decided to let her try deception today then decide how to evict her."

"I'm sorry again Mister Bob."

Mister Bob said "It might be a good idea for you to leave Lostnock for a while. Will you go to Selenden where I think the next moon will see something happening."

"So my suspicions were confirmed."

"Well let's say there are more suspicions but no certainties. It will be good for you to get to know my chief agent and he to know you. He always works in the shadows and even you won't know his name. You will meet in secret. You will take orders from him. We have to obey every inch of the law so I don't want any deaths on woodland tracks is that understood?"

"Yes Mister Bob."

The court was convened in the Moot hall. A clerk conferred with the coroner. Lucky was hidden amongst a clan of Smiths. Flor sat with Minda. Mister Bob sat at the back. The coroner listed the bare events and asked if there was anyone who could identify the body. Smith Jiller confirmed it with a nod. Smith Watts spoke up to confirm the deceased's identity. The coroner now turned to the manner of death. "I have it from the captain of the watch that the deceased was about to strike a girl when a bystander cut him with a sword so hard that the arm was nearly severed and the deceased then bled to death. There are four witnesses to the event and the girl about to be struck here I believe. Is that correct clerk?"

"Yes sir."

"The man who struck the fatal blow is also here is that correct clerk?"

"Yes sir."

"Let us hear his evidence."

Flor stood up and began speaking but the clerk stopped him. "No you have to come to this table to swear an oath to give true evidence."

After Flor had taken the oath and given his name and village of origin the coroner questioned him. "Did you strike the fatal blow?"

"Yes your honour."

"You address me as Sir."

"Yes Sir."

"Why was it you were equipped with a sword and ready to use it?"

"My job is to guard my mistress Minda."

"Who is Minda?"

"The girl who was about to be smote to pieces sir."

Minda stood up unasked.

"Thank you miss. Be seated. Mister Flor – Do you think I should believe that when none of the other girls in Lostnock have guards."

"Now you know the reason sir."



"What reason?"

"My mistress has enemies – Last night one nearly killed her."

"Being punched, however unpleasant is not the same as being killed."

"Being punched by a smith in a rage would kill a big man outright sir. Smiths are strong people sir."

"So why did you not restrain the deceased. Instead you reached for your sword in the expectation of delivering lethal force."

"Er – it was not practical sir. I would not be able to grapple with such a strong man."

"Young man I am deeply suspicious that a family argument is settled by a conveniently armed assassin. In the country you may settle feuds with the sword but I won't have petty quarrels erupting into bloodshed at any excuse."

"I defended my/"

/"Sit down! – Minda!"

She took Flor's hand to support her as she dragged her bad foot with her to the table. "Sorry sir. I was born with a bad foot." She'd decided to look as humble and had put powder on her face to look pale and vulnerable. After swearing the oath the coroner questioned her:

"Why was the deceased angry with you?"

"I had been involved in a family matter with Smith Watts and Smith Jiller. The smiths were agreed that he was not fit to trade as a smith. Naturally he was angry."

"What business is it of yours."

"I am a smith. I pulled the rotten tooth."

"How can you be a smith?"

Minda reached into her boot-scabbard and pulled out her knife. "I made this with my own hands it keeps its edge and has served me well."

"That doesn't make you a smith."

From the benches a fashionably dressed Pod stood up. "No sir. It is the brotherhood of smiths that make smiths and Minda is one of us."

"Hmm. So how has your knife served you well?"

"By saving my life."

"Not by killing people then?"

"No sir. I hastened the death of a criminal who was dying a very painful death once."

"You may sit down."

Minda nearly forgot to limp as she returned to her seat. Still the coroner hadn't actually been unfair.

The coroner checked with the clerk then continued. I have been told there was another witness and he is present. Will Zebedee of Elmford give evidence. Minda and Flor cautiously looked at each other in disbelief. Steela had really been blinded by jealousy. They smiled at a nervous and seedy Lucky. After the formality of the oath the coroner began:

"You were passing Smith Jiller's smithy when you saw a young woman repeatedly stabbing a man prone on the ground."

"No."

"No? That is what you told an informant." Lucky stayed silent. "I won't have insolence in this court."

"Do you have any more questions for me sir?"

"I ask the questions."

Minda contradicted. "I want to know who is calling me a murderess. Who is this informant? Let her give evidence on oath."

"Err – She is not in a position to do so."

"Lady Levendale's very pretty don't you think?"

"Steela has nothing to do with this and if I/"

/"Steela! That's familiar."

"How dare you challenge the court!"

"She squeals in bed. Your bed"

"Warder! Arrest this girl!"

"Last night about a half nine."

Lucky chipped in with a thin claim "On oath I saw it with my own eyes".

More forcefully from the back came Mister Bob's steady deep growl. "I heard it too. My adulterous wife in your house last night squealing with delight."

Flor had difficulty guessing where the immediate threats to Minda were. She stood up. "Either ask Zebedee for his evidence or end this play and say my guard killed a man in the necessity of defence and we can leave."

Cheers and encouragement came from the smiths.

The coroner shouted "Court adjourned!" and ran out.

In the confusion Flor and Minda automatically headed for the security of a wall. Flor guided Minda to a corner to protect their backs. He waved at Lucky to join them.

"Good man. We'll be drunk tonight. Now quietly keep an eye on our backs. Minda is amongst friends but we are not safe yet. All the people with the smiths are smiths but others are strangers who may be Toggy's friends who want to ask questions. A single whistle will bring us both. Clear?"

"Yes."

And the conference of a few seconds was over with each on their mission.

"Well done Flor. Oh and the evidence also – you were very composed and proper. Now will you or I comfort Mister Bob?"

"You do the smiths I'll do Mister Bob."

Minda in daylight. Minda against the lawyers. Minda against injustice. Minda who tickled their hearts by exposing scandal. She was the toast of the smiths. Naturally it was Pod who hugged her but after kissing him she broke away to find John and his wife silently holding hands sharing a happy moment. She hugged both of them.

"There is the evil of beaten-over rust here John." John made an angry stabbing motion. "You and the townsfolk will have to strike him. I have to go away." The sudden change of steady happiness to disappointment on their faces touched Minda

deeply. "I'll come back." Their expressions turned to sceptical hope. "It's only for a few days or so. I don't know. You are my family – All the smiths of Lostnock are."

John clattered on his slate "STARIRN MUST FLI"

By habit Pod's large family and a few friends were not embracing the Jillers. Minda pulled Pod from a crowd admiring his clothes. "The Jillers are your family Pod. Please make them welcome. Especially Mrs Pod. They are poor but they are your family – And you might be able to give them a son. And I may have a daughter for you when I come back."

"Come back?"

"I have duty in the countryside Pod. Your duty is to strike that bastard coroner while I'm away. Oh and Mister Bob will/"

"/Mister Bob?"

"Lord Levendale. His wife Steela was spying on me and tried to get the weasel you saw to say I stabbed Toggy when he was lying injured on the floor. Oh and come here." She whispered: "Mrs Jiller will be frightened of your wealth. She will feel so beaten down by it. Make sure she is happy – For me."

Pod wasn't used to the female way of thinking but he was honest enough to admit: 'Women make a family men only keep it.' "I will try."

Flor made for Mister Bob and stood next to him silently watching the happy smiths they were just 'family'. Deep down he wished he was part of them. The others were discussing and disputing the scandal as bits were explained. Mister Bob was silent but pleased that Flor was right next to him. To Mister Bob Flor's silent presence was worth a lot of something. Flor sensed that his job was worthwhile but wasn't a woman and didn't realise that men might need to share their thoughts – Or at least feel better for knowing they could share them if they could catch them. Flor broke the silence between them: "Watch the man in the green cap sir. Is he the boss? They are after Lucky."

"Lucky?"

"Zebedee. They may be Toggy's friends. We may have to protect him."

"Who is we?"

"Minda and me."

"I'm on your side then. Nobody beats you two."

"Not yet – Just watch. The signal is one whistle. Are you armed?"

"Just a pen knife."

"Have it ready if needs must. The one with the red hair is armed to kill. Leave him to me."

"How do you know?"

"Because he's not looking at people talking to him."

"Really is that a sign?"

"You're looking at me sir and I'm looking at them. I'm the armed one. That should help you decide."

Lucky had spotted the three bits of bad news. Unfortunately he hadn't got an escape route. Except! The coroner had a private exit that he'd just used. Flor saw his problem and his solution. Two dozen people were oblivious to the desperate calculations being made by Flor, Lucky and red-head. Flor finished his first. He called out. "Will the man with the red hair come here please." All conversation stopped. Eventually all eyes found the red-haired man. "Come on! I wish to speak to you. Are you afraid?"

Lucky was nearly clear...

"Alright stay where you are then. Suit yourself, but count your arms each morning. Toggy attacked my friend and died in a puddle of his own blood."

Lucky had escaped.

Flor had intended to engage the red-head further but Minda had got there first. She sneaked up on him. "Sun inn. One o'clock." she hissed and retreated as unexpectedly as she'd arrived.

Mister Bob turned to Flor. "What just happened?"

"Lucky was cornered so we gave him the chance to escape and Minda has iced the cake. I didn't hear what she said but we've just defeated a tiny army and they know it and now we follow hard on their retreat. – I think." Mister Bob was silent. Flor felt his silence. Before the two men had shared comforting silence now Mister Bob was empty. "Mister Bob. If I can help you get over your grief for Steela's adultery then ask me. If you want me to undo Minda's charge then I can't." With that he intercepted Minda. "Plan?"

"We are going to take lunch at the Sun. Red-head may join us."

"I'm so hungry."

"What about Lucky?"

"He's used to being the world's kick-dog."

"How is Mister Bob?"

"Sadder than sad."

"Perhaps I should go to him."

"I told him to come to me first."

She held his arm. "You men are like dogs leaping in a henhouse when it comes to women."

The Sun inn wasn't very private but they managed to preserve some illusion of mistress and servant. As they couldn't talk about the inquest here they made things up about lions and wolves to begin with and then about the shortage of oats which Flor just happened to have some spare of and would like the price to rise. Then the magnificent rivetting of a smith down by err – never mind she'd remember his name – Jiller! That was it. Saved money in the long run. Red-head appeared.

"Have you had dinner?"

"No miss."

"Waiter! It is one o'clock and this poor man is starving. Have you any beef?"

"Of course Miss."

"Then beef for him and peas pudding for us." Red-head tried to protest. Minda came to the point. "I have friends, and enemies. Enemies of friends are my enemies. Think about that while they prepare your dinner."

"But Miss/"

"/When I say 'think' that means shut your mouth."

There was silence as Minda smiled at red-head. After the meal had arrived and been eaten without conversation Minda spoke: "Thank you for coming Mister Red-head. Zebedee is one of ours now and he is not to be touched is that clear?"

Red-head paused. Like the coroner, a single threat wouldn't unseat him. "Who killed Toggy?"

"Flor here. But he was only protecting me. What you heard today was true. He was about to smash me into the ground. A big smith's fist. It was horrible and beautiful."

"Beautiful?"

"Oh yes. In the country we train for attacks and how to deal with them. Toggy didn't stand a chance. If Flor hadn't cut his arm off then I'd have smashed his wrist off with my knife. It was beautiful the way he showed me he was going to punch me, then that he hadn't got the rest of his body behind it. I could see where it would sweep, avoid, turn and slash. You know all that."

"I know about close fighting miss."

"Good. And now you know where to get beef dinner. I shall be out of town for a while. If you need my protection or a beef dinner it will be two knocks repeated three times at my lodgings or the Tax Office. Do you understand?"

"Yes Miss."

"Do you have a name I could use?"

"Er – Ken"

"Until another time then Ken."

When he had gone. Flor asked: "How do you make them submit?"

"Kindness and not asking questions and – huh – making them agree to something they feel they don't have to accept."

"How did Lucky know what happened last night Flor? I saw him leave before you and he went past me without seeing me."

"I'll find out. Now can we get back to our everyday business?"

"I expect we'll be sent into the country on a tax mission very soon. Mister Bob thinks if we're not here people can't point fingers. I think we may be able to get a day at Trowstead."

"Do we take Lucky?"

"I think we'd better for his sake. Can you get another horse? I'll leave everything to you. I'm really hoping to see them at Sel//Err this isn't the place to talk. I'm stupid! Find Lucky and see me at the office." Minda blushed with shame at discussing plans where people might hear.

# 7 Return to Trowstead

They cantered and walked the horses along the high road through light patches of rain driven by the blustering west wind. Waxed berries shone red in the hedges, wet yellowing leaves glistened, the fresh smell lifted Minda's spirits. The town's knots of intrigue tied her up and its constant closeness suffocated her. There was no time to think and prepare. Two days ago was the thin ice of the coroner's court. The day before three strikes and Toggy's killing and a wedding of smiths. Davey was pleased to call her 'fox in the henhouse' but the chickens wouldn't be so happy. She resolved to make two friends for every enemy. Captain Ferris Frodasher and his two troopers seemed to prefer taking orders rather than responsibility, she would have to deal with that. After the lunch break she made friends with the two troopers Karvin and Geort. She explained her history, promised to show them her archery and knife throwing. Ferris, Karvin and Geort had been in the party that collected the spoils of the ambush the month before so they knew about her but nothing about the details of the ambush.

## Building strength and trust

Flor had offered his and Lucky's services to the captain and made a point of acknowledging his position of command. Respectfully Flor suggested that he would take the rear and give a low-high whistle for danger and an extra high for go as fast as possible. Ferris hesitated but Flor made his point by saying that Minda would obey the whistle signals without waiting for Ferris. "We've practised this a hundred times."

Before the lunch stop Flor rode beside Lucky. Flor questioned him about many things and was quite impressed. He already knew about Steela's night-time destination and had used his knife to climb the shutters of the shop opposite and perch on the sign board to see if he could view the bed chamber. Then Minda and Mister Bob talked in whispers right underneath.

"How did you let us spot you following us when we were visiting the smiths?"

"I was sloppy. Farmer boy couldn't carry a pitchfork – so I thought. Lady Levendale doesn't inspire loyalty and I was thinking of other things. I made a mistake."

"Lucky mistake."

"Yes I think so. Very lucky."

"Do you know the red-head who was after you at the coroner's court?"

"They call him Quiet Ken. He's hired by the day like me."

"Can you think who was hiring him? We gave him a good beef dinner at the Sun."

"Dinner!"

"Yes it's Minda's plan. Meet your opposition face to face and let them know that you're friendly if left alone."

"And if not? Oh yes. You get your arm cut off."

"Yes she's a bit brisk with the knife but she scored an adultery which is a nice change."

"Did she really make that knife herself?"

"Yes. We may be going back to her home village very soon."

"What's this about the smiths?"

"She is a bit of romance for them – a connection to the world outside their village. She brings threads of news and plays with their children and makes marriages. She could walk up to any smithy and get whatever she needed or give whatever was wanted."

After the lunch stop Flor asked the Captain if he and Lucky could ride ahead and mock-ambush them. To the captain military exercises were a bit out of the ordinary and there didn't seem to be the need. "No I'd rather not. Excitement just after food is not good for a person." Flor dutifully returned to the back of the party with Lucky.

He hadn't glanced at Minda but this was a sudden problem for her for which she'd got no answer. What were her strengths. Where should she face? What was his weakness? Eventually she found something to try. "Ferris. Lucky is a mercenary who has been in my employment for only one day. I would like Flor to test him to see if he is as good as he says he is and above all else loyal. If he betrays us when it matters then we are all dead meat. I think he is more loyal than your men but we need to see. It might be a good idea to find out now rather than in the dark when anything could happen."

Ferris admitted to himself that ambush practice would be a good idea. It would liven up the miserable wet day. He called halt then explained. "Men let us have a practice. Myself and Lucky and Flor will ride ahead and ambush you. Then you can do the same to us."

Flor and Minda sank. The captain would lead them so predictably. Minda winked at Flor and gave him the low-low 'I am supporting you' hand signal. She was cheerful. "We'll give you five minutes head start." As they galloped off she addressed her party. "Karvin, Geort do you want to be made to look like fools or foxes?" They thought about answering but knew a power struggle was going on above their heads and didn't want to get involved. "Karvin?"

There was no escape for him. "Fox miss."

"Geort?"

"Fox miss."

"Good. You've wasted valuable time hesitating. Geort. Trot up the road to watch them but keep out of sight."

"But that's only a minute miss not five."

"I am alive now because I never fight fair." Something inside her, the mischief that kept her poking at the darkness, made her pull back her hood, take off her cap and unpin her hair. "Go! Follow at a safe distance. You Karvin! See the way the road curves round this hill. Ride the other side of that little wood and get a higher view. Arm up for 'there is a way ahead here for us all'. Arm sideways for 'no way'. Arm waving for 'you go ahead along the road slowly I will follow from up here'. If I wave you return to the road as far ahead as you think fit. Go!" That was two, possibly three minutes. She could afford to delay, it would mean her opponents had to wait in uncomfortable places longer – good training."

Karvin held an arm up. She galloped up the heath. Stefan was in good strength thanks to those morning rides. Soon she was up with Karvin.

"What about Geort miss?"

"Hang him. Let him learn what it's like to argue with me. Follow me. We are outflanking them. Stay ten paces behind." The next fifteen minutes were spent picking their way across the broom, bracken, heather and furze of the heath. The trouble was trying to keep close enough to the rounded brow to view the road below without being shown against the skyline. Lying prone in the furze she explained the plan to Karvin: "I think the captain will have picked where the road goes through that gully. Two minutes more then we gallop down to the road by that crooked tree and walk back. They probably can't see us here and our path down is round the bole of the hill. This is too easy."

"Much too easy miss." Lucky showed himself twenty paces away.

"Lucky!"

"Yes miss. Flor said you'd come another way."

"Ow ow ow! I'm dead!" She laughed with every muscle. Pleasure and pride swept through her. A magical moment of childish happiness when uncertain fear is replaced by warm family hugs. She rolled over face up in the wet furze, offered her hand to Lucky to pull her up. He'd never ambushed a laughing girl before but his surprise was swamped by the depth of feeling for such innocent honesty. She pulled him close. "A magic moment Lucky. Remember this when I'm dead. Now let's collect the bodies and get going." Karvin was picking himself up from the prone position rather hoping he was invisible. "Well done Karvin. I hope you've learned there are a lot of clever people in this world. There's a lot of training to be done."

Flor soon knew of the capture on the heath above and Karvin was sent to retrieve Geort while he, Minda, Lucky and the captain walked on. They discussed strengths, weaknesses and possibilities.

Ferris said "Flor said you'd never wait the promised five minutes"

"No of course I didn't."

"What's the point of giving orders if they're not obeyed?"

"Staying alive."

"Staying alive?"



Flor winced at the repetition. The sign of a congested or empty brain. Minda didn't like that when she was weary or run out of niceness.

"Staying alive." Flor smiled. Minda could give as little as she was given.

"Er what I meant was if I give an order I expect it to be obeyed."

"Which order was that?"

"I asked you/"

/"No you didn't captain" said Flor "Minda volunteered five minutes and you accepted. You tell me the enemy that doesn't take every advantage."

After a moment's pause Minda continued "Ferris, we fight for our lives not for somebody else's money."

Lucky added "Sir. I have known these two for two days or so. In that time they have killed a strong man, saved me from possible death, exposed adultery and a corrupt official. Just now Flor let a virtual stranger, an armed mercenary, ambush his most prized possession and taught you a lesson."

"What lesson?"

"The sleepy guard lesson. The one you never wake from."

Minda intervened: "Ferris. What these men are trying to tell you is that when you're with me don't go looking for trouble as it will find you."

"I don't want trouble."

"Why did Mister Bob send you then? To learn what trouble looks like I expect. This is a practice mission. There is probably nothing real for you and your troop to guard."

Flor added. "My mission is to look after Minda. Above all else."

Lucky added. "I've been around many countries captain and these men are real steel."

"What do you want me to do? Lord Levendale warned me this trip might be a bit exciting."

"Work with me Ferris." said Minda. "I have a job to do which might involve/"

/"Ahead right skyline!" called Lucky.

"Captain? Lucky? I'll wait for the troopers in the open here. Flor would you round them up?"

Lucky rode off and after a hesitation Ferris followed. Flor had hardly started back before returning. "They are lurking."

"I can't blame them. They know they're only horseshoes."

"Not our way is it miss."

"I will try to fix it Flor. I will ask you later how you got Lucky on the heath. That's something I owe you. I want my servants to be cleverer than me, that means they might be cleverer than the enemy."

Flor turned. "You two are the rear guard. Stay thirty paces behind. Lucky and the captain are investigating a suspicious man on the heath. Show me your swords!" They drew their swords to Flor's command. He had already learned the voice of command! Minda was thrilled.

"Who is the enemy miss?"

"I don't know. But we have made some recently."

"No Minda – You have made some and I killed one for you."

"I can't believe this is going to get worse."

"Worse? Sorry Minda."

"If Mister Trentchard is right the forces of banditry are about to be unleashed and it's you and me against them."

"And Lucky."

"And Mister Trentchard. And the Smiths and most of everyone else. I know where we are. There is a smithy a mile ahead. 'Smith Aken of Rodwell. Nearly home Flor! What's happened to Lucky and Ferris?"

"I can't believe they are in real trouble but we should find out. It could be playing games or a cast shoe." He turned "Geort! Karvin! Here!" "I want you two to ride twenty paces apart to that tree on the skyline. See what's happened to the captain and Lucky. If you need us wave both arms else we'll see you at the next village. Go!" They galloped off having completely forgotten the 'twenty paces apart' command. Flor and Minda felt their responsibilities growing. The two horsemen going up the hill to an unknown fate were not important but if there was really trouble they'd have to do something. In Flor's case it was 'get Minda safe'. In Minda's case it was tell their families they died doing their duty. Sour thoughts coughed over positive action.

"Let's get to that smithy." said Minda.

"Go!" shouted Flor. Neither knew of any danger but the oppression of unseen enemies of the town was beginning to haunt them along the skylines of the country.

They reached the village, raced up to the smithy, rolled off their horses and hurried to the safety of a wall where they could face whatever danger came. They both felt nervous for no reason. When Minda had checked there was no immediate danger she crept inside to see the smith. At last a proper village forge with all the right sounds, smells and signs of efficient industry. The smith was working a grindstone and stopped to greet his visitor.

"Oh you're the star-iron girl. Welcome."

She gave the friendship sign. "Greetings Smith Dick Aken. I'm on my way from Lostnock to Trowstead."

"Can I help you Miss? Please tie up your lovely hair." She began to scowl. "It could catch the fire or tangle in the wheel."

She realised the sense of this. "My fault smith. Sorry I should have realised." While twisting it together, it would need a lot of combing later, she was touched by his manner. "That was nice of you to say my hair was lovely Dick. Thank you."

It was a shame to spoil this moment of pleasure. "If I needed armed men how soon could you rouse some?"

"Whoa! What's happened miss?"

"I don't know but there may be bad people about."

The rolling thunder of hooves sent a wave of chill through her. A bow would be better than a knife. If necessary the smithy had missiles that could hurt but not cut. Had Flor got a safe post? What were her strengths. A friendly smithy to retreat into. That should keep them out for a while. As she came out Flor gave the high-low 'safe' whistle. Round the corner came Lucky, Ferris and his men.

What was going on? Ambush exercises were one thing but messing about in the rain...

Smith Aken stood beside her with a long hammer as uncertain as Minda. "I think it is alright Dick. I haven't practised with these men before today. They come from a town and aren't used to the countryside."

"Is there trouble coming?"

"I'll find out." She walked up to the knot of glowing men and breathing horses. "Is there anything wrong Ferris?"

"No. We met an old friend who wants to meet you. He will be here in a while and accompany you to Trowstead. We will go on ahead." She looked at Lucky who gave her an optimistic face. The sooner he knew the high-low whistle signals the better. Ferris made a cautious suggestion "You will be safe with him and so may I have Flor? It really would be better."

Minda realised there was something special going on. Ferris wouldn't have asked unless he had a reason. She had to trust him. "Yes Ferris – But look after him he's very valuable." Ferris smiled. Flor kept a straight face.

"Flor. Come with me a moment." Minda retreated into the smithy. "Tell Brand and Mister Trentchard as much as you can. I will arrive later and have to explain so much to so many. Oh and tell-off those troopers for being sloppy from me. Oh and ... No I can't do everything in one day – But there is something I must do now. Take care." She hugged him then strode back outside. "Ferris. Could you spare a moment?" He came over to the smithy door. "Smith Aken this is Captain Ferris. He is on the side of the angels. If he ever needs help please try. He may draw a shooting star as a man may wink to his comrade." Smith Aken and Ferris were both a bit confused by this but both knew Minda had shown them another stepping stone across the river of disinterest and decay. There was nothing for the men to say. "Sorry to hold you up Captain. May I wait here Dick?"

"Yes miss of course. Tell me the news."

## Silks

Minda was alone with Tom. The nerves of a few minutes ago had been replaced by curious excitement. She began telling him about striking Toggy. From her vantage at the door saw a damp chapman sheltering in his cape riding the first of a string of four pack horses clopping along the muddy village street. He had a painted yellow flash on the pack frames of all his horses and yellow flashes on his lead-horse's harness. Anything to do with trade interested her and the thought of all the various sorts of goods he must have intrigued her. She wished she could ride with him and ask. She continued with Toggy's tale but had hardly got past the description of striking when a boy ran up. "Please Smith Aken the man leading the pack horses has a message for this lady."

"Yes Jerry?"

"He says will she meet him on the road?"

Dick and Minda exchanged glances.

"I expect she will. Good boy."

Minda fished in her purse. "Thank you. Here's a penny for you mother."

The boy, only eight years old perhaps, had never had to stitch good luck and odd requests together before. "Thank you miss" And he ran off through the spitting rain.

"It looks like I must leave you brother. The news is that an unfit smith was struck in Lostnock three days ago and the remaining smiths are a strong family. If you hear bad rumours they are lies. Sorry I must go but may see you anytime of day or night in the next week or two and explain. I am on the Kings' duty. Some say bad times are ahead. If they are then I and the captain are your friends. Day or night, fine or storm. Any message for Trowstead?"

"No Miss. Thank you for stopping. Oh yes. What happened at Barrington?"

"Rowsing married widow Brawter and Dunstin forged the rivets."

"That's what I heard. But who is looking after Rokwold?"

"I think that's a dying village."

Minda soon caught up with the dour chapman. She was impressed by the way he had ignored her in public. Obviously this was to be a private meeting. Flor would have drawn unnecessary attention. As she overhauled him she spoke. "Greetings stranger. I am Minda. May I accompany you?"

"Greetings mistress. Please ride with me."

"Give me a name I can call you stranger."

"Today I am Ripetto, dealer in lady's accessories. Purses, shoes, furs, brooches, silks, caps, nets, gloves and so on."

"Hello Ripetto. Now give me a name I can know you by."

"No miss. You live in the light. Your name goes before you like the rose-light before sun-rise. Mine is hidden in the shadows."

"I shall call you 'Silks'."

"Let me teach you. My name is never mentioned. Not ever. If you are in say the Sun inn the day before yesterday with a red-headed beef-eater and you called me 'Silks' or any other thing it would be my neck in a noose."

"Yes I was more stupid than a mole in a tree then. I am ashamed."

"We have the rest of daylight on this road. Let us talk. Lord Levendale and Mister Trentchard have told me about you but I want to know for myself. As for me you only need to know two things. Firstly you don't know me if we meet. We won't lodge together and if we set servants to watch on each other we won't say and only because we are desperate to be back to back for each other's safety in ways we dare not share. Secondly I don't have an apprentice or a family. One day I will give up this job and stick to simple trading hundreds of miles away and settle down."

Minda thought about this. Face the enemy! "Why not stick to trading and settle down now?"

Silks gave her a funny look into her face and was quiet. Eventually he volunteered "There's not much excitement in trading."

Minda understood about tension and excitement herself but some men seemed to need constant danger. She longed for a quiet week at the Office to untangle the filing system. "I don't like danger Silks." He laughed and laughed and laughed. She was pleased to see his grey cloth face and deep eyes turned into a grinning whiskered devil's head but had no idea why he should be laughing. Was he mad?

"Ah that's a good one miss."

"What's so funny?"

"That's a funny thing to say for someone who sets fire to men's shirts for fun."

"Sorry – I don't understand."

"You have upset a lot of people in Lostnock. The rats don't like the ratcatcher. Two days ago you cornered the coroner. The day before you killed Jiller. And you don't like danger!" He started laughing again.

Minda still didn't see the joke. "I dealt with the situation. It's not really danger when it's just happening."

"You really don't know?"

"No."

"There are many smugglers you don't know anything of but they know about you. They don't have much goodwill at the best of times and it only takes one to lose patience. Killing you would be their simple way of getting you out of the way. Or see the force of jealousy. You were lucky to recruit Zebedee."

"I said I didn't like it. I don't like the rain but I have to put up with it."

"But you do seem to make a lot of enemies."

"What difference does another one make? From the first day when Frewsell had a good talking-to I was in danger. I must find out more about courts as I don't understand the rules."

Silks laughed again. "Lord Levendale and Mister Trentchard were right. You don't worry about anything do you."

Minda thought then shrugged. She wasn't going to tell Silks what she worried about.

"Why be worried by things you can't do anything about?"

The occasional light rain of earlier was gone. Now it was the wind's turn to hurry the changing of the seasons. Whipped branches let go of their leaves for a tumbling descent into the anonymous rustling flocks being chased across the road.

"Is there anything you want to ask me or tell me Silks?"

He didn't reply for a while. "We are like two fishermen holding a net across a stream. Each on his own bank. Do not cross to my side. Do not let go."

She was starting to understand him. "What about the captain?"

"His job is to stop you getting close enough to hurt anybody. Lord Levendale has definite views on violence. He says there is so much crime we haven't got an army big enough to conquer it by force so we need to use other methods."

"What other methods?"

"Fear of fines, imprisonment and forfeiting their goods. Once caught they know they are marked men and we will have our eye on them. You're good at letting people know you could appear at any time and are not afraid to poke your nose in."

"I just want to find out about trade."

"The merchants of Lostnock like you. You ask nothing from them in a world that has a price for everything. They think their little dishonesties will be forgiven if found out. One told me he thought you were like his mother – Telling-off silly boys and taking a shoe to the bullies. As the story of the court gets around the coroner will get a finger wagging from your friends."

"How will I contact you Silks?"

"Mister Trentchard knows how."

"And if he isn't around?"

"Good girl not to take no for an answer. I know I can trust you but talking about private things in the Sun has made me wary."

"I've said I was stupid."

"I will be at Selenden tomorrow. Do not follow me unless you get a message saying I have your er – Silk! Yes Silk. It will be in code. Remember we have spoken about fishing and I won't write anything without reason."

"Thank you Silks. It's like the code the smiths use. Simple to guess when you know how they think."

"Can you tell me about the events with the smiths?"

"Yes Silks. And can you tell me about how you trade?"

"Yes Minda."

The rest of the journey was spent with Minda telling Silks how she'd been adopted first by Dunstin then the others. "I cannot give you the signs but if you like I will let it be known that a trader who mentions 'star-iron' is a friend of mine and I will pay any expense. Offer to take messages to me. The brothers like to gossip but don't often meet. They don't know I lurk in the dark."

Silks explained his simple trading methods. The towns wanted things from the country like herbs, dyes and special cloths and tools while the country wanted purses, fine materials, trinkets, girdles, fashions, glass ware and many other things. Heavier goods were ordered then collected by a carter on a roughly monthly schedule. "They make the best fishhooks in Doddlestone and the best needles in the next village Saddlestone so I buy them for the town while they buy my goods and tell me what else they want for next time."

## Joyful arrival

Just before they arrived at Trowstead Minda thought she saw a movement in the hedge two dozen yards ahead. "Stop." she quietly commanded Silks and halted her horse. The plodding pack string took longer to realise it had stopped but eventually all was still. "Nothing to fear. There may be a welcome party twenty paces ahead. If they can play games so can I. I have all day." She sat still, folded her arms and spoke clearly to Silks as a chance road companion. "Thank you mister chapman. Will you bring your wares to the hall tonight?"

" 'Twould be a pleasure mistress. I think I will stop here tonight."

"Thank you for your company chapman. It gets lonely on the road all day."

"Until tonight then."

Minda climbed down from her horse as the string clopped on into the village. When they were well past where she thought the ambushers were she called. "You can come out now it's safe."

Henry and Delphia squeezed damp and sheepish from the hedge. "Minda! You've come back" Shouted Delphia and ran up to her.

With her sixth sense sharpened by two years of training Minda turned her back on Delphia in time to catch Brand walking up silently behind her while still ten paces away. "Any more Brand?"

"No Minda." Whether it was the joy of being home or the inability to speak of the gratitude to Brand for showing her how to foresee in vivid detail the ways of attackers, Minda found she was crying. Hugging Brand and Delphia she was so happy. Brand had a huge smile. Delphia was excited as a child at a fair. Henry stood a couple of paces away, hands by his side, smiling gently to himself. Henry! Bless him. "Come and have a kiss Henry."

Minda lifted Delphia bodily onto her horse. "Do you remember Delphia how you wanted to be lifted up when we first met and I threatened to throw you into the midden? – Only two years ago."

"Yes."

"Well I can still lift you but I've grown up and I don't throw people into middens any more."

"What? I can't tell when you're being serious."

"Don't worry Delphia. I'm happy to be back. And I may have a job for you."

"Really. Me?"

"Brand, Henry, can you see anyone else called Delphia round here?" Silence. "Of course I mean you you bag of butterflies."

"Sorry Minda."

"Come on I'm hungry and have lots to tell."

Four happy people walked into the village. Delphia riding while Minda had one arm round Brand and the other round Henry. She thought perhaps it looked like she was being helped as an invalid!

As they passed the smithy Minda had to make a difficult decision. "I must see Smith Thredvald. I will tell you my tales by the fire later." She squeezed the men and strode off to talk to the smith. Inside Thredvald was alone. Seeing his face recalled the night of the Harvest Home. "I'm back Thredvald. If I had the hands I would learn the fiddle."

He looked blank then abashed. "Did you like it miss?"

"Yes of course. Raysell and Delphia play the Lute and they know some dances but you got sparks out of your fiddle at Harvest home."

"Thank you miss."

She gave the private sign. Thredvald waited in silent expectation. "Four days ago I struck three for a bad smith."

"No!"

"Then he attacked his brothers in Lostnock and was killed closer than I am to you."

"Killed!"

"He raised his fist to smash down on me."

"Minda you shouldn't get involved with the affairs of men."

"How can I help it? And the brothers in Lostnock had grown apart and I welded them together. It was beautiful."

Thredvald recited.

*"Star-iron light of the black night.  
You sparkle, shine and then smite.  
The prettiest hag girl that ever there's been.  
Are you a witch or a faerie queen?"*

I composed it myself."

"Thank you Thredvald." She continued slowly "I can't answer your question. I wish I knew. And It's nice to be called pretty."

"You are miss."

"No Thredvald – I'm an ugly cripple"

"Miss! You have a bent face but the happiest – er – way of being happy."

Minda was flattered and pleased that it was a countryman who could put her suspicions caught from a hundred hesitating looks into straight words. "You've made me even happier – More than you know Thredvald." Somehow the lonely contentment of all smiths increased at this moment.

Minda's next call was Lewin. She apologised for not bringing him a present back from the town due to being called away without notice. Within a minute of sitting in his workshop she felt a wrap of something invisible and protective around her. The smell of horses, feed and oils enveloped her. She'd meant to tell Lewin all the things that happened in the last month but there was a more important cloud that she wanted to rain on him to see if he knew about it. "Jealousy. How can anyone be jealous of me Lewin?"

"Easily Minda. Another woman?"

"Yes."

"Men fight when they're angry. Women hoard a bucket of spite."

"This woman spied on me and nearly had me sent to gaol as a murderess."

"Only death conquers jealousy. Nasty business."

"It was."

"And if you go back it won't be over."

"Is there anything else you suggest?"

"Sorry Minda. Only death cures jealousy."

"Are you saying I should kill her?"

"Not unless she tries to kill you."

"She has in a way."

"Distance or death are the only things I can suggest. It's like this – You have made her frightened deep-down in a way you don't know. She thinks you want to steal something and no matter how many times you say you don't she won't believe you."

"Do horses get jealous of each other?"

"Sometimes. But horses are simple creatures. They want fair shares and all you have to do is give them some share and let them know that it is you that decides what is fair."



Mistress Marline came into the workshop. "Oh Minda here you are." They all knew Marline hadn't found them by chance.

"I'm pleased to be back Mistress Marline. I was just shaking out the dust of jealousy with the only man I know who can draw a sting on the arm with a look in the eye and hand on the forehead."

Mistress Marline was concerned "Where?"

"Sorry Mistress I was only using an example."

"Oh I see."

Lewin loved gossip but now the best thing was to turf the ladies out. He looked straight at mistress Marline. "Minda, I really want to know what happened in the town but now I must attend to my horses."

"I've exercised Stefan nearly every day."

"I can see that. Give him more roots than grain in future. He's a horse that gets above himself if fussed."

"I will Lewin. Well I'll make sure Flor does." She hesitated but praise was like manure and should be spread. "Flor has turned from a causal boy into a determined man. I have trusted him with my life and he's saved it. He is a treasure."

## Action delayed

Her interview with Mister Trentchard was friendly. Flor must have expanded on Mister Bob's reports. He was pleased with himself for crafting a team and enjoyed the guilty pleasure of starting a blaze in somebody else's field. When Minda asked if Flor had explained Mister Bob's painful domestic situation he said yes. She told him how she was learning about how the way trade worked and was getting on well with the majority of traders; how she was putting into practise the lessons in talking to strangers in their own homes without making them feel they were being questioned on sensitive matters; how the hours with Brand at fighting had paid off; how she'd expected Flor to be an armed household servant but he'd matured into a thoughtful lieutenant. She had complete faith in his ability to use his initiative.

"Flor says he has been learning from you too."

"Oh yes I've been showing him how to tally accounts. The town is trade-mad. Everyone is buying and selling. He buys more provisions than we need then sells the extra. He'll be rich!"

"Really. There's more to him than I gave him credit for. What I meant was he'd been watching how you dealt with people. He's a very happy man. Now on the subject of accounts you are quite expensive – but worth every penny. You'll get your shares from seizures but towns can eat your money. Don't worry just be careful."

"I have money of my own in account at Selenden. Silks will visit tonight."

"Who is 'Silks'?"

"He called himself Ripetto – I call him Silks."

"Ah. What do you make of him Minda?"

"Perhaps he doesn't make many friends. Makes a virtue out of solitude and adds spice to his life by taking risks and feeling important by dealing in secrets. I think he's lonely. It's sad."

"Um. I hadn't thought about him like that before but perhaps you speak the truth."

"And he knew a lot about my activities in Lostnock. I keep forgetting a town has ears everywhere."

"He has bigger ears for gossip than anyone else I know."

"Does he just listen?"

"Yes."

"Does Mister Bob pay him."

"Yes."

"Silks hinted I would stay here until the moment when I am to search premises by royal warrant."

"I understand from the captain that's the plan. Definitely from tomorrow but any time after dusk you should be ready to leave at short notice. Take your orders from the captain. He is a steady old soldier. You and Flor and your new man Lucky met with his approval but his job is only to put off casual robbers from stealing seized goods not to fight seriously so he doesn't think much of military exercises like ambushes."

Minda thought about this. "So it is up to me Flor and Lucky to look after ourselves."

"He won't put up any fight."

"Is he soft or bribed do you think?"

"He takes the very reasonable view that a few tubs of spirits aren't worth getting killed for. He wants to go back to his family."

"It makes me feel uneasy."

"You've done really well Minda. I'm proud of you. You have managed to actually avoid killing anybody yourself but know how it's done. People love you, people fear you but nobody hates you."

"Two do. The coroner and Steela must be white hot with anger and hate."

"Oh yes I'd forgotten them. That's why you're out of their reach here."

"But I'm going back soon. I have to learn how to deal with that even if I can't find a teacher."

"I can't help. Jealousy and hurt pride are blind to reason or threats."

Minda found Brand and Lucky in one corner while Delphia was listening to Flor and Henry chatting in another. When Delphia saw Minda she got up and raced over.

"Minda! Flor says you climbed into a lady's bedroom. Is that true?"

"Yes – Nearly. I'll tell you all I can in a moment. Just let me sort out my troops." She held up her hand in with the high-low-high 'to-me' sign and the men gathered round. Quietly she said: "We may be here one or two days. I have things to do but I'd really like Lucky to learn our ways. You saw how we looked after you at the courthouse and we saw how you gave true evidence so we are not testing loyalty or nerve just how to work together. Do you have time tomorrow to put Lucky through his paces Brand?"

"Yes miss."

"I think Flor deserves a rest from me after the recent excitements. Will you take him as well?"

"Yes."

"Henry and Delphia, I have lots to tell you about towns and trade and taxes so will you be with me here tomorrow?"

They answered yes.

"What about the captain Minda?" Asked Flor.

"Hmm. Sort it out amongst yourselves. Just remember, he's not your commander – I am." She fished in her purse and handed a coin to Brand. "In the town there are rats with knives but here anyone can drink plenty in safety. See you all have a good share for me." Lucky thanked her and the others felt a little celebration would be just the thing.

Minda took a welcome supper with mistress Marline, Mister Trentchard, Delphia and Henry. The cook had given her the largest plate which strangely made Minda focus on the value of food. In the town they had relied on a main meal cooked outside or eaten in an inn. Here it was different and she could enjoy double portions prepared by somebody who cared. When she was rich she would have a cook under orders. Little devils of half thoughts of employing a cook of her own and entertaining guests trickled like gravy amongst the peas. It was good to see Mister Trentchard and mistress Marline sharing the moment as if they were husband and wife. She noted glances, smiles and joint satisfaction. If she could join the Watts and the Jillers then why couldn't she do the same here? She told them about life in the town, the river, the hundreds of houses so close together overhanging the road. Yes, she did climb into a house when the door was shut in her face. And, because the townsfolk were not very friendly they started a rumour of being chased by lions from the country which the silly people repeated. And the place smells like a sty so she and Flor rode out every morning at dawn to get fresh air and buy provisions. She briefly described the bustle, haste and congestion along with the hundreds of trades selling thousands of things. She described the tax Office sketchily and how there was cooked food or breads and cakes of all sorts always available. She tried to tell them how an enormous a ship was. Tomorrow she hoped Henry would be able to tell her about the places they sailed to. Delphia was entranced.

The question Minda hadn't found a chance to ask was answered by Delphia who volunteered that Raysell was staying at Barrington and might marry Richard Risket.

"I'd like to go with you to Lostnock." said Delphia.

"I'm only going to be there a short while."

"So? If it's a short while no harm is done."

"Do you want to work hard Delphia?"

"I suppose so. If I can wear silk and buy a different pastry every day."

"Right! If you like come back with me. Er – I mean I know a rising family with four sons who would love a fashionable daughter who can do the accounts during the day and go to balls at night." She looked at mistress Marline. "Lostnock is a farmyard of wealth and fashion. It is the axle on which the wheel of trade turns and here in Trowstead we can hear it squeak but not join aboard."

"Please mother!"

Marline looked at Mister Trentchard who in turn looked at Minda.

"I will see she is looked after."

Marline said "I'd like to visit."

Mister Trentchard spoke to Marline. "We could send Delphia with Minda then visit a couple of weeks later. If there's something wrong she can come back with us."

This seemed to meet with general approval. Minda pictured Delphia married to one of the Watts in no time and knew she would have the accounting skill to manage the business that obviously needed somebody who knew how much a hundred nails cost to make.

"Henry, I want to tell you lots about taxes tomorrow. I only know a bit but that's something."

"The town seems very interesting. How wide was the river?"

"Tomorrow Henry. I can't stay awake much longer. I will sleep soundly for the first time in a month. Can you believe in towns they have a clock that rings a bell that counts the hours all through the night!"

Despite being tired and home amongst friends she didn't sleep well. It was too quiet. Silence blanketed everything good and bad. Owls lined the rooftops in silent ambush. A coroner owl hissed from behind a chimney spitting like the last foam on a quenched tool bill. Then he unfurled a net across the street and the horrible logic that there must be owls on the roof above her woke her up. Was she awake now? Was it a just dream? She shivered inside, pulled the bedclothes tighter and tried to forget the lurking images of the Owls.

## Training day

The next day Brand, Flor and Lucky spent an hour of close combat in the large barn. Lucky wasn't as fit as the others but could teach them some sword skills and had the ways of a weasel when it came to spotting and slipping out of trouble. Brand addressed his men: "There are three of us and three of them. Let us try to put a bit of fight into them. Even if they only look more aggressive they will look after Minda better. What's the first rule of practice Flor?"

"Safety"

"And the second?"

"Purpose"

"And the third?"

"Fun"

"Good."

"Fun?" asked Lucky.

Brand looked at Flor who replied. "If we enjoy it we will want to do it for longer and not worry too much about the pains. And we will want to do it again tomorrow."

"I was taught to obey orders like it or not."

Brand replied. "Orders are a last resort. Look at the troopers. I bet the captain has to kick them out of bed, make them look after the horses properly, and keep inspecting them. I haven't ordered you to be more fit but this afternoon when we have some running, climbing and shooting you'll wish for yourself you were. In time it will come to everyone's satisfaction."

"Well look at me Brand. This country air is fresh and see my smile."

"Good. Remember that smile, treasure it."

Flor added. "Something I've learned from Minda. Always smile at your enemy. It confuses them and makes them annoyed."

Lucky laughed. "And captures them. Like me!"

Brand took charge. "I will lure the troopers out into the street and then we make it fun for them. They need to be confident if we are to leave Minda in their hands."

Flor added. "If we don't do it Minda will and they won't like that."

A very drunk Brand hammered on the door of the farm where the captain's troop were staying. "Come out and fight you baggages. Typical tax collectors lying in bed bleeding honest folk." He staggered to the open yard gates and resumed his tirade from the middle of the street. After much fumbling he unsheathed his sword, looked mazed at the empty scabbard before tossing it away then comically tried some swings but the sword seemed to control him. "Are you afraid? I've seen better maggots in cabbage than you lazy rats. Too early in the morning is it?"

The two troopers appeared in the yard. "Shut your mouth bumpkin."

"Don't call me a bumpkin you weevils. Who is first to have his wormy head cut off?"

"We're kingsmen. Insult us and you insult the King."

"So which one of you is brave enough to save the King's honour. You! Straw hair straw brains straw cock." Brand uncertainly lifted his sword and nearly over-balanced. The two troopers strode into the street showing their swords. "We'll teach you a lesson bumpkin."

Unfortunately for them Flor and Lucky had been either side of the entrance tucked behind the open gates. As the troopers closed-in on Brand they suddenly found an arm round their throats and a knife waved in front of their noses. "Smile! you're having fun." called Flor. He and Lucky stood back. The expression on the faces of the unfortunate troopers was a sickly paralysis.

"Smile!" Shouted Brand as he tossed his sword twirling into the air then caught it. "You need some fighting practice. We're not letting a bunch of washer-women look after Minda. She has real enemies not dolls on sticks. Until you can look after her I will instruct her not to look after you – but you know what women are like. She might anyway and put herself at risk. I'm not having that."

The smell and trooper's pained expressions were a not very subtle clue. "Which one of you has shit himself?" They both had. "Go and clean yourselves then we'll have a little tourney in the yard. Bring the captain with you."

Flor and Lucky gave a slow demonstration with padded jackets and practice swords then the troopers and the captain went back to sword school. The genuine smiles, good-natured concentration and Brand's briefing to make it fun for the troopers mended relations. Everyone knew who were friendly experts and who out-of practice strugglers. The strike and slide of steel, the sweat in the eyes, slippery grips and pretend lethal blows reawakened times when the troopers were younger. This really was more fun than escort duties.

Brand addressed the captain. "We three are returning to the hall for lunch. Then we will be exercising our horses and hunting skills. Please join us, we'll be passing, bring your bows. We may have Minda with us – she is a joy to watch. Come on Flor." Flor

had been talking to the spectator children as he'd seen Minda do. It seemed so natural to show them his sword, kneel down to their level, let them feel its weight and answer their questions. Though he didn't realise it until chaffed by Brand on the way back to the house, his whole being was one big sparkly-eyed smile.

## Discussions with Mister Trentchard

Minda's morning was very different. She was now the older sister of Henry and Delphia. She had seen the world, came to report back and could see Trowstead from the outside. Delphia would make a good daughter for the Watts. Henry should be measuring a wider world. How strange she left Trowstead before Henry? Mister Trentchard – he was an odd character when she thought about it – Merchants belonged in towns where all the trade was so wouldn't it be better for him to set up in Lostnock? Clearly she should talk to him first.

Minda entered Mister Trentchard's study full of quiet humility, demur downcast eyes and a curtsy. "I've brought my accounts and journal Mister Trentchard."

"You don't fool me Minda." Mister Trentchard was smiling. He rose, arms outstretched to embrace and kiss her. "That's a good try but anyone who can do what you've done in the last week doesn't need to curtsy to me. I have it all from the one you call Silks. We drank a bottle each toasting you last night."

Minda thought carefully. Praise was welcome but as she'd been trained by Mister Trentchard himself it could be used as a fog. "You set the sails and pointed the mill to the wind. I only turned as events pushed me."

"No Minda. I gave you the timbers and the stones and a labourer and you built the mill and made it grind corn. You made it grind corn in the tempest when other millers would pull off their sails and pray."

The power of this description silenced both of them. Mister Trentchard was surprised by his clarity of thought so long after the first decisions to coach her. Minda was impressed by the casual way responsibility seemed to flow from Mister Trentchard. She was struck how all his servants had trust and now how she was doing the same for her servants. Flor had been a fat wiggling chrysalis and she'd burst him into a butterfly. Lucky, what a good name, was her own creation in the same mould. Give people responsibility and see if they respond with trust. Strike a bar in the forge and listen. She must visit Dunstin again and share that with him.

Mister Trentchard was one of the few people wise enough to recognise when silence was more valuable than speech. Minda surfaced from her thoughts in the happy knowledge of being forged. As iron takes time to heat to working temperature so Mister Trentchard was being patient. She shivered at this obvious knowledge. Obvious now. "You are a most patient man Mister Trentchard."

"To tell you the truth Minda: I'm a bit of a coward I suppose you must say when it comes to anything important."

"You mean like mistress Marline?" Minda's face dropped as she realised she'd said a thought aloud. "Oh Mister Trentchard! I'm sorry."

"It's alright. I know it."

The silence couldn't knot between them it just ruffled like silk in a breeze.

With his 'brave face' Mister Trentchard spoke "Why did you want to see me Minda?"

She smiled. "Perhaps I should tell Henry and Delphia about Lostnock. Henry should know about it and I have a lovely family for Delphia and a job if I can sort out my finances."

"Don't worry about your finances Minda. You have earned a tranche from that ambush. I will pay for Henry and Delphia to learn."

"Will you let me talk to them first?"

"Yes of course. If you're in Lostnock then they're safe."

"The country is standing still while the town marches on. If Delphia comes with me to join the Watts she will grace a family of smiths that is already mixing with the senior citizens. They are not slovenly but need grace. Four sons and a loving father who combines jollity with the sharp honesty of smiths is a simple sum."

"You would grace any family yourself Minda."

She flushed involuntary. She would never be married and have a family – Ugliness had seen to that. Still the compliment was nice. "When I come from the north I bring the snow. When I come from the east I bring the cold. When I come from the South I bring the drought, dust and flies. When I come from the west I bring storms. I am the wind that turns the sails – and you know it Mister Trentchard because you have helped to make me. I am the wind that can never settle."

"Even the strongest wind dies away in the end."

"Not yet for me. My breeze is gathering strength under far-away clouds. I'll be blowing stronger yet."

After more silence Mister Trentchard followed the wind theme. "Perhaps I have been blowing myself out round and round a corner. Trowstead is my home."

"A home needs a family not a shifting visitor who twists until he can depart again." More silence lubricated a change in equilibrium. "Are you saying Minda I should be a tree not the wind that shakes it?"

"Perhaps each of us needs to decide."

With uncharacteristic forcefulness Mister Trentchard said: "Now you are the seeking wind. I will be the sheltering tree."

"You have sheltered me."

"I have sheltered you like a shepherd's wattle – inanimate but movable. To be a tree that lives on one bit of land without option until I die is to admit to a sad end."

"Trees have nuts and berries and shoots. They do not die childless. With their roots they hold the loose earth together and break the rock."

"I can't be owned."

"Death will own you."

"That's a horrible thing to say. And true."

"You have wedged yourself into a crack here Mister Trentchard but never put down roots." When all else fails be direct. Both of them knew the field and both of them knew that it was Mister Trentchard's privilege to set his own furrow. Minda felt he had the will but not the courage. "Delphia and Henry may be gone soon and Raysell also. That leaves you and mistress Marline. Shouldn't you marry?"

Mister Trentchard wasn't going to tell Minda his bedchamber fears. "I can't. Err– for reasons I can't explain."

Every woman knew about petrified men long before discovering for herself what went on under the sheets. "Can you explain to Lewin?"

"Possibly."

Minda reached to hug Mister Trentchard. She kissed him. "That's from Marline."

With a grotesquely distorted saucy smile she playfully elbowed him in the ribs. "And that's from me."

Strangely, after her intimate session with Mister Trentchard Minda found it difficult to relax with mistress Marline. She respectfully offered her journal and accounts for scrutiny but Marline was tense. "Is something the matter Mistress?"

"No and yes." Minda knew better than interrupt after a 'no and yes'. Eventually Marline continued. "Raysell is off and likely to marry and you want to take my other children away from me to Lostnock."

"They should at least see the town with their own eyes. A month ago it was just a name to me but now it is a stinking heap of trade, profit, style and opportunity for anyone who cares to start a business."

"And what about me? Left with no husband and no children."

"I've worked hard at Harold. I think he may soon be yours. Pretty Delphia will be a brilliant addition to an honest family that needs her writing and accounting skills if they are to make use of the money they make. They will be delighted to show her off wearing the latest fashions. The family is four boys who have been brought up to work in the largest iron works for a hundred miles. They dance like cart horses and save their pennies for business but Smith Watts has ambitions to be an alderman and mix in society."

"Have you asked her Minda?"

"I haven't had a chance yet. Has Harold said anything about Henry?"

"The plan was for him to be a surveyor for the land tax but Harold's friend who would have arranged it has died. Henry will probably take over the running of this estate unless his cause can be made to the chief Collector."

"I'll ask the chief Collector in Lostnock."

"You know him?"

"No but the whole town knows about me."

"You can't just knock on his door Minda."

"But I can! They know what happens if they shut a door in my face."

"Minda! You are a terror." Mistress Marline smiled and kissed her.

Delphia was desperate to know all about the town. "Did it really smell? What were the women wearing?"

"Come on Delphia let us walk as far from one side of Lostnock to the other and you will see for yourself. Is Henry around? He might be interested."

They strolled about a thousand paces with Minda describing what they would be passing at each point. She kept quiet about the adventures with smiths, coroners and jealous wives but couldn't help describing the unending variety of goods in the shops. "We had to leave at an hour's notice" Minda lied "so I couldn't bring a gift. There was too much to choose from." In the absence of any more subtle plan Minda



took the direct approach with Henry. "I could ask the tax Collector in Lostnock if he will give you a job if you want."

"Have you met him Minda?"

"No. I don't know him but I will simply knock on his door. I'm sure he knows of me and how I'm – er – sorting out the confusion and delay in the tax Office"

A confused Delphia asked "How can you work in the office and not know the chief collector?"

"Because there's the 'Office' which deals with taxing trade which is where I work, and the 'Collector' which collects property taxes – The more land you have the more tax you pay. I deal with things that encourage gangs of smugglers like Henry and I found last month. The Collector has an easier job but everything depends on measuring land and making sure meadows are not passed off as commons or wasteland and things like that."

"Oh I see. So you go looking for a fight while the Collector goes looking for on-purpose mistakes in accounts."

"No. I don't go looking for fights, but I find it is best to confuse the criminals by being an unpredictable girl who can win their heart or pierce it as I please."

"If you don't go looking for fights then why have you come here with troopers and a mercenary?"

"Ah. It's secret. But I can tell you my job is to knock on doors of suspects with my King's warrant and look for smuggled goods. I have been instructed not to fight, hurt, threaten or kill unless attacked. The captain of the troopers is in charge and I have to take my orders from him. I can tell you he is about as much use as a sack of air so he will shit his britches and we'll all go back to Lostnock as if nothing had ever happened."

Henry smiled broadly. He knew Minda. The chance of her letting some outlaws drive her away was very small. "Can I come with you Minda?"

"To Lostnock?"

"Er – I was thinking of what action you're about to get involved with. But Lostnock seems interesting as well."

"Action? What action? I'm just here for a day's rest before frightening people into/"

/"No you're not. The troopers told us you're off to Selenden to burn down the house of a notorious smuggler masquerading as a lime merchant."

Minda blanched cold. "Is that what they said? Really?"

Delphia answered excitedly. "Yes. You are brave."

Minda faced them and caught herself in knots of rage at the troopers while trying to be nice to her innocent childhood friends. "Bastards! Idiots! Henry help me! You and Delphia are my closest companions here but I didn't tell you anything. Selenden may be one of our targets but everything else they say is false. Henry knows this because he's been taught by Brand but Delphia – Where I may be tomorrow is not gossip it could be a noose around men's necks. If anyone ever in your whole life asks you what I'm doing just say 'Don't know'."

"And keep saying it and keep saying it." added Henry helpfully.

"Thank you Henry. Later will you explain it all to Delphia?"

"I know already" replied a peeved Delphia. "Remember I often wrote your journal."

"Sorry Delphia – I'm so angry with those rats I'm too sharp. Sorry. And I miss your journal writing. In towns there is so much accounting and so much happens every day."

"I want to see Lostnock with my own eyes."

"Just what I was saying to your mother. You should indeed. And you Henry. But it's very expensive. I've won money from the smugglers but don't go near the place without letting me know. Sorry. Let me deal with things one at a time. Delphia you're first. Would you like to stay in Lostnock with friends of mine for a month or so?"

"Yes yes."

"What if you stayed with a family of smiths?" Delphia's face fell. "These are special smiths Delphia. They are the princes of smiths for hundreds of miles around."

"They?"

"Smith Watts is a lovely gentleman with four sons. He would marry you himself if he wasn't already married. And you'd have a good match. But best of all you could be a sparkling silver ornament in their family of iron. They would worship you."

Delphia was excited but suspicious. She knew Minda wasn't always honest. "You're making it up!"

"No I'm not. Let's sit down on this bank. This is where the quayside would be. Ships the size of a church come and go every day. They are full of unimaginable goods. Stone, bricks, coals, tiles, iron, lime, wheat, cows, sheep, wax, spices, fine leather goods, wine, spirits, cloth, wool, tableware, cutlery – everything from buttons to billhooks. Men loading and unloading. Carts coming and going all the time. They arrive and in a few minutes the cart is full but the ship has a hundred more cartloads inside it."

"I want to see this more than anything." said Henry. "So much and so many!"

"You said they would worship me. Nobody would worship me."

Minda was about to say 'they worship me!' but stopped herself. "A family with four sons is like a waggon with four sturdy wheels but no driver. They need a clever and beautiful daughter to bring them into society where money makes more money."

## Worries about secrecy

Minda was happy with the morning's work. When the men returned for lunch her smouldering anger at the troopers burst back into flame. The four of them shared impressions of the guards. Lucky fitted-in naturally. Minda remembered he was her servant and should therefore be encouraged. "How are our country ways suiting you Lucky?"

"Fine mistress." By his expression and way he looked at Brand and Flor this was an understatement.

Minda understood the magic of comradeship. Uninterrupted contentment on the faces of Brand and Flor told her Lucky was now one of them. "With Brand's permission, Lucky I would like to ask you a question." Brand nodded. They all knew from Minda's way of speaking this was a serious moment. Minda hesitated by instinct. "Lucky, you are one of us. How do I know?"

"I don't know miss"

"Because you're eating with the three of us."

"Why – Err – I can't read the signs like you miss."

"Do you think Brand and Flor would let me be duped by a stick-winded, brain-fagged weasel?"

"No. Not ever."

"So if you are good enough to share their food you are good enough to get better."

"Get better?"

"You have a lot to learn. My rule is to pay average wages but expect each man to have the brain of five and the strength of two and the stamina of three and loyalty that can't be measured. Is that fair Lucky?"

"Fair and fun as Flor has it. Ever since that moment you asked me to help you with your leg that wasn't really bad I would work without wages if I could."

"Good. Now here is a test Lucky. What would you do with the guards that have betrayed us by letting everyone here know we are on a mission to a lime merchant in Selenden?"

Minda knew how to fold sheep. Pick on one and force it in a specific direction and the others would get the general idea. Brand and Flor were utterly shocked but understood that Minda had a plan or would ask if she hadn't.

In the silence Flor added "Take your time – we country folk are slow thinkers." Minda could have hugged him for that but all her utterly casual attention was on Lucky. He was uncertain.

"What's your first reaction?"

"Slit their throats and run away miss."

"I'm a bit like that sometimes." admitted Minda "But I have been barred from killing people on this trip."

"I don't know then."

Minda addressed Brand and Flor "What do you think men?"

Brand answered. "It's a puzzle. Why would somebody be so stupid to alert people who might have arrows and swords and kill them?"

This question lingered but as it obviously had no answer Minda broke the silence.

"You see Lucky just as a swordsman lives by guessing the moves of his opponent so we have to ponder the minds around us."

"Whether friend or foe." added Flor.

"I still don't know what to do miss."

"I can see you're not used to responsibility Lucky. We will teach you."

"I will do my best miss."

"This is difficult. We have to keep them on our side. You did well this morning. I think we all feel a little safer."

Brand asked the obvious question: "Should the expedition be cancelled now it isn't secret?"

"How long will it take for the news to spread? Who in Trowstead would tell?"

"Nobody local but there are always wanderers."

Minda defined the options: "We can cancel or strike before the rumours spread."

Brand asked. "But what about the chapman? Is he safe?"

Minda thought about this complication. "I'd be happier if we were on the scene to protect him if required."

Flor asked: "What about the captain?"

Suddenly the crevice in which to put the lever appeared. "The captain can answer for his men. He will abandon the mission at the first excuse. Lord Levendale emphasised this was a training mission so I'll have to train him."

Lucky's survival instinct brought another question: "Do we have to leave now or at dusk?"

Minda replied. "Selenden is an easy half-night's journey with this moon and this weather. If there is to be a raid we might do it at dawn. See Brand I have been paying attention! We could ride through the first part of the night then find out from the chapman what he wants us to do and follow his instructions."

"What about the captain and the troopers?" asked Brand.

"Insist they come." said Flor. "They got us into trouble so they can suffer with us."

A tide of despair suddenly swamped Minda as the plan collapsed. "We have to get the captain to agree. He will protect his men who he is responsible for don't forget, he'll say they wouldn't have given valuable information away. He won't care about the chapman."

"So do we ride anyway to protect the chapman if he needs it?" asked Brand.

Minda hadn't forgotten Lucky. "What's your answer Lucky?"

"We must look after our own miss."

"So we must. Every time. I must look after others as well."

Brand asked "Is our plan to exercise this afternoon with the guards, eat then leave for dawn action?"

"Yes. I'll tell Mister Trentchard. Will Henry come with us Brand?"

"If he wants to."

"I could go ahead with Delphia and mistress Marline as if on a social visit beforehand?"

"Ask Mister Trentchard. He is wise."

"I know! He and Lucky could go ahead on business without rousing suspicion."

"Miss. We're ready. We will wait here for orders. Go now." said Brand.

Mister Trentchard was concerned. When Minda suggested he and Lucky could be an advanced party to make contact with Silks he thought for quite a while. "The one you call Silks is not in any more danger. You have frightened yourself by your imagination. The troopers don't know Silks has anything to do with their expedition. It is you and them who are in danger if the opposition are strong. So you do not need to go on a rescue mission."

Minda was confused then deflated then relieved and finally enlightened. She'd be jumping at her own shadow next! "I need all the wise counsel I can get Mister Trentchard. Now you've shown me the real lay of the landscape. Should we still go?"

"If called but prepare for a disappointment or a fight."

"If we go and they have been warned it will be a waste."

"Not necessarily Minda. If they think they have outwitted you then they will be more bold and less careful next time. Or they may decide to be more careful which means more expense and delays for them. So it's not all wasted time. And if people complain to your face it tells you who are friends of your enemies."

## More military training

That afternoon Brand took all the fighting men, Henry and Minda on an adventure ride. He told the captain it was to exercise the horses and practise archery but Flor, Minda and Henry knew they would all be scratched, bruised and muddy by the end. After a five mile canter they dismounted for a breather by a ford. They took it in turns to shoot at a hat-sized floating straw target as it passed them down the jiggling stream. Brand hit it with his only attempt. None of the guards managed a hit. Lucky made an effort but hurry and lack of practice conspired with almost comic effect. Minda got two out of three. Henry managed four out of four. Minda squeezed his arm and beamed. Brand castigated Lucky with good humour. "Thank goodness you will soon be a day away It's the only distance I feel safe if you're juggling with a bow and arrow."

"Sorry Brand. I'll practise."

"Good lad. Just not near me." He smiled. "Trooper Geort come with me. Captain you go with Flor. We will be ambushing the rest of you half a mile ahead. No weapons will be used at all. Henry, you're the commander of your group. Give us two minutes. Mount!"

Minda and Henry had practised ambushes like this many times but always there was a tension as the spring-out moment neared and even passed. Trooper Karvin had worried about such things but not had to practise it.

Henry explained. "They will jump out at us and we defend ourselves with bare hands as if we had swords and escape, kill them or are captured."

Minda added "We do this to practise staying organised when surprised Karvin. With four of them we will be captured but you must follow Henry's orders."

Henry emphasised the point " It's not to practise fighting Karvin it's to practise coordination. Come on. You take up the danger post twenty paces behind. Listen for my commands."

They took turns at capturing each other in various combinations. The experts called out when they could see hiding places and give-away clues such as hoofprints and broken vegetation. The guards and Lucky were amazed at many tell-tale signs to look for. They practised whistle signals and when to fight and when to surrender. They broke it down into the first five seconds and the time taken to decide what to do and time taken to organise defence and escape. At the end of the session Brand summed it up. "If you're outnumbered by people who know what they're doing then surrender. Otherwise fight or flight according to their weakness."

The final phase of the exercise was running and trotting. Minda was hopelessly outclassed but Brand wanted the newcomers to know what she was capable of. "Minda is a cripple with a club foot men. After a long day it is painful and sore. Running in the dark is difficult and dangerous so we will show you how to hold and run with her as if your left leg was tied to her right one. It is still slower than real running but we can't think of anything better." After she had shown her best pace they took turns at three-legged-running with her. "Well done Minda. Well done

everyone. To remind you Minda is left-handed so if you're on her right side you'll each have a weapon arm free." Minda led the horses back while Brand made the men sprint, jog and walk the three miles back. Henry and Flor loped far ahead happy to be sharing sweaty exercise again. Minda carefully made herself scarce while Henry and Flor stripped and bathed in the horse-trough then ran twice round the barn to dry off.

Eventually Brand brought Lucky and the guards back to Trowstead painfully gasping for breath. A wheezing, bent-over Lucky was pounced-on by Flor and Henry who were soon ducking him naked in the trough with much laughter and spluttering.

Brand called them together. "Before I dismiss you listen to me. You have all worked very hard. I like that. You will soon recover. Captain! I am told we may be on the move after dark tonight are you ready?"

The captain had long-since passed the point of caring about anything except breathing with as little pain as possible. Trapped in his narrow nightmare Brand spoke reassuringly to him and forced an answer. "Yes."

"Henry!"

"Yes Brand."

"Make sure our guests have cakes and ale."

"Yes Brand."

"Flor!"

"Yes Brand."

"When your man is fit ask him what he's learned today."

"Yes Brand"

"Now then everybody. An old soldier once said to me. 'You're paid to fight and die by your master. Fighting and living comes out of your own pocket. Dismissed!'"

There was no call that evening. The next day Brand arranged with the captain that they would have simple archery and inspection. For the first time in a long while Minda had nothing to do and no responsibilities. Her men were being looked after by Brand. The guards weren't her responsibility. Now was a smuggler's moon if ever there was. Surely tonight they would be off. Her morning was spent immersed in happy concentration helping Smith Thredvald. The skills she'd learned over the years with Dunstin returned with the happiness of a dog returning to its master. Thredvald wasn't busy at this time of year and the sympathetic efficiency of two of them with Minda doing the chores that would otherwise distract the smith soon had the essential work done. They talked about the town and smiths in general.

When Minda told him about the possibility of Delphia joining the Watts in Lostnock there was a sad silence. She realised Thredvald was still single. "Are there not any women here to marry?"

"It seems not."

"I know a smith in Lostnock with three daughters. I cannot vouch for them but why not visit Lostnock? It is only a day each way."

"Would you introduce me?"

"Of course. But you're a brother who needs no introduction."

"I would be happier. I am too shy."

"I will then. Be prepared to come and stay for a week in a week or two's time. I will let you know. Even if you come back without a woman you will learn a lot from Smith Jiller. Just to watch him rivet is a joy."

## Family moment

That evening's meal with Delphia, Henry, mistress Marline and Mister Trentchard was a tense turning point charged with uncertainty for all of them. Mister Trentchard and mistress Marline announced their intention to marry. Henry announced if he could get a job in the town he would take it and see the world. Delphia announced her mother had given her permission to stay with the Watts subject to proper arrangements being made. Minda kept quiet knowing she was the one who had brought tomorrow too soon. Everyone had their own thoughts. All of them wondered if their country ways were falling behind the times. The youngsters were excited by the pace and variety promised by Lostnock. Mister Trentchard thought about how to make the local economy more connected to trade – He would have to discuss things with Lord Risket who seemed to be doing a good job of attracting business to Barrington. Mistress Marline was simply happy that Harold had decided to become a legal family man even if it was when her daughters and his son were all leaving.

Spiten slipped into the parlour and made a sign to Mister Trentchard who acknowledged it. Mister Trentchard stood up with his drinking cup in his hand. "Marline I wish you happiness. I should have married you years ago. Son, I wish you prosperity wherever it be. Delphia I wish you long life among friends. And Minda, I let you go with all of our love and prayers." He drank and passed the cup to Marline. When the cup had finished its circuit he sat down. "Good luck Minda. No sleep for you tonight daughter."

As Minda got up trying to clear the warm blanket of a friendly family meal from her head Mistress Marline and Delphi stood up the better to wish her on her way with an embrace. Henry asked his father if he could join the expedition. "Ask Brand." Henry knocked his bench over in his hurry to find Brand.

Delphia whispered to Minda "Can I come too?"

"I'm sorry Delphia. Next time I promise. If we didn't have three guards who shit themselves at their own shadows then it would be a picnic."

She remembered how Raysell followed her to Barrington. "Mistress. Delphia wants to come as well. I understand why. If you wish it then she may come but a small army wasting its time getting scared of every owl hoot will fray everybody's nerves. I promise I'll take her on the next one."

Marline looked at Mister Trentchard then Delphia. Common sense prevailed.

# 8 Selenden smuggling

Mysteriously the dumb Spiten had spoken with Flor. The news was that a convoy was expected at Selenden tonight. Brand and the captain agreed that the first thing to do was get moving now and decide on a plan later. Brand halted them just past the edge of the village: "Listen men. The password is 'Duck'. At the first halt I will be checking you know the whistles. Henry and Flor can you do your magic at the front as the last time? Show Lucky how you do it. Off you go at canter up to edge of the wood at the bottom of the heath. Henry knows where I mean. Ready?" They all answered Yes. "Go!" "Guards forty paces behind. You know the drill. There are seven miles to the first rest. Keep up. Flor, Henry and Lucky are doing the hard work at the front all you have to do is keep awake."

## Tactics

There was no difficulty riding in the moonlight and the weather smelled like it would stay dry. Minda settled down to focussing on safe riding and watching her part of the roadside. She wickedly let herself relax. Here she was on a mission where enemies may have been warned and yet there was some part of her that just couldn't be bothered with worries. What was the point of training people if you didn't let them take responsibility. She wasn't sure what her responsibility was on this mission. Obviously it was convenient to get her out of the reach of an angry coroner and Toggys friends. Her warrant was to search. She'd been told lots of the smuggler's tricks but she assumed the captain would know all those and more. Still if they found some they would get a share. Were the troopers on a share? If not then perhaps they should have been to shut their mouths. The first rendezvous with Silks was the Windmill. How would they get there? Should they all climb the heath? What was the plan?

"Brand. What do we do when we get to Selenden?"

"I've been wondering that myself. We're in the dark. All we know is there may be a convoy expected tonight but we don't know what direction it will arrive, when it will arrive and what direction it will leave. We don't know how large it is and what it is carrying."

Minda concentrated on riding for a while. "Only Henry and me know Selenden. Are we really going to attack a convoy? Word of what happened to the last convoy must have got around. Should I alert the Hesquerys and then we'd have a refuge and some more men?"

"You've given me an idea Minda. You and the guard walk along the main road an hour after Flor, Henry, Lucky and me have spoken with Silks. We will get a message



to you if needed or just knock up Hesquery and then break down the door of the suspect's house. Does Henry know where the suspect lives?"

"If I tell him."

At the first stop in the shelter of woods as they gave way to open heath Brand held a conference with the captain. Minda briefed Henry on the suspect's house. She found herself telling him about the strange extension at the back for the disturbing reason that she might be delayed, captured, disabled or killed. Defiance of fate demanded a gesture so she unpinned her hair letting it flow in a rippling river down her back.

Brand explained the simple plan. "If my party finds a convoy we can capture that's what we'll do. Captain?"

"Err- My party will take a slow straight approach to flush out any convoy to get those guys out of the way and close-in on where we suspect their secret store is. The password is 'duck'."

Brand added "Any questions from anybody? ... Flor and Henry in advance. If they have a lookout up there they will see us. You know what to do. We will wait for your signal. Go! Next rest is the dip down to the bridge. Stay this side of the river.

Flor and Henry galloped out from the dappled safety of the wood into the bare moonlit heath.

"Lucky you pair with the captain." Brand tested the guards and Lucky on the whistles.

While they were waiting for a flash of lantern from the skyline Minda spoke. "The heath shouldn't be dangerous but some idiot guard has let it be known we would be heading towards Seleneden. If that idiot gets an arrow in their throat then I won't stop to quicken your horrible slow choking death. Are you listening back there?"

## Stupid or worse?

A short and a long flash from darkness of the humped heath signalled no danger. "High-low, off we go" called Brand. Their careful journey across the heath was uneventful. Occasionally there would be 'no danger' whistles and lamp signals from ahead. A short-long-short 'follow-me' lamp turned out to be Henry. "Dismount and we'll stay over the crest."

Geort was stupid enough to exclaim "What! We have to walk?"

The clearly audible intake of breath from Minda, Brand and Flor was enough to alert the captain to the seriousness of the situation. He was about to reprimand Geort but Minda got there first. "Down on your knees!" Her knife smacked him across the side of his head. He staggered and found knees were easy. Her bad hand pulled up his chin so he could see her grimace behind the knife in her good hand. Being stared at with one eye was horrible.

"Captain. Please come here. This man may be putting our lives at risk? Do I kill him because I will not let his stupidity kill the rest of us."

The captain saw the situation clearly. Minda was right. Here was an idiot who could get them all killed. But instant execution was a bit harsh. "Geort do you obey orders without question?"

"Yes sir."

"I expect you to obey them without stupid comment is that clear?"

"Yes sir."

"Thank you Minda." She withdrew.

"Get up Geort."

"Sorry sir."

Minda said "Take three deep breaths Geort – Go on." He did so, breath-in breathe-out repeated. "Now do it again and enjoy the smell of the fresh air on this heath on the moonlight." He did so, breath-in breathe-out repeated. "Nice isn't it. – That's six more life-giving breaths than you deserve. Now try and behave."

"Yes miss."

"Sorry for the delay Henry – Let's go – Sorry captain. I'm not having my men killed by your fool's carelessness."

Brand knew that Minda's anger wouldn't go away as quickly as it came. He would like to keep her in his sight. Should he swap her and Henry? Should he swap himself and the captain? Neither option seemed a good idea. At the rest point they were safely out of sight and could check their equipment, have a hard-cake and drink to sustain them for the next six hours. Brand praised Flor, Henry and Lucky for their excellent work. He addressed them all. "The guards and Minda are going to wait an hour then plod into Selenden to drive out any convoy by being noisy and letting them know the King's tax collectors are coming. You should find that easy. If you are lucky the ones on horses will escape and not bother you. For the benefit of any guard who is feeling tired and lazy this is Minda's home village and she doesn't like to be seen in the company of second-rate britchshitters. Do you understand?"

The captain replied. "Thank you Brand for bring us here safely. Good luck to you and your men."

"Time for us to go. What's the password Geort?" asked Brand.

"Err– Duck."

"You will have to get used to our slow country ways Geort. 'Err–Duck' will get you killed. Learn 'Duck' on its own."

After her friends had departed seemingly at random in the next few minutes Minda was left alone with the guards. As none of you is taking guard duty I'll do it. Have a doze. We stay here for nearly an hour. The captain tried to take over Minda's sentry duty but was rebuffed. "This is my land. You can guard from over there if you like but I'd rather you kept your troopers under control."

After the moon told them an hour had passed they descended into the little gorge, crossed the river and clattered along the road. The rags silencing their harness and weapons were now removed. The captain and Minda took the front with Geort and Karvin behind. Minda's anger had vanished. Recognising the local landscape made her comfortable. She felt she'd soon be able to spot something out of place – especially now the leaves were mostly off the trees. There were two hours of moon left and twenty minutes to Selenden. She concentrated on how she would watch for tax collectors if she was a smuggler. There was only one good place for an ambush if

you had time. A lookout on Tikken Hill would be the obvious choice. They wanted to be seen but not ambushed so... She knew the back lane that would avoid the obvious ambush. Could she turn the trap against the trappers? With Flor, Brand and Lucky it would have been worth trying but the guards would be crow food. She stopped them with two high whistles. "Captain. If they have a lookout we will have been seen by now." She indicated a likely location. "But if they are waiting for us they will be in the wood that's quarter of a mile ahead where the road is sunk between banks. Don't you think it is strange that there haven't been any contacts with the opposition so far? Anyway I know a detour. There's a track to our right just up ahead. Let me check it first then you follow." Without waiting for approval Minda galloped ahead, gave the high-low then urged her horse ahead in the trixy moonlight. Soon she was following hedgerows with the guards in a line behind. All the details of the land came back to her. The drop between Top field and Long field, the vista at the next hedgerow gap. Two high whistles brought them to a stop. She signalled them to dismount and automatically drew her knife in case there was an armed sentry at the gap. No signs and no tracks. She made a careful survey of the scene. What next? Muster in the road outside the hall to give the opposition time to take fright or show themselves. Then close-in on Fullers row. With any luck they would get a message on the way. She showed the guards the general layout and pointed out the hall to the Captain. "If we muster at the hall I will let them know who we are. If nothing happens we can go from there. Geort! What's the password?"

"Duck miss."

"Good. You and Karvin follow twenty paces apart and fifty behind the captain. Captain you follow me fifty paces behind. This is my village so no bad language or oafish behaviour or I'll use your backsides for bullseyes." She climbed into the saddle and raced with hair streaming behind down the Long meadow on the last half mile of her homecoming. She reached the hall, checked the guards were following albeit a lot further behind than the stipulated fifty paces and was about to dive into the yard to find someone awake when a shadow emerged from the gateway and gently called "Silks".

## Disappointment and discord

It was Silks himself. As the guards came up he hid again. "Go on to the pond and wait. I will be with you in a minute." When they had gone she leaned against the wall next to the Silk shadow. "Tonight's password is Duck. I have four fighters watching the West road. Our simple plan is to scare the transport then take our time to examine the store. If the horses get caught that's a bonus."

"Good plan but everything went from Fullers Row an hour after dusk. I think they were warned."

"The bastard guards blabbed their mission. I didn't tell them where we were headed so it must have been the captain. Are you safe?"

"I believe so miss. Thank you for asking."

"Do you know the boss man?"

"It is the lime merchant."

"Is the Reeve involved?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Anything more I need to know now?"

"The priest is a partner and the church crypt may be worth looking into."

"I will look out for a rich widow in Lostnock for you. Good night. Tell the Hesquerys that I was five paces from them but I have to race the dawn."

She rode slowly to the guards and told the captain they were too late. "Would they still search the lime merchant's house or leave now and hope they had a fright but not enough to learn how strong the King's party was?" The captain made a show of thinking about this question Minda had deliberately made easy for him.

"We can return in a few weeks better prepared."

Minda took the initiative. "I will be your guide. We will go up Larks lane to the windmill. Follow me quietly and remember the danger isn't over."

At the windmill they dismounted and Minda casually inspected the timbers for a fresh notch and scratches. She found signs for 'GONE WEST MEET MILL SUN' with her fingers. Two hours to dawn. "Men. The others are probably waiting on the West road. They will return here at dawn. You three get some cloak-sleep in that hedge and I will keep guard.

"How do you know that Miss?" Asked Karvin.

"Witchcraft." muttered Geort.

"Geort! I have no need for witchcraft. I can hurt you by simple anger at your stupidity. Do not test me again or you will die painfully. Is that clear? Ask yourself how many hairpins I have and are they sharp and where I might stick them."

"Minda please stop threatening my men."

"Do you take responsibility for this man captain?"

"Yes."

"Then I will hold you responsible."

"That sounds like a threat."

"You work it out. Now do you want a sleep or not?"

"How can I trust you Minda?"

"Because I'll be too busy casting spells to look after my real fighter men to worry about you."

Karvin spoke. "Please miss. I don't believe you're a witch." Minda was pleased at this ray of sanity but slightly disappointed that he didn't think she had strange powers.

"Will I stand first watch with you miss?"

"Right captain! Karvin and I will stand first watch. How much sleep you get it up to you. Karvin, picket the horses then join me at that hedge-corner. Captain you will have to decide what to do when Brand returns."

The captain gave Karvin an evil glance in the last of the moonlight but knew when he was outclassed.

As the light arrived Minda was fast asleep in the hedge. The captain and Geort had collected firewood ready to light when the others arrived. A voice from somewhere distant called "Duck. Heat the meat now." In five minutes Flor and Henry appeared followed shortly by Brand and Lucky. Their empty night of waiting was a disappointment but their good humour and energy were still there. Hot pork and peas for breakfast put grins on their faces even as they watched the horizon behind

each other's backs. There was some debate about whether to wake Minda. The captain wanted to talk to Brand without being interrupted by Minda. It suited him for Minda to be a weak girl. Flor and Lucky knew the value of sleep and would never wake a comrade enjoying an hour of restoring escape. Henry was entranced by a hazy sleeping beauty even though she was snoring like a hog. Brand wanted to know from her first-hand what the situation was but since the birds had flown and everyone could do with a bit of rest he decided to postpone action. "Three hours rest. My group will be over there in that hedge. You stay here. Henry will you wake the miller and get him to watch over us like a shepherd does his flock then report to me. Who will volunteer for first watch?"

In their minds Lucky and Flor were already on watch anyway so they kept silent. They now understood and trusted each other perfectly. Under his breath Flor offered Lucky the choice and he took first watch.

The break in the boredom of the last two days, the honesty of the dedication to a cause and the chance to please the people he admired caused Karvin to volunteer again. "I'll stand first hour and a half. Who is next?"

Brand answered. "The captain and me. Fire out! Get your sleep while you can. Captain and Henry to me."

"Henry, why am I asking you to get the miller to watch for us?"

"In case he is treacherous."

"Well done Henry. Can you tell him who we are but there are only four of us in that top hedge and nothing to do with Minda."

"Then what?"

"We'll see if he's honest by what he does."

The captain objected. "Why bother? We should just go home. You're looking for a fight."

"Yes. I'm looking for people who want to fight the tax Officer. Do you have a problem with that?"

"Err – It's unnecessary."

"Are you afraid of fighting?"

"Err – Best not to."

"Excellent. On your way back to Lostnock you can ask Minda how to avoid fighting. I've spent two years teaching her and she's very good."

"Minda! Her avoid fighting!"

"Yes. Here is Henry back from the miller."

"He says Mister Hesquery let him know Minda might be about and we are all invited to rest in his barn." Brand thought for a moment then for a bit longer as the implications sank in. "We'll all be visiting the village in the sunshine. Captain, the village here loves Minda, if you need a clue she beat them all at archery. I suggest you follow her lead. Here is my rough plan. We stay for lunch time then travel back in the afternoon. How is that?"

"I must get back to Lostnock. My job here is over."

Brand remarked to him casually. "Your horse is there. Depart."

The captain realised he hadn't thought this through. "Guards get mounted!"

Karvin who was alert and on watch and had therefore heard the discussion replied.  
"What's the hurry Captain? We can't ride without sleep on our own."

"Obey your orders."

Brand added more softly. "Karvin. Minda is one of your party. You may wake her up and tell her the captain is afraid to meet the honest citizens of Selenden."

"He can do it himself!"

Brand faced the captain. "I believe you're here on a training mission. Are you learning?" The captain was angry and afraid. "I see you're angry and afraid." Brand helpfully added. "Remind me. Am I stopping you and your men from leaving?" He'd learned the power of bare-faced cheek from Minda – It was fun to use it.

"We're going! Geort! Karvin! Minda! to me!"

Geort and Minda were asleep. Karvin stepped up. "I'm on watch sir."

"Damn your watch Karvin. Give Geort and Minda a kick and get the horses. We're off."

Strangely for a camp supposedly at sleep Lucky and Flor were intent on polishing their swords either side of a sleeping Minda. Even more strangely they didn't look up when Karvin approached and stopped at the invisible barrier.

Flor spoke gently. "I'm sorry Karvin. You'll need an order from Brand to wake Minda."

"Brand did say I could wake her and tell her the captain is afraid to meet the citizens of Selenden."

"Gently then." said Flor. "Lucky will take your guard as no one else is."

Lucky was amazed at how Flor had spotted lack of guarding and hurried off to a good vantage point.

## Result

Minda was soon up and had the situation explained. What were her strengths? Knowledge, a better plan, solid support.

"Hurry up Minda!" Shouted the captain. "We're off."

"Good. What's the plan of attack?"

"Attack? There's no attack we're going."

"Leaving?"

"Yes. Come on."

"So you don't want a share of the bounty?"

"What bounty?"

"Brand. Do you want the bother of investigating the church crypt?"

"No Minda. Not me! We might have to go – um – up to two miles out of our way."

"Two miles? That's serious. Well, off you men go and I'll catch you up. Flor! Lucky! Henry! Follow me." Minda climbed onto her horse.

"Get down!" Shouted the captain.

"Let me see captain. I could do the King's duty as stated in my warrant and seek out contraband or I could get down. Shall I read it to you? Are you ready Flor?"

"Yes miss."

"Brand. Would you do me a big favour. This man seems reluctant to investigate crime and let it be known we were headed to Selenden. He may not be honest. Would you accompany him homewards so he is no more hindrance?" She clearly showed him the high-low-high 'follow-me' hand sign. "I'll only need ten minutes."

"Yes miss."

"I'm innocent!"

"I'm sure you are captain. Now get out of my sight!"

"Karvin!"

"Yes miss."

"The bounty may be a rumour Karvin but if you want your share of anything we find follow me."

"I would miss but I am bound to the captain."

"You are welcome on my next mission Karvin."

It was still very early in the day when Minda knocked on the priest's door. When a servant answered she recognised her as an old playmate. "Hello Maggie"

"Minda!"

"I'm on the Kings duty. I have a warrant."

"Oh Minda! Is it my master?"

"Nothing for an honest person to worry about. Would you be so good as to fetch your master Maggie?"

"I'm dreaming. Is it really you?"

Minda was happy to see the shadow of someone stealing along the passage to the back door. "Yes. Do you remember when we played Tom-in-a-tree in Bixe's orchard?"

"Oh yes."

Maggie's recollections were cut short by Lucky shouting in through the back door.

"We have him miss".

"Thank you Lucky. Would you quickly check here for anything obvious. The captain should be here soon."

"The captain!"

"Brand should be bringing him. He is an expert searcher. We are beginners."

"Sorry Maggie – why would an innocent man try to run away. We may be here for a half hour. Could you warm some soup and bread for a very hungry friend?"

"Yes Minda. What will happen to me?"

"Nothing. I can promise you. There's nothing to fear – except if you put too much salt in my soup."

Outside Flor had the priest in an arm lock and by the expression on his face it was painful.

"Look at this Penton. It is a King's warrant to let me search wherever I have reason to suspect contraband." She held it up in front of his face. "Keys to the crypt please."

"This is church property. Minda."

"I know. Keys please Penton."

"You have no right to be here."

"I'll take that up with the Bishop of Lostnock when I tell him about one of his perfectly innocent priests running out of the back door. The King will be happy for any excuse to get money from the bishops so at this moment you are just an embarrassment."

"I know my rights."

"Good for you. Now these gentlemen are going to take you to the parlour and there they will find the keys. It is up to you how hard you make it for them. They're tired and have just heard about a good friend murdered by smugglers so you may have to bear some pain."

The priest gave in. "It is hidden above the fireplace."

"Fetch it Henry." commanded Minda adding a low-high warning whistle.

"Just in time. Here comes the captain."

By the time the priest's failed escape had been described to the captain Henry brought the key to the crypt. "Thank you for coming. We need your searching experience to do the job properly." He was confused and tense but no longer angry. Minda didn't trust him and made a note to keep an eye on Geort especially. As everyone was looking at him expectantly he volunteered. "Unfortunately this is church property and we have no right to search. Did she detect a relief in his voice? "I would like to but we'll just have to leave." With more confidence he asserted: "Come on everyone. Leave the poor priest alone. I must apologise Penton for this intrusion. Minda is very enthusiastic. Come on everyone."

"Flor, Lucky, Henry, Brand." She held up low-high-low 'enemy' hand signal then pointed at the captain.

"Karvin! To me please... Can I borrow your sword please." He unsheathed it and handed it to her. "Thank you. The captain is under arrest."

Four men acted too quickly for the captain to speak a coherent word. Geort was disarmed at sword point by Lucky. Flor moved between Karvin and Minda to protect her and the others pushed the captain to the ground and held swords at his face.

"Captain. How many times have you met and conspired with this priest?"

"Never."

"But you knew his name. How was that."

"Er – I guessed."

"Karvin I am sorry to abuse your kindness by asking for your sword. I think you are honest. Can I trust you?"

"Yes miss."

"Good. You'll have it back as soon as I've finished my breakfast. Please ask Maggie if it is ready."

"Maggie miss?"

"The servant." Karvin went inside. "Geort! To me!" She made a point of getting a good grip on Karvin's grounded sword. He was visibly sweating. "Geort. You have helped the captain out in small matters is that right?" Silence. "I know you have – just some little things."

"Yes miss."



"So shall I arrest you as well or will you promise to show me how good a guard you can be on our way back to Lostnock?"

"I didn't do anything."

"So what's your answer?"

"Answer?"

"Cloth brain! Shall I arrest you or do you promise to show me how good a guard you can be?"

"I promise to be good."

She was beginning to lose her patience with this fog-brain.

Brand knew the warning signs and interrupted. "Geort. When Minda says she wants you to be a good guard she means good at guarding not saying your prayers. Do you understand?"

"Oh – Er – Yes. Like you bumpkins you mean."

Minda was hungry. "I am very cross. I'm going to have my breakfast. You can all go fishing for all I care."

The captain, still prone on the ground complained. "I'll get my revenge on you Minda. You can't –Arghh." Minda's kick to his crotch made her feel better already.

She left the men to start searching, dealing with two prisoners and organising themselves along new lines of command while she had a warming breakfast. Maggie was asked to run to the hall and fetch Mister Hesquery and if she saw the chapman to tell him that she was enjoying breakfast and to choose a purse for herself which Minda would pay for. She was determined to take a leisured breakfast. It might be simple food but she was a mistress of servants and sometimes the mistress should be aloof and enjoy privilege. When Henry brought the news that the crypt had bales of cloth and casks in it she simply acknowledged it and asked him to send Lucky as quickly as possible. She was furiously cross with herself for forgetting about the lime merchant but there was no point in showing it. When Lucky arrived she explained about Fullers Row and the carpenter. She remembered the silver fish earring and extracted it from the lining of her cap. "Give this token to the carpenter. See if you can find out anything. Keep watch or follow the merchant if he sets off in this direction. I'll send a messenger. Hurry!"

It was only half an hour since they had been up by the windmill. Now the day had begun properly. Maggie returned with Mister Hesquery and the news that the chapman said he would come in a while. Maggie was sent away again to get a messenger boy for Lucky. After a happy kiss and a long hug Minda and Mister Hesquery sat in the snug kitchen. She filled in the details of the picture Maggie had given him on the way. Her story tailed off... Gradually, like getting warmed after a day out in the cold, Minda began to glow in the knowledge that she was sitting here by the fire while her men were doing whatever they were doing – she didn't care. She liked this feeling. Still she deserved it! She was the one who spotted the captain's mistake of calling Penton by name.

Mister Hesquery was proud and worried. "Here on my own doorstep!"

Minda continued the thought. "And a lot of other doorsteps."

"What about the Reeve."

"Well I warned him. That gives me an idea. I must congratulate him on keeping hidden. How is the archery?"

"I give a prize a month which keeps the men interested."

"In truth Mister Hesquery I haven't seen any reason for them to arm. The land is still at peace."

"But for how much longer? A failed harvest, a band of smugglers who turn to stealing and extortion, a band of loose soldiers back from a war. Any of these could cause harm beyond counting. Mister Trentchard and me take these things seriously but as you've just found out corruption gets everywhere."

"Yes I was nearly sent to trial for murder in Lostnock by false evidence."

"No!"

She could smile for Mister Hesquery now but it was luck and instinct at the time.

"Yes there are so many hiding places for enemies you have to bring them into the open so you know where they are."

"Like exposing this captain."

"Yes."

"Do you think you were sent to deliberately try to expose him?"

This hadn't struck Minda as a possibility before. Hey! She'd never thought of Mister Hesquery as possessing this level of sophistication. Oh! Brown sadness swept around her as she huddled in the shame that was assuming Mister Hesquery was just a boring good man. It took her some moments to gather herself. "Mister Hesquery. I am ten years older than when I left Selenden. I am so sorry if I ever treated you or Mrs Hesquery with abruptness. Now I can see how clever and loving you were."

"You always pleased us Minda. Even when –" he chuckled at the memory – even when you played sheepdog with the flock. Mrs Hesquery and I watched you. You must have been only five – stumping along trying to get them going where you wanted them and ending up with them gone in all directions." Mister Hesquery was grinning at his remembered picture.

"I don't remember that."

"We do you terror! And when you came back and complained that the sheep wouldn't obey your commands we cried with laughter. Samfia asked you what commands you'd been giving and you said "Sheep talk." Minda could join in with this lovely recollection. "Did I? How stupid of me. I should have used sheep-dog talk." More laughter.

## Consequences

Mister Hesquery really was clever when it came to people and possibly his greatest satisfaction was to see Minda had acquired the same skill. He could see that as a cripple she'd have a lot more prickly episodes and need for wit, but even so her fluency with children, servants, rogues and superiors was astonishing. Perhaps they had indulged enough and it was time for business. "Ripetto spoke highly of you. He says 'you have the brains of ten men six days a week and the brain of a woman on the other day.'"

Minda was tempted to say it was the same thing but this wasn't the time for easy jests. "The reason I asked for you was duty. I may need men as escorts for contraband. The King will pay."

"I'll have a down payment. This King of yours is a grudging payer."

"One shilling per man per week?"

"One and threepence."

"You drive a hard bargain Mister Hesquery. How much for a sheepdog?"

They laughed and waited in warm silence.

A man let himself in through the back door, saw Minda and Mister Hesquery looking at him and made to back out. "Come in Jett" commanded Mister Hesquery. Penton will be with us shortly."

"It's alright I'll call later."

"You're just the man I wanted to see. I need some mortar for my crumbling dovecote. Can you supply it?"

"Well I'm rather busy at the moment Mister Hesquery..." At this point, invisible from inside the kitchen, Lucky had appeared walking towards the lime merchant while juggling with two small swords. Morning sun flashed off the blades. Jett was caught as a rabbit between two foxes.

"Come in and sit down Jett." commanded Mister Hesquery. It was obvious to Jett that something was seriously wrong and where Minda and Mister Hesquery were so relaxed there must be more happening than he could possibly see. The man with the swords was part of it. Still he had nothing to fear.

Minda remembered a lesson from Mister Bob: 'Start with a lie and hear the echo' Now she realised she didn't have to be the one doing the lying. "What brings you here this morning?"

"Oh. Penton said the church plaster was flaking and would I have a look."

Minda turned to Mister Hesquery. "Hands up all those who believe that." She looked at Jett. "Frodasher was killed last night in an ambush. Arrow in the chest. Took half an hour to die with horrible bubbling blood noises in the dark. Not nice. Any idea who did that?"

"No miss. The captain was er –"

"Er what Jett? What was the captain?"

"I don't know. Never seen him." Lucky lounged at the open doorway. Jett knew he couldn't walk out.

They all knew Jett had given the game away but Minda couldn't see how to turn it into an outright win so she compromised: "That's a funny extension you have on the back of your house Jett? What's it for?"

After a momentary pause when they could almost hear Jett's brains working. "It's not used for anything."

Quickly Minda replied. "If it's not used for anything you can demolish it then. Mister Hesquery is the Lord's agent and I'm the Duke's daughter so I believe you have to get permission from Mister Hesquery to extend your house. Have you got that permission?"

"No miss."

"So we are all agreed that will go in the next seven days?"

Jett could see he was being let off with a warning and took the hint. "Yes miss."

"Good. Take my man with you and I'll have the first four bottles of anything that's there is that clear. No, make that five." Jett retreated in the knowledge that the outhouse was completely bare thanks to the tip-off.

The small crypt was packed absolutely full. How strange it would be if the quantity of goods to hide was exactly the same as the space available. Minda gave Maggie two shillings. One to buy an expensive purse and one to put in it. Maggie soon told her there was a hidden cellar exactly under where they were sitting in the kitchen. Crib upon crib of bottles were in there.

Henry took the job of recording everything. Karvin and Geort witnessed the totals with their signs. As the morning got older spectators gathered and Minda had to describe what Lostnock was like many times. Lucky reported back with six bottles. The Lime merchant had smugly shown him the bare out-house but Lucky had impressed on him that Minda was more bitter than the North wind if she went home empty handed and she'd probably use his private parts for target practise if he didn't find six bottles within the hour. Jett knew Minda's love of sharp shiny things and was one of those beaten by her at the archery so perhaps escaping with his life was worth six bottles.

She explained to Simon the reeve what had happened and showed him her warrant to prove it was lawful. "I cannot tell the next time I will come. You are more valuable to me as an informer who is allowed a certain scope than as a victim. Come and look at the haul. Two big waggon loads!" His discomfort at being dismissed as a small player was mirrored by Minda's pleasure at telling people how they should fit into her scheme. As they walked he filled with pride that a Selenden girl was making her way in powerful circles. Selenden people were the best he decided.

Minda rushed to the smithy to find Dunstin. The usual crowd of loafers got the story direct from her mouth and she added exciting and unbelievable facts about Lostnock. "Every hour day and night a clock strikes the hours." "Boats as big as a church." "Continuous noise of carts all hours of the day." "It stinks like a hundred middens but you get used to it." She managed a few private minutes with Dunstin and May. "I am safe." "Have you heard I struck three for Toggy Jiller?" "I have made the smiths of Lostnock brothers again." "Now I seem to be finding wives and husbands for smiths." "How are they at Barrington?" "Any messages for Trowstead, Rodwell, Sokenbridge or Lostnock?" There was hardly time to share a moment of peace with Mrs Hesquery who asked how Minda found town society. Minda guessed there was some reason for this interest but could only reply that she was taking dancing lessons and planning on attending some dances as she hadn't yet had time to get established. A quick transaction with Silks allowed her to tell him of the outcomes.

The priest was freed but Minda told him that he could expect the Bishop's displeasure and what he did was up to him now. They left at noon with two carts and drivers provided by Mister Hesquery. The captain rode with his hands tied behind his back.

As they started they were tired and irritable as a reaction to the strain of the dark and excitement of the discovery but resting would mean nearly a whole lost day and Brand's men were used to keeping going. They reached Trowstead at dusk. The

carts went into the yard and the gates were closed. Everyone wanted the day to end. A quick supper and all except the captain slept soundly.

## Rest and review at Trowstead

The next day was Sunday which gave everyone the excuse they needed to catch up with what had happened. Mister Trentchard gently interrogated Minda and Brand about the time at the windmill and priest's house. He was secretly overjoyed that Minda and Brand could scheme such a thing. "Did Minda know for certain the captain had betrayed them at the windmill?" No but she wanted him or his experienced men to do searching. "How did Brand persuade the Captain to follow?" By making it clear he would look less silly by helping rather than acting like a child. "There was a certain amount of that's where we were going anyway whether he liked it or not. In the end I suggested he needed to be on the scene in case Minda was excessive when under his command."

"It's a serious matter arresting your commander Minda. Well done. Now you have to make it stick. Remember that Mister Bob may be sympathetic to him for some reason of old comradeship and of course you have shown he was wrong to trust Frodasher. I suggest you write everything down clearly for him and get as many witnesses to sign it as possible. I have already sent Spiten to tell him we have another load of contraband and to send more guards and a replacement for the captain." Minda asked if she should leave tomorrow to get back to Lostnock as soon as possible or wait two days to depart and take two days to travel with the slower contraband convoy. Mister Trentchard reminded her that part of the reason for this expedition was to get her out of the town, so why not take her time getting back. Brand added that Henry had done well and Minda should write what he did in recording the haul when they found it and how he was now checking it in more detail. Although Henry was tired after a night expecting trouble he'd settled down to it like a bird on its nest. Mister Trentchard dismissed Minda with a suggestion that the earliest departure was Wednesday but probably Thursday and she should rest and enjoy the break from the town.

When she had gone Mister Trentchard unlocked his cabinet and pulled out a bottle. "I must thank you Brand. Your years of service have been well done and the last two years better done and the last two months better done and the last two days better done still. Share some of what Minda extorted from the Reeve of Selenden with me." "Thank you Mister Trentchard. A wise and trusting master makes service a pleasure." "Here is a toast to you Brand."

"And to you and mistress Marline sir." Brand's honesty that would be a cheek from anyone else settled them into that rare warmth of off-duty comradeship that men sometimes enjoy when the fires of competition and status are replaced with those of goodwill and intimate confidences.

Brand observed. "All of the men want to please and protect Minda – you know the effect she has – but Henry simply gets older and bolder and wiser when she is wringing necks."

"Remember Brand we were training him to do the sort of thing that Minda does naturally. He must admire her talent and at least try to have a go when she makes it look so easy."

"Oh yes he knows her talent and is grateful that he doesn't have responsibilities like that any more. He enjoys training with us but mostly it is to be manly with men. If I was marching off to battle then I'd want Henry to organise the provisions and survey the route but keep him away from the sight of blood."

"Well Minda hasn't actually killed anyone herself." observed Mister Trentchard.

"You're right. She hasn't deliberately committed an act of murder with her own hand."

"There is a lesson for her soon Brand. It will dawn on her that the captain will lose his job. What will become of his family? She's a woman and it might be difficult for her."

"It would be difficult for me but I would leave him to find his own way. I think Minda will help him find some other employment when she realises."

Mister Trentchard took time to picture this in his mind. He poured some more wine into their glasses. "And instead of an enemy she'll have another devoted friend. How does she do it?"

"Spells if I didn't know better. She's won Lucky who is an excellent fighter when properly led and also one of the guards is eating from her hand."

Mister Trentchard offered another toast. "Here is a toast to our faerie queen Minda."

"To Minda. And us – her subjects."

Mister Trentchard laughed. "We are aren't we. Bewitched!"

Brand laughed in turn. "You let the demon out of the bottle."

"I remember Marline telling me you were smitten by her guts on the first day."

Brand admitted. "There was something about her even then."

"Bravery and brains"

"Luck as well."

"And she's so lovable."

Brand offered: "Here's to the most ugly lovable person we know."

"To Minda!... ..Wouldn't it be difficult if she was a beauty always making eyes at the boys."

"She could cast a spell on any man tomorrow."

"Brand I have to go to church soon. Err – Another glass will ease the boredom. I have to dress carefully as Marline will be on my arm for the first time. Can't a man be late for once?" Mister Trentchard filled their glasses to the brim.

Brand offered an old toast: "Strength and sense –"

"Prosperity and pence –"

"Good living and good women –"

"Good summers and good men –"

"May enemies avoid you –"

"And friends surround you."

Mister Trentchard had been dreading the moment when his union with Marline would be displayed to the whole world. Knowing amongst yourselves was a nervous secret that might be shared in bits between you but he had to be confident in public. Finally he was ready to do his long-shirked duty. "Lewin has given me something – I might make Marline happy in bed yet." This was a bit of a revelation to Brand. He had to think. There was a lot to think about. "Mister Trentchard. Err – Between you and me – Have you been afraid of taking Mistress Marline to bed all these years?"

"Yes Brand. That's one way of putting it."

Brand lowered his voice. "You have a son Henry so you must have a loaded pizzle. What's the trouble?"

"I'm the horse that refuses to jump the hedge. I don't know what's in my head but I refuse."

"Until now. Hurrah. Marline isn't a hedge of thorns or a rock-filled stream to jump. She's thistledown itself I can tell you."

"How can you tell me?"

"Because I have been there. You cruel man! She has the urges just like you."

"I have been cruel or stupid or something."

Brand asked "If there is any left I will give you a toast." The last of the bottle was emptied into their glasses. Brand stood up formally with a big grin. "Here is to you Mister Trentchard. The biggest prick in thistledown." Mister Trentchard grinned sheepishly at Brand's pithy description yet happy there was someone in the whole world who understood.

"We should have had this bottle many years ago Brand."

A servant knocked with hesitation at the study door. "Please sir. Mistress/"

"/Yes thank you Mary. Tell her to wait for a moment."

Mister Trentchard and Brand shared that moment before the dawn attack when shadows grow into grotesque fears but it was conquered by a quick hug. Bravery and bravado, conviction and certainty welled up. Brand praised Minda for the spirits. Mister Trentchard praised Minda for her spells.

The village of Trowstead was pleased to see Mister Trentchard and mistress Marline as man and wife to be. They would probably discuss the reasons for the years of delay amongst themselves but never express the answer aloud although it must be guessed by many of them. They were pleased to see Minda and Flor of course and excited by the visitors and the rumours that gold and silver and jewels had been captured by Minda from pirates. That autumn Sunday afternoon hit the happy spot which spurs arabesques of curiosity without demanding action. Brand, Henry and Lucky went for gentle archery and then skittles. At Minda's suggestion Flor saw how mistress Marline kept her household accounts and showed her how he was doing himself.

Minda enlisted Delphia to help her writing journals and statements and commendations for Mister Bob. She debated about telling Delphia about Silks. She knew Delphia wouldn't betray Silks deliberately but what about if she had a glass of wine or a lover-man was sharing confidences? "Delphia? If you had a secret who would you share it with?"

"Um – I don't know. Let me think. If it's my secret I would share it with who I like but if it was another's secret then I would to lock it up inside like you do."

"Really? How would you lock it?"

"Easy. By asking 'what would Minda do?' "

"I am more full of secrets than a Broom bush has seeds. I want to snap my pods open in the heat and fling secrets everywhere."

"Don't tell me any secrets Minda. What good will it do to have two people worrying?"

"It shares the load. There are some which are so important, a matter of somebody's life – or lots of lives – or lots of money that the only thing to do is lie."

"Lie?"

"Yes. Remember the other day I told you straight I couldn't tell you where we were going but I didn't make up a lie. But suppose I told you I was going along to watch what others were doing and not getting involved and not getting anywhere near an arrow out of nowhere in the night or a sword flashing from out behind a hedge. Well that wouldn't have been true. I was only brave because if I wasn't then the men would be using me as an excuse to turn back."

"Even Flor, Brand and Henry?"

"No not them. They would always look after me."

"What's the problem Minda?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I just want to share confidences and there's nobody to confess to."

"Well do you want to tell me a secret or not?"

Minda took a long time to reply. "If you need to share this with anybody else it is Mister Trentchard. Brand and Flor don't know this."

Delphia reached for another precious piece of paper. "Tell me what we are writing. Is it a letter?"

"Yes. To Mister Bob – Er Lord Levendale. Another formal one."

"Hmm – I don't think I should Minda. I can keep a secret I promise. You can keep a secret but the paper can't keep a secret. If it gets read by somebody it will tell everything."

"You are so right Delphia! Thank you. I must be stupid! Mister Trentchard taught me a thing called code which hides a message so only one who knows half the secret can read the whole."

"How does that work?"

"Um – Suppose the message was 'Important information see Delphia at Trowstead for details' to someone who was spying an area. I might send a message. 'D at T is looking for an expensive gown like Minda's'. I might send word to a few places. Only the one who knew me and that I would send a message like that would understand what it was about. He would know that T meant Trowstead as that's the only place I am associated with which starts with T. He would know that the person to speak to was you and so he would also know I wasn't there and so you would have a better message from me. The 'expensive' in there tells him it is valuable information."

"That's clever. Do you have to learn that 'expensive' means important and all other special meanings?"

"No. It's guessing."

"That's a bit of a risk."

"All spying is risky."

"Have you been spying?"

"No Delphia." Then she remembered Steela's nighttime visit to the Coroner. "Well I have hidden in some dark lanes."

"Are you frightened?"



"Yes of course – Just a little. No not really. I'm thinking all the time about what's happening here and behind and with the others. It isn't like lying in bed worrying about ghosts."

"If you wanted to tell a lie you could write it down and let it get stolen. And because it was stolen the thief would trust it."

"What sort of lie Delphia?"

"I don't know. Any lie – And! And when you found out the message was known you would know that whoever knew it was the thief."

"That's an idea. I could leave false information in the tax Office and see if the clerks are passing it on to their friends. Thank you – What a clever idea."

## Day trip to Barrington

As far as Minda was concerned the next two days were free. Having nothing to do was a bit strange. Should she go back to see the Hesquerys and Dunstin? What about Barrington? Was there more searching for smuggling she could work at? Every haul meant money in her account at the tax Office, after all and she wanted to be rich and spend it all on fine clothes and loyal servants. In the end as a reaction to servants and fighting she asked Delphia if she would like to go to Barrington with her for the day and catch-up with Raysell. After getting permission from mistress Marline and giving Flor and Lucky the day off – "No they were not to follow her or worry about her. She would be back by dusk or staying the night dancing at Risket Hall." As they were leaving Flor and Lucky stood at the roadside looking serious. Minda made a point of stopping by them and loudly telling Delphia "That's the trouble with men. They are always finding excuses to run off and enjoy themselves but if you order them to have fun they think it is a trap."

What a difference a month of adventuring makes. Minda and Delphia were no-longer sisters engaged in local trivia. Each was aware that the world was a much bigger place than they'd thought. Delphia's isolation had a growing-up effect on her and Minda was desperate for any talk between girls that was far from the pressure of the town or tension of the track. As they rode to Barrington being tickled by occasional spots of light rain they chatted about men, fashion, Lostnock, Trowstead and the people there. Minda told the whole of the story about Steela. Delphia was concerned that the town Minda had described might twist people. How different she was to the twittering Delphia of two years earlier. They discussed men and marriage. Minda started off thinking about Delphia and Pod's sons. By the end she had a queer feeling that marriage might not be beyond her. It seemed so natural the way Delphia spoke about it but in her mind she was, and always would be, a one-eyed ugly cripple destined to be an old-maid.

Minda stopped at the crest of the hill overlooking Barrington, estimated the dwellings, estimated the income, compared it with the rather large hall and perfectly arranged park. Nothing had changed she decided. The village served the hall and the lord of the hall knew how to make the most of his assets. Raysell and the lawyer son Richard were practically certain to get married. It would be interesting seeing what effect that had.

The first stop was of course at the Smithy. Minda had explained to Delphia about the tradition of giving the urchins a ride. For no reason she suggested Delphia should simply talk to them normally about things that interested the children rather than get caught up in fairy-tale nonsense.

It was obvious to Minda from the green that Smith Brawter was a man of energy and commerce. He had painted the smithy and hung examples of his work above the door. A coulter, ploughshare, bolts of various sizes, horseshoes of course and a knife that looked quite a bit like hers. The usual smithy-crowd were gossiping away as the smith got round to their jobs and quite while after he'd finished as well. When two well-dressed young ladies rode into this arena the loafers stood back.

"Excuse me Delphia I have to say hello to my brother."

"Brother!"

"All smiths are 'brothers'. I'm a brother."

"You are as daft as a bag of down Minda!" They dismounted into the throng of curious labourers, servants and old men who could just about be trusted to take a horse to be shod or some tools to be sharpened and hardened. Delphia took her confidence from Minda's outrageous lead. "We are the red-hot rivets from Trowstead smith Brawter ordered." He heard the jest and passed Minda and Delphia over to his wife in the cottage next door. The pleasure was mutual "Katey!" "Minda!" Delphia was introduced to a smiling Katey. There was no doubt things were turning out alright for the Brawter family. They were soon enjoying warmed cakes, there was always a place to warm cakes or ale in a working smithy. Delphia explained they had come on a chance before the winter made the roads difficult. Minda described Lostnock and then spoke about the smiths. "I have bad news and good news. Toggy Jiller was struck three times and then in a rage tried to kill me. He died."

Smith Brawter asked. "Who struck him?"

"Me. It was horrible." There was a sudden silence. She looked at the ground.

"You have done right for us and I'm sure you had good reason. Brave girl."

"And the good news is that now the poison is removed the smiths are true brothers again. Smith Jiller has three daughters and Smith Watts four sons. Jiller is very very skilled but Watts has most of the business with three hearths and a cast furnace and is rising in society. I'm going to take Delphia to stay with them."

Katey said "You are the smith's marriage fairy Minda."

Delphia added "Not only smiths."

Good news travels fast among urchins and it wasn't long before Minda and Delphia saw the amazing sight of half a dozen barefoot girls with eye-patches and wooden swords fighting barefoot boy lions with charcoal whiskers in tatty, disgracefully shaggy discarded coats. Delphia was delighted. Minda was unsettled by a phenomenon getting out of control. Katey told them that the children had given the lion the name 'Ilon'. Half 'Iron' and half 'Lion' perhaps. The slower of the loafers had the spectacle explained to them.

A little boy in a huge brown coat dragging on the ground and sleeves that hid his hands came up to Minda and with a coy smile roared provocatively. His attempt to frighten Minda with his squeaky voiced didn't sound very fierce but by convention

Minda had to react accordingly. Only Delphia knew Minda had never been closer to a lion than a picture in a book, and the lion in it looked like a dirty yellow sheep with a funny tail. Some of the Ilons were barking and spitting and some meowing and growling. With a shock Toggy Jiller's roar as he attacked her came back. He would serve her now. She strode over to the men waiting for Smith Brawter to resume work. "Does anyone know what a real lion's roar is like?" Nobody volunteered. "What does a groaning mill wheel sound like? Come on my girl's voice can't do a good roar. You! Go on have a go." Her victim made a weedy groan and the others smirked. "Right we'll take it in turn. Start with you on the left." Everyone had a go and began to put an effort into it. "Good. Now again with a laden waggon rumbling over ruts. Lots of rumbling." Finally she commanded them to add some rage. This was only partially successful. She was about to thank them and pick one to show the children when Smith Brawter made her jump as he stood right behind her and bellowed and gargled and rumbled in a tempest of rage. This time she really was scared. The village stopped for a moment, two horses reared and the others needed calming down. "Now we all know what a lion sounds like."

After the tradition of rides for the children Minda said farewell. "You really made me shake with that roar Smith Brawter. Shall I call you Ilon?" He gave a quiet growl. "I will be proud to have a name given by the Star-iron girl herself."

"Now we must visit the hall Ilon and see Raysell. Fare ye well and you also Katey."

Katey told them. "You'll be disappointed. They all left for Melbun yesterday for the Kingsmoot. Lord Risket is a King's Councillor and he's hoping to get a lawyer's job for Richard there."

Delphia wondered what the implications for Raysell were. Minda wondered what to do next. She felt stupid about to go with nowhere to go. "Thank you Katey. And thank you all. Follow me Delphia." The moment the children had been waiting for arrived as she withdrew her shining knife, tossed it spinning in the air, caught it, then holding it high galloped out of the village towards home.

On the way back they wondered if Raysell would soon be a lady at the King's court. Delphia was inclined to think she could if Richard was really rich. Minda thought of the cost and pace of life in a town and decided Raysell might have to be her own servant in many things. A struggling new lawyer would probably be just an apprentice in a gown. Minda had a bit of wealth and two seizures of which this last one must be money in her pocket. Delphia would be a snug rivet in the Watts family if that's how things turned out. Oh and what about poor Thredvald? He might be better off taking over Toggy Jiller's smithy? She would have to ask the smiths when she got to Lostnock if there was enough demand.

"Minda. I thought it was lovely to see all those tiny Mindas. Did you see two had a star embroidered on their caps?"

"No. Why?"

"Brawter called you the 'Star-iron' girl. I thought that might be connected."

"The Smiths call me star-iron because that's the most precious metal they know. Star-iron comes from stars that fall to earth. Shooting stars."

"What is 'striking'?"

"It's the worst thing that can happen to a smith. He cannot be a smith. His whole life destroyed."

"Why did you do that?"

"His smithy was derelict. He terrorised and stole from his brother who was paying for his bad ways. He had ceased to be a smith. My master, Smith Dunstin of Selenden charged me with being a good smith and looking after brother smiths in need. So I do."

"Shouldn't you have discussed it with the other smiths?"

"Yes. But I was trained by Brand to fight without discussion. I knew I was doing the right thing."

"Why was it horrible?"

"It was an evil hole. Where honest iron should become bright steel – where honest sweat should make clever tools – where honest blows should shape worthy everyday things that people rely on there was nothing but a spirit of decay and rottenness living in the place. To fight something like that you have to go near it, count its slithering legs, touch its clammy heart and feel it watching you daring you to have courage."

"Did you kill him?"

"No. But in a way I did. I shattered the trust every smith has for another. A smith will shelter a fugitive smith or feed a penniless one. Smiths will see each and their widows get proper burials."

"Have you killed anybody?"

"No. Very nearly. I hastened the death of a smuggler last month when I was out with Henry and Brand you remember. I was about to cut Toggy Jiller's hand off when Flor or Lucky or both got to him first. He was six inches from me and very strong and very angry. He would have killed me."

"Why didn't the other smiths do something?"

"They just put up with it. Men can sometimes be like that – shrug and let it be for another day – or week – or year." This was food for thought for both of them. Minda was pleased with Delphia for asking these innocent questions between themselves. If the men were around it wouldn't be the same.

Delphia asked. "How will I earn money for my clothes in Lostnock Minda?"

"To begin with I think you will be the daughter Smith Watts never had. He's brought up his sons to be frugal and hard working but in himself he wants to be a nobleman and would love a beautiful daughter to show off. 'Watch out you smug burgesses! Now the smiths have money *and* style.' "

"And then what?"

"You have seen a bit of how I help the smiths. You can cast accounts, you can read agreements and write nice and nasty letters. They think almost always of simple trade, whereas you, with a bit of help from me, might stir the pot and get business or organise it better. Mistress Marline has taught you well. And I will look after you."

"I'm not complaining Minda but why do I need looking after?"

"That's what I do for people I love and love me."

"Why?"

"I don't know Delphia. It works. People have always looked after me without question so I suppose I do the same."

"Henry says he would like to marry you but you'd keep trying to improve him."

Minda laughed then laughed again as the layers of this unpeeled. "Henry is good enough as he is but..."

"But what Minda?"

"He hasn't hooked his future yet. He hasn't even made the hook." Delphia took a while to comprehend the metaphor and apply it to Henry. Minda was also thinking of herself being in a stream like a pike waiting for lesser fish to swim by. Her stream seemed full of fish at the moment but none of them husbands.

"But Minda I haven't made a hook yet either."

"I've made it for you. See I said I'd look after you. Now all you have to do is cast it."

"Stop!" Minda commanded under her breath. Although she couldn't remember a time she was so relaxed part of her was always on alert. Delphia nearly panicked at the sharpness in Minda's voice. "We may have company."

"Company?"

"I swear I will carry you to the midden if you repeat what I say. 'Company' means someone who has shown himself on the skyline. We can stay on the road and ignore them or play hide and seek which would you like?"

"I will follow you?"

"It's a really deep and smelly midden! I'm asking you."

"Hide and seek."

"Come on then. This is only playing games."

Minda lead the way off the road along the edge of a wood to gain height then looked at the ground carefully. There are some new footprints. They look absolutely fresh. But there was something wrong. This track wasn't made by Brand or Flor or Henry they run over muddy tracks but these were walked. Then she remembered it could be Lucky or the guards. It could be an honest peasant. She wished she'd got Henry's skill of knowing where tracks would be in a wilderness. The best she could do was think for herself where someone going in this direction was likely to go and would they have a horse and if so where would it have been left? Delphia was intrigued by Minda's concentration. She'd seen other people think for a moment or two but never for a whole minute. Luckily there was nobody ready to attack them at that moment because Delphia was not taking the guard duty any of the men would have naturally taken and Minda had forgotten the men were not there protecting her.

"There's something I can't see in these tracks. Shall we follow them?"

Delphi hesitated. "Yes" was the only answer she could think of.

"Listen carefully Delphia. Your life may depend on it. If I give the command 'fly' you are to ride to Trowstead as fast as possible and not to even look behind. Is that clear?"

"Yes Minda."

"Sure?"

"Yes."

"If I give the command 'attack' ride you horse directly at the nearest man. Nearest and then fly. Is that clear."

"Yes. The nearest man. Are we likely to be attacked?"

"No but it is best to have a plan in just case. Then you don't have to worry about what you might do and can focus on what is actually happening."

"This isn't playing games any longer is it Minda?"

The accuracy of this froze Minda in the act of remounting. Delphia! What was the risk? No risk. Just a stranger or one of the guards sent by Brand to spy on them. "It's not children's games but you're safe if you remember your two orders."

"Which way is Trowstead Minda?"

"Downhill to the road then follow the sun."

Minda instructed Delphia on look-out duties while she dismounted to follow the trail. It seemed to vanish into a wood where it wasn't worth following so the game was an anticlimax. Minda used the excuse to get back on the road and hurry the last three miles to Trowstead. "I'm sorry Delphia. Most trails go cold." Her irritation wasn't helped to see Flor and Lucky, clearly intoxicated, playing skittles on the village green. She didn't want her servants to appear stupidly drunk in public and would have words with them later. "Keep going boys." was all she said as she rode past with Delphia. Somehow the childish magic at Barrington had been polluted by inconclusive trail-following and drunk servants.

## 9 Horror at home

Spiten arrived soon after Minda with news that Mister Bob would come himself tomorrow with more guards to take the contraband back on Wednesday.

At sundown while Flor and Lucky were sleeping off their shameful excess, news came of a farmer's wife being raped near Speal. Mister Trentchard, Brand and Minda discussed what should be done.

Brand said "It is probably Butcher. He's been stealing for a while in the area. I think he's hiding in the woods above the Barrington road."

Mister Trentchard suggested they should use a bloodhound to track him.

Minda said it could be anybody. Even if Butcher was a thief it didn't mean he was a rapist.

"Good point" Mister Trentchard said.

"How can we tell?"

"We know it's Butcher Minda. He was nearly caught by the farmer but escaped. Hmm. I would rather not tell you the details." In the following silence Minda picked

at the information. This was yet another test. Before she could speak Brand added.  
"This isn't a test. This is real."

"Why involve me?"

"Because you're the person above all who puts things right."

"I can't undo a rape."

"You can help to revenge it. Revenge helps stop others thinking they can get away with it."

"If you tell me the details what bad thing could happen?"

Both men tried to speak. Brand gave way to Mister Trentchard. "Imagine a windmill with no stones and no brake in a gale. It would spin itself to bits. Now is your brake on? Here is a gale and half."

Minda took time to understand she was not to let herself spin into bits. "My hands are on the table. What is it?"

"Butcher held a knife to the farmer's child and took her away as hostage."

Minda was conscious of the effort that Brand and Mister Trentchard had taken to tell her the news gently. "Thank you. That's horrible taking a child from its mother."

Brand and Mister Trentchard shared a glance as they knew of the worse things that might happen to a child in that situation and realised that Minda didn't. "If you mean the woods three miles from here then I saw a track that confused me today early afternoon. I thought at first you were watching me from the skyline but when I investigated the tracks were not yours but they might have been Lucky's or the guards. They vanished into the wood and I didn't bother to go further."

Brand asked "What made you look in the first place?"

"I saw a figure on the skyline for a moment."

"None of us were near."

Mister Trentchard began organising his troops. "Well done Minda. Butcher deserves to hang five times over. There is not enough light left today. I suggest we flush him out of the wood at first light tomorrow with dogs from the Barrington road. That should make him break cover onto Hickydiky lane that runs on the other side of the hill. Perhaps we should get Henry to help us. Your men Minda need to be fit. Can we use the guards Brand?"

Minda reluctantly woke Flor and Lucky to warn them of a pre-dawn start. She didn't tell them why. Drunks just had to obey orders.

Mister Trentchard took charge of the various forces from local villages who had been collected to do the driving, Brand mustered the catchers. Henry had been able to give the commanders a picture of the land and even suggested that if someone was camping in the wood they would probably pick somewhere not far from the stream running from the bog on the top that crossed Hickydiky lane. Every one was solemn as their instructions were given in the lamp light of the courtyard. Every man had to keep in touch with his neighbour so there were no holes in the net. Every man could shoot to kill. With dogs carefully muzzled until the time for the start they filed out with each man's equipment being checked by Brand and name recorded by Marline. After the beaters had shuffled off by sparks of half closed lamps into the night Brand's party mounted and headed for the back road. Henry and Flor teamed-up again to scout ahead.

Minda rode between Geort and Karvin. "Thank you for your help at Selenden Karvin. Brand tells me you have decided to mend your ways Geort. That's good. Tonight – or rather this morning – make sure you follow orders. We can't afford weak links in the chain."

"Yes miss." replied Geort.

"Do not join in some general chase without orders is that clear?"

"Yes miss."

"One person sees a ghost and before you know it half the force are chasing nothing. We don't let spooks fool us."

"Yes miss. Please miss is this man armed?"

"Whatever weapons he has he knows he is finished if caught so he will be deadly dangerous if he only has a stick. His best bet is to try to sneak past us without being seen. So our best weapon is eyes everywhere."

"But if he sees us he will go elsewhere."

"Exactly. That is the plan. You and Karvin will keep watch on this side of the wood and your mounted patrol will be noisy and obvious. You are the flank guards. Now you must stay on patrol because he might steal a horse and come along the road towards you."

"Any questions?"

"Please miss is there a bounty on this fugitive's head?" asked Geort.

This threw Minda for a moment. "You don't understand. We don't go looking for people because we might make a profit. We get wet, cold, tired, scratched and fed-up because we don't want people like him raping and thieving. If your neighbour's house is on fire do you ask for payment to help carry buckets?"

"No miss."

"And if we don't find him this morning we'll be looking all day."

Karvin helpfully completed Minda's message. "So we don't want to be fooled or we'll be the ones to suffer."

"Well put Karvin."

## Death in the dawn

Brand carefully placed his men in the half light. The guards on one flank, Flor and three village men on the other. Henry and Lucky as a pair with Lucky visible and Henry hidden in the bushes where Butcher might think Lucky couldn't see. On the other side of the stream himself and Minda similarly with Minda riding a patrol to just short of where Brand was hidden. All they could do was wait as the light improved then watch carefully for what Brand estimated would be less than half an hour after the dogs were loosed. If Henry was right and Minda's tracks were genuine and his previous hunch was correct and Butcher had gone to ground in his safe place then he would probably follow the stream down to the road then try to escape the dogs where it joined the river.

Nothing happened. The bare branches black with autumn damp. The clumps of saplings by the stream would give him the best cover. He must come soon. The barking of dogs could just be heard. A badger pushing his way through the fallen



leaves on his way home gave Brand a false alarm. Suddenly a cry of pain and Henry shouted. "Twenty paces my side of the stream." Minda stayed on her patrol while Brand and Henry did whatever they were doing. Brand called her. "We have him Minda. Send the guards to meet the dogs then return."

She returned as ordered to find a unkempt man kneeling naked with a bloody arrow wound in his thigh. She'd forgotten about the rule of stripping prisoners to make sure they didn't carry weapons. Brand was in a hurry. "Henry will you check what's in his bag. They could be things stolen from the farmhouse. Flor you're the watch."

"Now you Butcher. You're a dead man and you know it. Where is the child?"

Butcher looked down.

"Do you want to die painfully or very slowly and very painfully?"

"Let me go and I'll tell you."

"Every breath an agony. Hoping each moment to die."

Lucky tried to be helpful with a display of casual sword juggling but what might work in the shadows of a town between thugs was clowning here.

"Go away Lucky!" said Brand. "Where is the child Butcher."

"Let me go."

"Minda come here and watch me dislocate his elbows."

Henry interrupted with news that the gold ring and silver candlesticks matched the descriptions he had of items stolen from the farm.

Minda knelt down by Butcher and asked quietly and clearly. "Is she alive?"

He didn't answer.

"Where have you buried her?"

"I can show you. Please let me go."

"No tell me."

"Let/"

"/Shut up! I can have dogs rip your flesh, burn your legs away in a fire, use you for archery practise and you know what I do for pleasure don't you Butcher? My smiths hammer will break every bone in your body one at a time. Now where have you buried her?"

"By the burnt oak miss."

"Where's that oak?"

"Near where you followed me to the wood yesterday."

A cold flush swept through her. "You are going to hell."

"I know miss. Sorry."

She looked up at Brand while trying to get through each second without thinking. Brand shouted to Lucky. "Tie him to that tree over there. That is where he will die. Henry do you want to stay here and watch or lead men with spades to a child's grave?"

Henry was white and silent. "Sorry Brand. Both and neither. I will do my duty but I wish I didn't have to."

"You speak for all of us."

This made Henry feel slightly less sick. "Command me and I will stay."

"Stay for as long as you will then we need to return that child to it's village."

He turned to Flor. "Will you guard Henry for me?"

Flor was a bit worried by the inevitable execution himself. "Yes Brand."

"Now Minda come here my darling."

She fell into his open arms and whispered a confession. "I could have followed him yesterday and caught him."

"No you couldn't."

"I was so close."

"There was nothing you could do."

"There must have been. – I could have tried."

"Nobody can catch an arrow."

"I could have tried."

"I am ordering you to kill him. Will you do that?"

"I am not worthy."

"You struck a smith now kill a man – I will help you."

"Alright Brand. How?"

"Painfully and slowly."

"How?"

"I will show you. Let's get it over with then we can deal with the larger horrors to come."

Minda was too confused to take much notice of this last bit but resolved to make a start.

"Lucky! Fetch Butcher's cloak."

## **WARNING**

*There is no such thing as an execution that isn't gruesome. This one is particularly barbaric. Readers may want to skip the next passage.*

"Henry! Here! Would you use your knife to carve a letter R on his forehead."

Henry hesitated but found the muscle and did as Brand asked. Lucky had used a rag as a gag but the pain on Butcher's face was obvious as the first vertical stroke scraped across his skull. When he'd finished the other two cuts Henry felt a lot stronger."

"Thank you Henry." Brand patted him on the shoulders as a mother congratulates her son on his first loss. "Lucky will you hold the cloak so it is an apron for Minda." She took her eyes from Butcher's blood-smeared face of agony as Brand drew his sword lightly across his tense belly to show her how to butcher Butcher. She was revolted at the thought and even more as he writhed in an attempt to avoid her knife. She made herself watch as she forced the blade into his stomach and carved it open. As she'd feared his intestines spilled out in front of her, red and pink slithery sausages

with splattering and squelching. The cavity had gobbets of muscle and silky membrane hanging from it. Blood covered her knife and arm. She looked at Brand for permission to stop. "Now wash off the blood in the stream and we will be away to deal with more evil."

When she waded out of the water she made the mistake of looking at the tortured carcass on the tree. His bloody eyes were pleading for an end to the pain. "Minda! To me!" Brand's order was something she could understand. Henry was at a distance with the horses. Lucky was physically sick. The villagers had sensibly made-off round the bend. "Henry! Tell Flor where he can get spades and a shroud. Flor take the men where Henry tells you then we will meet on the wood's edge above Barrington road."

The beaters and their dogs began arriving at the lane. They had maintained discipline and taken their time to be sure. They all saw Butcher and word soon spread who had performed the atrocity. Mister Trentchard took the details from Brand then stood on a bank a hundred paces from the awful sight of Butcher dying in agony with his guts spread around his feet.

"Men I would like to thank you all. Each one played their part and justice has been done. Has anyone seen a burnt oak this morning?"

"Yes sir." came from at least two voices.

"Will those men please stay. The rest of you may return to your homes knowing you have done well and there will be a reward... ..But despite all our efforts the child has been killed. None of you could have prevented it. Tickling from Speal all you did was bring a dog and walk through the woods – You have done all that was asked and nobody expects more. Durrant of Westlington you came with a stick and reaping hook and walked peacefully through the woods – You have done all that was asked and nobody expects more. All of you go home and tell your families that even when all men do their best there will still be times when evil wins a round. Go home. Thank you."

Minda climbed up on the bank beside Mister Trentchard. "Butcher is a bastard! All men are bastards! Brand is a bastard! Mister Trentchard is a bastard! Why didn't they leave it to somebody else? We could have slept tonight and shrugged when another rape or murder happens to someone else. And you bastards – ALL OF YOU! – Who is going to take the body back to the mother?... ..I am. Now GO!"

## Sweet sorrow

Minda couldn't face a horrible half hour searching by the burnt oak. She sat outside the wood and cried in empty rage. Flor and Lucky kept watch with their own thoughts. After a while Flor suggested they should go down to the Barrington road and then a wash in the river would do them good. Minda accepted – it was better than sitting here. Flor took Minda's arm while Lucky led the horses behind. She stopped.

"Come on Lucky. Take my other arm. Three is a lucky number." A tiny bit of her cloud cleared. "There is a tomorrow and we are all in it but there is worse yet today. We are going to spread bad news in the kindest way we know how. I'm going to be

very angry and very tired. I'm going to need some of Lewin's special herbs when we get back and I don't want to go back to Lostnock tomorrow."

Clean cold water was good medicine for red eyes. She could see with one but cry with both. Flor took a turn to privately cleanse what could be cleansed on this dirty day. Lucky's turn came and Minda and Flor were startled by his splashing and screaming "Bastards! You're all bastards and going to die!" Then he began the most pure church singing. Neither Minda or Flor understood the words but the gentle rising and cascades of his clear voice filled their emptiness. In his cupped hands he brought stream water and splashed it on Minda's face and then Flor's. Still singing he gently made the sign of the cross directly at Minda as he would to the Virgin. Flor was nervous as Minda had a habit of sleeping on his shoulder at church in Lostnock. If she was angry Lucky would have a knife in him.

"See the virgin's tears" she said with yet more tears flowing down her face. "That was beautifully sad."

Flor chose his moment. "Minda, will I keep your knife for you today?" She was confused. "Perhaps the virgin shouldn't be carrying a bloody knife just now?"

Gradually knives, virgins, jobs to do and trust in Flor arranged themselves in a clear picture. "Here it is" She handed it over carefully. "But I need something to hold onto."

Lucky suggested a wreath of leaves. "There are plenty of berries and it could be – oh – It was fitting for the – err – occasion."

Minda's resilience showed: "Lucky, I appoint you my spiritual advisor. Go and make a wreath."

The child was brought down from the wood by a muddy and silent party. Mister Trentchard spoke. "This body is to go back to it's Speal. Minda do you still want to come?"

"Yes. I will do my duty."

"The rest of you may come and go where you will. You have done your duty."

"Geort and Karvin! Will you escort the body for me?" asked Minda.

"Yes miss."

"Come here then." She spoke very quietly to them. "I want you two to clean the little girl with the water from this stream so she is presentable to her mother. I will do the same for you if you are killed in my service." They hesitated but moved off to obey.

"Brand. Would you see Geort and Karvin get assistance."

"Yes."

"Henry. Your work has been done, you have discovered the places none of us knew exactly. Please don't come with us this time. There is no glory in unnecessary pain." He was uncertain but she'd lit the straw of his uselessness at other people's grief so he gratefully used the excuse to be the leader of cowards. Mister Trentchard was silent.

Lucky had taken Brand's place at the water's edge as the little body with her gaping neck was carefully washed. Brand told Minda of the wound but made sure she didn't see the brutal slash. "It might be an idea to bind it with clean linen." he said.

"Good idea. Get some."

"Err – I was wondering if you had any?"

"Of course not you idiot! Men think all women go round with yards of spare cloth. Of course we don't. Go and ask your mother!"

"Sorry Minda. Just asking. I'll – err – find some somehow. Sorry."

Mister Trentchard intervened "Will my shirt do?"

As they cantered the two eye-watering miles to Speal Minda knew her hopeless job was to bring hope. No lion-fighting legend could help her now. What was all the star-iron in the world weighed against a dead child? What were her strengths? She was a woman. She had revenged the killing – personally – with her knife. She had a wreath that Lucky had made. She had two very respectful troopers. As lord, Mister Trentchard could command attention. None of these strengths seemed very useful.

As they entered Speal they dismounted and removed their caps. Without a word Lucky gave his weapons to the guards in return for the little shrouded body and lead the procession to where the farmer and wife were staying in the safety of the village. The single street was lined with silence as people watched from doorways and made the sign of the cross. A priest hurried to meet them and held out his arms for the body. Lucky defied him, nearly pushing him over. No words were spoken but every fighter had tensed and considered their options in the moment of confrontation.

Minda called halt with two high whistles. "Priest. What has happened is in the world of men. God may stand back now."

"God is everywhere."

"Is God is responsible for this murder? Lucky! Sing for us and carry on."

Lucky sang with rich feeling and strength. Rising and falling, swelling and fading, defining edges then filling them. Everyone, including the victims was drawn by it into the street. The farmer's wife knowing her daughter was dead went to Lucky who showed her the child's face as if it was just sleeping. She turned to her husband and hid in his chest. After a while Lucky passed the body over to the husband. Mister Trentchard caught the eye of the borseholder and discretely gave him the stolen valuables for later restitution. Minda woke up, stepped forward, presented her wreath to the wife and kissed her. She whispered "I have killed him. Very painfully. I wish I could have done more."

The ride back to Trowstead was silent. Minda was relieved to the point of elation that she hadn't had to be the messenger of grief as one woman to another Lucky really was lucky! Her role had turned out to be on the flank not the centre. He'd somehow managed to be tender without giving way to tears. Bless him.

As they arrived Lucky asked "Can I take your horse to the stables miss?"

"Bless you Lucky no. I should see Lewin myself. He will be worrying about me."

"What about Mistress Marline and Delphia? Don't they worry?"

"They know Lewin has cures for everything and would rather I was being mended than needed by their honest questions. Tomorrow we stay here and rest. The horses need resting anyway."

Lewin wasn't surprised to see Minda. He'd heard about events in the wood from Henry. He listened with his eyes as she described the procession and handing over the body in Speal. He had been expecting a very stressed and exhausted Minda so the ease in her voice cheered yet worried him. She was obviously tired but for now there was nothing for him to do. "Sleep and a day of rest is the best thing for you sweetheart. Bathe your eyes in fresh well water and get your hair washed, trimmed, brushed and plaited. Put on your best dress and smile as the bloody darkness fades away into an old dream."

## 10 Return to Lostnock

Mister Bob came himself, pleased no doubt by his portion of the bounty. He found it easier to accept what had happened with the captain from other men. Minda didn't just report a few facts but remade the event in a way that emphasised her energy and anger that he wasn't sure how to deal with. There was no doubt that she had taken risks for Mister Bob and it was now his responsibility. She had heated the water and he mustn't let it go cold. He couldn't fault her for her actions but he'd known the captain for a long time and felt sorry for him. She also told him about Silks' valuable contribution in a way that implied he should get a monetary reward – and if he didn't make one she would.

Mister Bob judged the rage of her enemies in Lostnock had subsided into embers of anger; still hot but contained. Thinking about this later Minda wondered if she should have stayed and got them to make mistakes in the haste of their blinding anger in the same way that Toggy did. Still, while she'd made enemies in Lostnock she'd made good comrades on the road.

Henry's careful records were checked and receipted. His valuation was only rough but Minda's share would keep her increased household for nearly a year if she was careful. The waggons left the next day while Minda did as Lewin had told her. She began looking at Trowstead with stranger's eyes, the village had reached the age of soldering-on, wrapping up well, taking tasks slowly and watching the children leave.

Back in Lostnock there was lots to be done. Flor had to organise domestic matters, Minda had many calls to make and there was still a lot of work to be done at the Tax Office. She spent a very pleasant evening with the Watts family – Delphia would be very welcome. Pod glowed with pride that Minda had selected his family to have such a useful ornament. She asked her dancing master about the ball to be given by the Duke's son. This needed careful preparation. Delphia would be here by then. She would have to wear her boots but perhaps she could find a bootmaker and shoemaker who could work together to make something more pretty. A dressmaker

could make her a fashionable gown though she admitted her figure owed more to oak than willow. This gave her the excuse she needed to revisit merchants as friends and find from their wives who would be the people to ask. Of course if Minda was going then perhaps the better-off merchants could make the effort to be seen showing off their wealth and social ambition. Minda brought a lot of business to the dancing master. Some husbands were driven to him while others quite fancied themselves as ten years younger.

She went directly to the tax Collector to ask about the possibility of Henry working for him. She showed him Henry's crisp inventory of the Selenden haul and a beautifully executed estate map. She explained that Henry had been brought up like her to measure by eye and spot what wasn't right. The Collector had heard a lot about Minda and was impressed by her directness. On the other hand he was glad it was Levendale who had to deal with her as she was obviously bred for fighting and not a family pet. "Why not have him in the Office with you?"

"His heart is in the measuring and the figures not the men and the fighting."

"I have never heard the different styles of Collector and the Office described so simply before. Yes I will give Henry a trial at the earliest opportunity."

"Good. I will have him here within the week." Stuck her foot in the door of his expression. She guessed his enthusiasm cloaked a desire to delay until some indeterminate time. "I know that might be a bit hasty for you but Henry needs to leave home and be useful. Do you have children?" The Officer knew he was outclassed but pleased to be bested by an obvious genius in the art of getting what she wanted in the sweetest way. Next morning, after Minda had been discussed with his wife, he was another who sought out the dancing master.

Minda had a quiet meeting with Smith Jiller and his wife. Now Toggy's shadow had been removed their easy simplicity took the form of happy optimism. Johnny and Pod had been building their trust and considering how their children might be usefully married and their businesses developed to their mutual advantage. Smith Thredvald could stay for a week or two and they would see what happened. Pod had his eye on Toggy's old smithy but perhaps in the long run a new face would be better.

Invitations to the ball were easy to obtain for anyone with social standing or in a position to give the Duke's son credit. The girl everyone had been talking about couldn't be left out, especially when the dancing master made it clear that she was the one who mattered at this moment as far as at least a dozen merchants and more indifferent officials were concerned.

There was a gale which Minda had been waiting for. The shutters of the back rooms of the office were opened wide to sweep out the dust from ancient records. With Mister Bob's approval of course, she organised the staff in a morning of getting shelves of parchments, rolls, bound books, leaves, sealed and plain put into heaps and catalogued and then an afternoon of filing in proper order. Various items were found to be missing. Minda made careful notes to investigate these later. At the end of the day they all had black faces and red eyes. She explained to Mister Bob "Clerks like to make their work look difficult and are always inventing complications. It may be in their interest but it's not in ours or the merchants who have long waits while their efforts to be honest are dealt with."

Minda's household moved to larger accommodation. Lucky was dispatched to meet Henry and Delphia, show them the town and introduce them to the Watts as a way of giving them a cheerful welcome. Thredvald came by slower cart as even the basic personal tools of a smith are too heavy for a horse to carry. The price of food increased as autumn began the turn into winter.

Delphia recalled Minda's first days two years ago when she arrived at Trowstead and now resolved to use every ounce of energy to make a good impression and get a move on. The Watts were impressed by her practical interest in business and girlish sweetness. Pod especially was charmed by her sophisticated manners. Minda showed Delphia her luxury boots with coloured soft shoe leather layers climbing her calves while having the strength of boots underneath. They were quite expensive but Delphia asked if Minda minded if she had a pair made like them? What was good enough for Minda was fine for her. Minda suggested she have a more practical boot for walking the streets with the foot part tough and the leg part more decorative. Or just tight fitted boots like Minda wore most of the time with a little tooling.

At the dressmaker Minda looked with disappointment at a huge plain deep blue dress that might have been a wall-hanging. The little girl inside her died as she finally admitted she impressed people by blocking out the light rather than sweet chit-chat. No wonder she could bully. Like Toggy in a dress. Ugh! The dressmaker recognised the reaction. She had plenty of experience with matrons but wasn't sure what she could do for an active teenager. Fur trimmings would be awfully unsuitable. Outrageously long sleeves would help to disguise her huge muscles. Embroidery would get lost. "What about a bright blazon – say a yellow diamond on the front and matching diamonds down the sleeves." Minda had a better idea: "Why not white stars on the sleeves and a shooting star on each breast?"

"Never two on the front. Always one."

"Alright a large shooting star in white. I'll draw it for you."

The only person in the whole world Minda could think of to share her sorrow with was Mrs Watts. That made her even more sad. Inevitably though, that cheerful family made her feel better.

## Mister Bob's difficulties

Mister Bob had the difficult job of dismissing captain Frodasher knowing it would mean desperate hardship for his family. Minda's written report and interviews with Geort showed beyond doubt he had betrayed them. Geort had clearly made an effort to be a better guard and was extremely sorry for being misled by Frodasher so Mister Bob decided to give him another chance. Minda said she would trust him in future. Geort said he would follow Minda anywhere after that day they took the dead child back to Speal.

Minda asked Mister Bob about Steela. He was divorcing her. Pike had delivered all her possessions to the coroner's street door in a heap in broad daylight. Her practice at discussing one thing to expose another soon revealed that Mister Bob hadn't been faithful either. She was pleased her guess had turned out correct and gave him one



of her long scary intimate smiles as a comment when the actual admission came. Mister Bob tried to defend himself but Minda refused to hear any excuses observing that it was none of her business and what was in the past was gone. How simple men were. If you tell somebody you've been a bad boy then you can do it again! Eventually Mister Bob saw what he should have realised from the start. Minda had seen straight through his coat of self-approval. It made him blush to think this witch had found his little failings and charmed them into the light with nothing but a crooked smile. She had the confidence of just 'being' that inspired confidence in those around her. He was proud to be close to her – advise her – able to serve.

That reminded him. The word was that Toggy's mates had no ill feelings but the coroner and Steela were still seeking revenge.

"Thank you Mister Bob. I'll interview Toggy's mates straight away. We need their cooperation. If they are a bit rough then that's a matter for the justices not the tax man."

"Why do we need their cooperation Minda?"

"Because they probably supply labour and safe refuges. I want them to trust me – like you trust me – to work for me if I need to kill the coroner."

"Kill the coroner?"

"Stop repeating what I say!"

"You can't kill people you don't like."

"I can but I shouldn't. They shouldn't be trying to kill me."

"Who is?"

"My enemies. Captain Frodasher's brothers for example. I am determined to make enemies and determined to collect friends to conquer them."

"Why make enemies?"

"I have no choice."

"Please try not to."

"But I must expose them. You sound like Frodasher. I am justice."

"With all respect to you Minda it is more complicated than that."

"Have you noticed that all lawyers are men?"

"What has that got to do with it Minda?"

"With what?"

"You are impossible!"

Without a pause Minda changed the subject. "Now tell me about the Duke and his son – my brother. You were with the Duke when your fathers were killed you said." Mister Bob took a moment or two to reply. He was used to the way a woman would suddenly change the subject before the current one was half finished but this was a serious matter. The Duke was someone of Frodasher's ilk. Anything for an easy life especially if somebody else was paying. He had wasted his life hunting and drinking and fornicating. (Minda had to have that explained which was an interesting moment.) His ignorance about making money from his vast estates had left many ruined with poverty and embezzlement. His son, Humfrey, was two years older than Minda and could hardly read or write or number. He was generally regarded as a rat who would soon inherit his father's title and estates. Vain and spendthrift he seemed

to hold everyone in contempt as if it was some kind of duty. According to some he brought clothes then never wore them. Minda was shocked. Mister Bob explained he came to Lostnock for two months every year to enjoy the townspeople's gifts and credit that often was never paid for. His father used to come but was crippled with gout and possibly dying of good living. Minda asked why the traders of the town put up with being bullied? Probably because the Duke could stop their trading rights. Minda was about to say she would go and get it sorted out with the King but kept quiet – There was a lot to think about here. The ball was apparently organised by the town in the Duke's honour so that offered possibilities.

Minda was direct. "If Humfrey dies before the Duke will I inherit the Dukedom?"

"I should think so. Gerold has never said he's disinherited you."

"What have you told him about me?"

"Nothing."

"Surely he must have heard about a girl from the country that fights lions."

"He may have but he hasn't asked me."

"I must think about this Mister Bob – I may have to kill Humfrey."

"No you can't."

"Yes I can."

"Alright you can but you shouldn't."

"Perhaps I should?"...

..."What do you say Mister Bob? Who would be the better steward of the dukedom?"

"You would. But/"

"/But what Mister Bob? I have spent the last two years hunting for evil under every leaf in the woods without success and now I find it in the town wherever I look. I struck Toggy. I exposed the coroner. I trapped the captain. Is the town ready to deal with Humfrey the duke of snot? – I will think about it. In the meantime have you rewarded Silks?"

Mister Bob was thrown again by Minda's change of direction. "No not yet."

"Ask him if he would dine with me privately."

Mister Bob was in no doubt who was the boss. He would like to have escaped then but had one more important thing to tell Minda. "Steela – and of course her lover the coroner – is going to try to get you charged with witchcraft for stealing me from her and perhaps other trumped-up charges. When news gets around of you executing that man at Trowstead the coroner might want to make a fuss."

"Let them. It shows they are hurt."

"Listen Minda! I know you listen carefully sometimes so listen now. Take care and double your watches. You may find arrows and swords settle feuds in the woods but in the town there are hordes of rats called lawyers who feed off refuse in dark places. If they get bold you will have a dozen round you."

Only a day later a man called at the Tax Office. He was most concerned that the receipt for goods seized at Selenden had been signed by somebody called Henry Trentchard who wasn't a King's official. In his opinion as a lawyer this made the seizure illegal. Also it was on church property. Luckily Mister Bob who had been accustomed to following the letter of the law was now inspired with a bit of Minda's

'if it's right then do it' attitude. He called for Minda to give him time to time to think but soon knew he'd really asked for her because she'd know how to deal with it.

"What's your name please?" she asked.

"Err. John Richards."

"And you are a lawyer."

"Yes."

"Welcome to the tax Office. How can I help you?"

Mister Richards was not used to being made welcome. "Who are you miss."

"Minda."

"No sorry I meant – er I meant – what standing do you have here."

"I'm the one you speak to."

This statement of fact reminded the lawyer he was dealing with an expert. "Who is Henry Trentchard?"

"Mister Trentchard's son. A brilliant mapper, accurate accountant and currently advising the tax Collector. Are your taxes fully paid Mister Richards?"

"I don't see what that's got to with it."

"Are they?"

"You are a most insolent girl."

"So that's a 'No' I shall ask Henry to check within the hour. Why not go round to the tax Collector this afternoon with your dues and talk to Henry himself?"

"I am busy this afternoon Miss."

"How much do you owe?"

"How outrageous!"

"I know I am. It really is outrageous that lawyers should have to pay their taxes on time."

"It is none of your business."

"But it is Mister Richards. Now have you any more questions as we have important work to do."

The lawyer got up and headed for the door. "You will be hearing from me."

"Better get that money ready. Four of the clock today." The door slammed behind him. "What was that all about Mister Bob?"

"He wants to challenge the seizure on the grounds that Henry signed the inventory."

Minda followed the lawyer down the stairs and into the square. She bellowed after him. "Richards! Who is your client?" He ran away and Minda couldn't hope to catch him up. Oh dear the silly man had defied her. Now what was the name of Toggy's mate? Red Ben? It was time to see if the thugs could take on the lawyers. It was worth investigating anyway. She told Mister Bob her plan. Why would a lawyer refuse to tell who his client was? Didn't Mister Bob realise that the client was the one who had been hurt and therefore the principal? This obvious fact and his lack of cleverness in picking it up was just another indication that Minda was his bloodhound. He just had to keep her on the lead.

# Friends and enemies

Lucky arranged for Ken to visit within the hour.

"Hello Ben."

"Ken miss."

"Sorry Ken I get confused. I have killed three people, one by live disembowelling since I saw you last. Tell him Lucky."

"Err There was this rapist and murder. I tied him to a tree and she cut his guts out with lots of people watching. I can tell you I was sick Ken, but she wasn't."

After a silence Ken said "Justice."

Minda saw the trap but couldn't avoid it. "Yes. It's Justice Ken. Revenge. As if revenge ever made things better. Now Toggy Jiller didn't need to die but he attacked me and he was going to get seriously hurt. I didn't set out to kill him but he was just silly. Now you know who I am. I work against smugglers don't I?"

"Yes miss."

"Now we ask ourselves, don't we Ken, who are the people behind smuggling. Are they the bods on the quay who don't see anything? Or the merchants, lawyers and nobles?" Ken was silent. "My job is to discover the lords of smuggling – and I will. As I find each one so I have more enemies. Would you do that Ken?"

"Er – No future in that miss. They have all the cards if you know what I mean."

"Exactly Ken. But not quite. I don't play cards. I play swords and arrows."

"You can't kill all the nobles."

"I can if I want to. Are you going to stop me?"

"Err – No miss."

"All they have to do is pay their taxes. Is that asking too much?"

"A good idea miss."

"And then there would be honest work for honest people like you wouldn't there?"

Ken saw Minda's drift. "When a man can make as much in a night from smuggling as he can in a week of honest hard work who would not smuggle."

"Exactly my point Ken. I can see you are an intelligent man. Now do you remember who I said were the real villains?"

"The lawyers and nobles."

"Well done Ken. Now do you think I am talking to you today in order to trap you?"

"No miss."

"Right again. Of course not. You are a victim of the system Ken and I feel sorry for you. If there was no smuggling then everyone could lead an honest life without having to pay bribes to the office clerks or blackmailing merchants."

"Yes miss."

"So I have a little job for you today. I want you to find a lawyer called John Richards and give him a message. 'A lady congratulates him that his house hasn't caught fire.' Have you got that Ken?"

" 'A lady congratulates him that his house hasn't caught fire.' That's an odd message."

"Something to think about isn't it."

"Why me miss?"

"You are a tough character Ken. Is it a Valentine message from a mysterious lady?"

"No miss. I think he will guess it is you threatening to burn his house down."

"I expect he will, but it will give him the shakes when I say how pleased I am that it isn't burned."

"You are scary miss. Nobody knows what you say is what you think."

"You may be right Ken. And also they don't know where the next blow will come from. You have done fighting and know to strike from an unexpected quarter. The more rough my friends are the more frightened he will be. Hey. Do you have some mates that can meet him unexpectedly in the street for the next week to say 'Hello from a certain lady' to his face. The rougher the better. I'll give you three pence for your mission then a farthing for each 'hello' up to a shilling. There's no law against it."

Ken smiled. Minda smiled back. "I'm not going to burn his house down you understand but I don't want to be bothered by fleas like him – I'm after the rats he lives on."

"I see miss. Are you sure you're not going to burn his house?"

"Not unless he does something silly – when of course I will."

"I don't know what to say miss."

"That's alright Ken. If you have nothing to say – say it. Now do you remember the knocks?"

"Yes miss it's two knocks repeated three times."

"Here is six pence on account. Is it worth cheating me by a penny Ken?"

"No miss."

"Good. And I won't cheat you by a penny either. I have work to do and don't spend time arguing about pennies."

## Magic powers

Witchcraft! She discussed the matter with Flor and Lucky without seeing any simple solution. They both agreed that just about any story about her was easy to believe. Half the town thought she killed Toggy with a single stare from her covered evil eye, while the other half had taken the more logical approach and thought she stabbed him normally with scissors. In fact there were people who were prepared to sell the actual pair of scissors. Lucky had heard a song of how her sweetheart, an apprentice smith, had been beaten to death by Toggy and she had come from a hundred miles away through the snows of winter fighting wolves and lions to avenge his death.

"But it was only a couple of weeks ago? How could it have been snowy winter?"

"I am only telling what I heard." said Lucky. "It was a good song."

There was more to come.

Smith Jiller played the fiddle and his wife plucked the gittern. The truth of the old saying 'You can't have two fiddlers and one tune' was demonstrated each evening as Thredvald and Jiller competed in good spirit. Thredvald had found a daughter to suit and it didn't take much to see that he was happier here than at Trowstead. Minda

made it clear that it was up to the men to organise their futures from now on. Thredvald and Jiller had concocted their own song about Minda. They insisted on performing it at the Watts' house on the eve of Thredvald's return to Trowstead. Mrs Jiller sang the parts of Minda and smiths wives while Thredvald took the parts of smiths she'd met and helped. At the end of the story she sadly but beautifully returns to the sky she came from as the North Star and the last verse was about her looking down on the smiths while they tapped out the rhythm of the song on mid-winter's night to remember her. Minda patiently put up with words being put into her mouth and deeds being invented – until the last bit where she felt herself becoming – how? – Transparent. A ghost. Delphia couldn't keep away the tears at the glorious ending. Mrs Watts overflowed with admiration. The sons were gripped with the life-force special to smiths and their luck to behold the lady herself. Pod was all of these things. Not knowing what to say, he stood up, indicated his family to do likewise then bowed most deeply to the musicians.

"Johnny, Thorese and Thredvald that was the most magical song I have ever heard."

Minda realised it was her turn to say something. She began by growling: "I shall murder you all in your beds for the outrageous things you have said about me..." then finished with a normal "...but will you do it again?"

Delphia's "The end was beautiful." was echoed by everyone. Edwin tapped out the ending rhythm with a knife on a candlestick.

Minda saw the "meeting" smith's sign from Pod to Johnny and Thredvald. She caught his eye ready to join them but he smiled and signed her to remain.

Minda suddenly wanted to be held by the sons. She didn't know why. With nothing better to do she put thought into action. "Let me sit on you knee Cain. ...Which bit of the song did you like best?" Like all the stocky Watts family Cain would have been better-off sitting on Minda's knee. He was embarrassed of course. Especially when Minda tousled his hair and holding his chin up kissed him on the brow then hugged his head into her chest. "Are you the one to marry Delphia?"

"Mumpf."

"Ah well that's a 'mumpf' she said as releasing him and fixing the next son. "How about you little Edwin?" She was more elegant but just as strong this time.

"Mumpf."

"Another 'mumpf'. What do you reckon Delphia? Only two left. Let me tickle your lovely side-whiskers Tom." She sat on his knees and stroked his curly whiskers. As she did so the game got out of control. She looked at his simple round face, carefully combed dark curly hair and was shocked. A coat of sparks covered her and then set her alight. This was a man she wanted. Tom was ready for his 'mumpf' but Minda called to Delphi "This one's mine." as she tickled his chin to distract him while getting up and then picking him up to kiss him in a bear hug.

Nobody rushed to Tom's aid. They all knew 'Don't get between a smith and his anvil'. Tom wondered what he had done to deserve this. His dreams of a dainty milkmaid smashed into sparks by the Star-iron girl. However clever and strong she might be she had the body of a rusty anvil and horse's-foot face. He looked around for support but could see he was going to be sacrificed for all of them.

Delphia caught the mood. "Minda. Can I have Cain?"

"Have whoever you like. Cain! Are you agreeable?"

"Yes mistress Star-iron girl."

Minda winced at this oafish form of words and showed her expression to Delphia who shrugged carelessly and smiled outrageously. So that was fixed.

Mrs Jiller and Mrs Watts held hands and whispered while watching Minda's honest gale of sorting out the sexes. Mrs Watts had sons and Mrs Jiller daughters and they sort-of understood each other's type was a worry in a different way. It was accepted that as they were now as good as a family by virtue of being welded by Minda, perhaps the daughters should bake cakes for the sons and the sons try to woo the daughters. Each realised that some of their anxieties were being washed away as a result of Minda's antics.

The smiths came back from their Brother's meeting. Pod said "If Thorese will oblige we will have the song again after some refreshment." She nodded and smiled. In the next half hour important futures were set on their course. The basic financial aspects of Thredvald leasing Toggys's smithy and how and who he would work for and how much for himself had been settled amongst the smiths in their meeting.

Minda took Delphia to one side. "You are always dreaming of fairies. Tell me how I can defend myself against witchcraft."

"Witchcraft! As you defend against anything Minda. It is just another attack. I know how it works."

"How?"

"You know too. If you don't know defence then attack."

"How did you know that?"

"I have been helping you write your journal for two years and had plenty of lectures from Henry."

"You're right. Well done. I must attack."

"You can't use actual witchcraft – er – can you?"

"No of course not!"

"Then lay false trails perhaps."

"Any ideas?"

"I could ride out with my new boots and an eyepatch to appear somewhere as you while you were at home. I got that idea from seeing those children at Barrington."

"That wouldn't fool anybody. You are half my size."

"It was only a thought Minda."

Minda was ashamed. Here she was amongst her family and pulling them to pieces.

"I'm sorry Delphia. It is an excellent idea!"

"Yes?"

"Though I'm not sure how to use it. If you have any more suggestions please say them as my purse of ideas is empty."

The musicians had a little conference between themselves and came to an agreement. The second performance overflowed with emotional overtones to the players and the audience. Thredvald put character into his parts. Thorese sang every

word with confidence and smiles. This time there was an extra verse about a bad smith being struck accompanied by John with a painful and moving extended solo and three claps against silence from Thorese. Pod and Denise were in a lovely dream together. Minda held Tom's hand throughout. Delphia sat on Cain's knee as they listened in awed silence to the simple healing deeds of Minda. At the sad and majestic ending all the ladies had tears and all the men felt bathed by crystal-pure love. The men were proud and empowered by the fire of this visitor, the women understanding and saddened by the bleakness and sacrifice of departure.

## Henry learns about the town

Henry had hit a bulls-eye at the Collector's. As he was now part of her household Minda made sure that Flor and Lucky looked after him in the town. Despite the colder weather with frosts and chilly showers they all went riding first thing in the morning with Delphia. The regular silly greetings with other road changed on whim. "Hola! All's well in heaven", "Flee! We've seen an honest miller.", "Beware the red-head dwarf", "It's a lucky day for you if you have a silver horseshoe." It was decided amongst the other travellers that young people had always been daft and these were good humoured so the World was right.

Minda was unsure about how to deal with the coroner and his plots. Acting on Mister Bob's warning she reluctantly curtailed Flor's illicit merchandising. Either buy at the market or have a proper arrangement with a farmer and then only to buy what they needed. She didn't want him accused of forestalling.

Richards the lawyer was soon chased by Henry for his unpaid taxes. Henry had taken the precaution of making elementary checks to his properties and inconspicuously found out from his servants about the inside. Then he waited at the back yard gate for him while Lucky pretended to be Henry at the front door. As expected Mister Richards bolted straight into Henry who was blocking the exit to the back lane. "Hello Mister Richards I am Henry Trentchard with a warrant from the Collector for your overdue taxes. Five pounds six shillings and eleven pence."

"Let me past."

"Not until you offer to pay or refuse to pay. Refuse and I will arrest you."

Richards reached for something. Henry's training had been as thorough in self-defence as Minda's and recognised the action. As Minda said, let your hidden enemies show themselves. Out came the dagger but Richards was hampered by his cloak and out of practice. Henry could deal with this easily. He let Richards attempt a thrust in the limited space between half open gate and wall, dodged behind the safety of the gate and let him out into the lane in a rush. Richards didn't have time to turn before Henry kicked him in the small of the back tumbling him into the filth of the lane. As a dirty and bleeding Richards scrabbled to get up Henry gently stood on his dagger wrist with enough force to warn Richards to let it go.

"I'll take that as a refusal Mister Richards. Now get up and come with me to the Collector."

"You'll regret this Henry Trentchard."

"Oh well then I'd better make the most of enjoying it while I can. Now get up!"

Suddenly Flor stepped from behind Henry and heaved the lawyer to his feet.



Henry was shocked. "Flor! What are you –"

Flor smiled and concentrated on making Richards use his legs then pulled his hands behind. "Off to the Collector we all go. Pick up his weapon Henry."

The episode was discussed in many places. Henry started thinking Flor's appearance was chance but soon found he was being carefully looked after. "I was there to stop you killing Richards as much as he you. Did you know you didn't show your blade at all. A poor 'unarmed' tax collector's assistant being attacked by a dagger-wielding lawyer is a good story. He'll be let off for the attack I expect but tonight in the inns you can act it out full of horror so the message gets around. Everyone likes to see a lawyer in the mud."

"The town is weird Flor. You can't do anything yourself without being entwined by threads of one thing or another."

"We must use it to our advantage. And it's even more weird Henry because if you have any others in your sights, say other lawyers, you can knock on their doors and they won't know whether to run out the front or the back. They will be spooked."

"You mean I will get a reputation for trapping people in their own webs like Minda?"

"Yes that's it. Innocence and honesty and the luck to see bad people making fools of themselves. Defenceless Henry. Why not ask around in public for some archery lessons to protect yourself in future?" This confused Henry for a second and then it took time while he smelt the soft cloak of deviousness. "By the way Henry. Minda says we're all to visit the bootmaker at the bottom of Market Hill to get boots like hers. The maker knows about it."

"Why?"

"Because she says so."

"Doesn't she know how expensive the town is?"

"Of course but she says the town uses money instead of fresh air and while we're here we have to do the same."

## Planning a killing

She now had plenty of sympathy amongst the merchant classes but it couldn't be mobilised into action without a target. The dancing master had coached her about what to expect at the ball but it was a bit daunting and she wasn't sure how to use it to her advantage. Privately she was fairly certain that the Duke's wealth and status would be much better in her hands than his son's. She would just have to provoke or trap him. It was no use killing the rat after the Duke's death so how long would the old man live? How would she kill the rat? It had to be at a distance. Mister Bob was right, she couldn't creep up unseen in the woods – everyone would suspect her – of witchcraft possibly. Her most distant ally was Henry and if he was to be the killer then it would be by bow and arrow. Did anyone in Lostnock know he was an expert? Until she had seen her prey it was difficult to plan details. He might have all sorts of weaknesses or bodyguards who knew their job.

She called a household conference. "The ball is a week today. The Duke's son will probably arrive tomorrow or the next day. He must have heard about me but he doesn't know he is my brother. I'm told he is a rat but we need to find out more about

him and his weaknesses for ourselves. We can appear humble but I won't be treated as a serf – I think you know what I mean. We will give him a weakness he thinks he can exploit. I want him to hear a rumour of witchcraft if necessary coupled to Steela. We have a general strength of goodwill in the town and we can pay agents to do our bidding. Any questions?"

Henry replied bluntly. "You're going to kill him aren't you?"

Minda's air of ordinary business faded. "Er – That's something I might have to resort to. You men know me too well."

Flor said "I am your servant Minda. I have been charged by just about everybody in Trowstead to look after you. If killing him gets you into trouble you can't get out of then I will have to resign or stop you."

There was a little silence as Minda thought through this new maze. "Well said Flor. I could be being stupid. We can all ride our dreams forgetting we have to wake up. Don't you dare resign! I have been stopped from going too far before and lived to be grateful."

Henry asked what he thought was the obvious question. "Why do you hate your brother enough to kill him. Surely it was the Duke who rejected you not the son. His name is Humfrey by the way."

"Mister Bob says he is a leech-fish. He also says the Duke himself is a wastrel. That means all his estates are rotting or plagued by corruption. I can do something about that. I can't wait to start."

After more silence it was Lucky's turn round the table. "Miss. There are two of me sitting here. Lucky number one says he will kill Humfrey whatever it takes him. He knows he must work to a careful plan as death like that will be only the first move of a game you have to win." There was a long pause of respect and anticipation. Lucky folded his arms and mimed holding the child at Speal. Minda recognised the moment instantly and looked down. "Lucky number two says 'Do we who kill deserve to live?' "

All these friends knew to keep silent until they had something to say so it was a while before Henry spoke. "Perhaps Minda is telling us that Humfrey has to be killed in order that she may do good. In the balance of things – prosperity, roofs that don't leak, food in the barns, all those things are worth the life of a good-for-nothing wastrel. That's thousands of lives."

Lucky answered "Minda – Look at me – I'll follow an angel that is the angel of death but a faerie-witch is an evil abomination."

Minda answered "You're a trained swordsman Lucky. Is a sword just for waving?"

"No miss."

"What is it for?"

"Hurting your opponent."

"Come on Lucky – 'Hurting?' – Don't you mean killing."

"Yes I do miss. Sorry."

"Don't be sorry Lucky. Sometimes we live by our blades and sometimes by our brains."

"He wasn't talking about living Minda." said Henry.

Minda wasn't upset at this contradiction. They were weaving a web of – what? – trust. Single purpose. "Right again Henry. Sometimes we kill by our blades and sometimes our brains."

Henry was very particular today. "Or both."

"Yes both Henry."

Flor tried to bring them back to the practicalities that he was comfortable with. "We are making plans for an assassination if we can't think of an alternative is that right?"

"Yes Flor. But we need more information."

Instead of leaving the difficult subject for another time Henry's logical brain was drawing diagrams. "I could kill a man with an arrow or possibly two but how else could we kill him without shaking him by the hand? In a town everyone would see you?"

"I'll leave that for another day." said Minda "We have enough to think about discovering the rat's weaknesses and giving him an easy way to get back at us." There was still the shadow of witchcraft. "That reminds me – Delphia had an idea. All of you could pass as me in the dark with a girl's cap and cloak, eyepatch and boots like mine. If I'm a witch then why should I be in one place. Suppose on the night Humfrey was killed I was seen at three different places just out of town and actually in the Sun inn with reliable witnesses."

Lucky had his head in his hands while the others tried to see the advantage.

Flor asked. "What good would that do?"

"We give our enemies a wooden sword. All the people who said they saw me in various places would be contradicting each other. Now suppose somebody claimed to see me where the rat was killed, their testimony would be just as suspect."

Henry kept thinking aloud! She wasn't used to his accuracy. "But you'd be in plain view with reliable witnesses. You just couldn't do it."

There was no escape. "Henry. You said it yourself. If we could deliver the rat could you shoot him in the head?"

"It depends on the light and the range."

Minda hated being glued by Henry's literal interpretation. "If we gave you the chance would you kill him?"

Henry hesitated. "I think so but I'm not yet convinced it is necessary."

Flor saw his chance "None of us, including Minda, are convinced it is necessary yet. That's why we have to find out more. Henry you should practise your archery."

"No!" Interrupted Minda. "If you go to the butts pretend to be keen but hopeless. We don't want anyone to know you can hit the bull every time. When the rat gets shot in the head how long will it take for somebody to put two and two together and say 'it's funny that the best archer in Lostnock is one of Minda's household.'"

"Right you are Minda. I will try my best to be useless tomorrow."

"Can I continue?" asked Flor.

"Yes."

"I could be an empty-brain household servant the Duke's servants can talk to. Lucky can be Minda's fancy swordsman full of swagger and happy to buy the Duke's guards a drink in an inn. He can also deal with Ken and his men."

Minda added "I can only get the gossip amongst the women I'm afraid. I don't think that's worth much."

At the end of the meeting Henry knew fate had given him an arrow to kill with. Strangely, contrary to everything he'd ever thought about violent death, he felt pride

in his part in a noble venture. He really wanted to see this duke's son, a man he'd never met and had no quarrel with die. Well perhaps seeing him alive would be better than seeing him die but he was already breathing more deeply planning an ambush.

Apparently Humfrey would either go hunting all day or visit the town from his estate along the Bartonbry road in the early afternoon to prey on merchants then spend an agreeable evening being entertained by the wealthier citizens. By all accounts he wasn't a welcome guest being prone to drunken excesses of all kinds. Minda was busy in the tax Office but still needed to find out about the leech-fish. He usually had four retainers. Their 'Brand' was often drunk which seemed to indicate the others would be undisciplined. They rode out in that direction in the mornings but saw no signs of life.

Minda was sure he would want to know more about her. What did he know already? How was he finding out more?

## Happy gipsy

Minda had made an early friend of the silversmith. When he had a visit from the rat's chamberlain with a request for earrings shaped as anvils she knew about it within half an hour. As she had no better plan she persuaded the silversmith that she could deliver them herself and see what happened. It would show any sensible person that she could make her own rules as she wished. She rewarded him with a commission for a neck pendent brooch as a shooting star. She explained the reason and it turned out that the silversmith's wife knew Mrs Jiller.

For the first time in her life she wanted to appear mysterious. She headed for Delphia and Mrs Watts to see what they could suggest. On her previous visit she was depressed about a dress with all the charm of a castle keep. Now she was overflowing with images of gipsy dreams. Suddenly she wanted to be an enchantress appearing with gifts of silver to be given to the giver in an impossible situation. She explained her plan to take a war of confusion into Humfrey's camp without explaining why. Soon the Jiller daughters had been rounded-up to stitch and the Watts boys as a reciprocal afterthought sent to illegally make silver star buttons under the direction of Smith Jiller. Pod looked thoughtfully at the ugly silver anvils then sent out for more cakes and candles. Minda noticed Thorese in a corner with Denise's youngest, Terence, discussing something important. Thorese was encouraging and twelve-year old Terence was obviously 'educating' her how the world worked. Thorese smiled at Minda and their understanding was perfect – Bless him. Minda decided dressing-up was fun. She should have paid for the cake and candles and spoke to Pod but he just hugged her so happily that she couldn't have her way. Denise and Delphia stole her away to try out paint round her eyes. In the end the whole effect was completely outrageous. Strands of tinsel in a flowing red cheesecloth rag cap decorated with silver stars. A scarlet band instead of an eyepatch. Earrings of freshly made silver shooting stars. A neck brooch of amber borrowed from Denise accentuating the expanse of flesh below it. A chest of breasts everyone could admire floating on a peasant's pleated bodice and artfully ragged skirt showing her racy calf-boots.

This image they'd made as a family would remain with them all for the rest of their lives. After a hasty conference between the sewers a carefully tatty cape with more loose ends to beguile and bewitch was added to the ensemble. Never in the history of

the world has equipping a warrior with their armour been so lovingly and enjoyably undertaken. Everyone could see Minda would sweep any surly Duke's son aside helped by their little contribution. Tom, admittedly pushed by his brothers, went up to her sweating.

"Star Iron girl, shimmering in the heavens, image of my dreams, may I kiss you?"

"Of course you can Tom."

She bent down tenderly and they kissed gently. They were both overwhelmed in that release of pure sensation on top of the loving atmosphere. Both felt one release through the lips – to be replaced by another commitment, glorious love and close warm attachment – surrounded by families and friends. Tom stood back in shock. Minda looked around in joy. This must be false. Yet everyone smiled. When she looked again couples were smiling at each other and the singles were letting the emotion show in their faces. She only came here to cause mischief to the Rat with some dressing up and now she had an army of followers and a husband-to-be.

"I have nothing useful to say except thank you for a beautiful evening. What most of you don't know is that I have had days when I've been betrayed by corrupt soldiers and nights wondering how I'm going to take a murdered child back to its mother so tonight is more lovely than lovely."

Minda asked if she could take the youngest Watts, Terence, as a page boy with her next morning. It was her turn to bring on the next generation starting with the responsibility to stay silent in the presence of elders and betters. She soon found out that education had gone to little Terence's head. Nothing was unknown or debatable for him. As they rode slowly next day to the Duke's hall along the Bartonbry road she turned the subject to animals and then lions. What did they look like? What did they sound like? To his credit he said he didn't know. What was the best weapon to use when they attacked? He didn't know. Where did they live? He didn't know. Were there any lions around here?

"No."

Minda let him see she was thinking. "You don't know where they live but you assure me they don't live here. Hmm."

"I know they don't live near here but I don't know the places they do live."

"How do you know they don't live near here?"

"Because – er – I'm sure I would have heard."

Minda slipped her shiny knife out of her boot to show the boy and said "Don't worry Terence. I'll look after you. Tell me if you hear a lion won't you?"

"Yes miss."

"How will you know it's a lion when you told me you didn't know what one sounded like?"

"I meant to try."

"Tell your brothers or Delphia about this talk. They will tell you something you haven't learned at your school."

There was no time for more education as they arrived at the gates of the hall. Minda just wanted a sight of the quarry and a feel for his defences. Somehow as they rode up to the hall she felt it was her duty to erase this turd in the road of progress as

hornet's nest should be burned. Minda tied their horses to a post. Terence had hardly ridden before and needed help getting down. He was instructed in the art of removing her cape and keeping it mud-free until it was needed later. He could not help but stare at the flesh from her neck to her bosom. Eventually a servant came to the door.

"I am Minda from Lostnock. Will you tell your master I have some silver for him." The servant attempted to shut the door on this monster of a woman but it stopped with a horrible grating sound as it wedged on the nail Minda had dropped and tickled with her boot. "We will wait inside. Come in Terence, Humfrey will see us soon." The worry on the servant's face at this outright breach of etiquette was clear but of no consequence to Minda. "This is where the Duke's son lives Terence. – But I was told he had servants not statues. – Are you going to fetch your master or shall I go to find him?"

"Yes miss."

A man soon appeared from the kitchen area of the corridor. Clearly his duty was to shoo Minda away. "You must leave."

"I don't think we shall."

"You must – I command it."

"Who are you?"

"Chamberlain to the Duke's son. Now please leave."

"Have you not heard chamberlain that Minda gets her way?"

"I have heard rumours."

"Good. Well I have a parcel of trinkets Humfrey has ordered from the silversmith in Lostnock to deliver to him."

"Give it to me and go." Minda gave him a slow staring smile as if to say stop playing games but came across as a leering lascivious grin charged with unknown power.

"Get out witch!" Now there were two kitchen servants in the passage behind him and another shadow at the top of the stairs.

"You need to fix your front door. It stays open Mister chamberlain."

"Just because you bewitch the door doesn't mean you can bewitch me."

"But I can fool you silly man. Why not look for why your door won't close. It isn't magic now shut your mouth fool and show me to Humfrey or I will go and find him."

A thin voice pretending to be far away and not lurking at the top of the stairs said "Is there a problem Tomlyn?"

"Please sir this witch-woman has silver to deliver but won't give it to me."

"Do I have to deal with everything Tomlyn. I will come down."

Humfrey was like a beetle with small oval head and sticky limbs. She found it gratifying that he was at least half a head shorter than her. "I am not used to having my servants made to look fools."

"Lucky I have come then. Only a fool would put up with a fool-in-waiting. I have trained my servants. Are yours new?" He was confused by this barrage and as he turned the staircase he saw her properly. Seeing her distorted face combined with a lovely bosom confused him more with revulsion and lust distracting him. This wild girl had a household of servants! Only a witch would do such a thing. "Humfrey my dear. This is the first chance I have had to welcome you to Lostnock. Page! Hand the silversmith's package to him." Terence advanced, handed over the small package,

made a little bow then retreated behind Minda. "Shall I see you at the ball on Thursday my pet?" she asked while appearing as if she was about to depart.

To his credit Humfrey had regained his faculties if not the initiative. "Yes. I look forward to it."

"Good I have been taking dancing lessons. May I have the first dance?"

Humfrey was trapped. There was no other way out. "Err – Yes."

"Oh you are a sweet. Now I must be off – Taxes don't collect themselves. Lord Levendale will be wondering where I am. Page!" After Minda was cloaked ready for the road again she turned to Humfrey. Clearly he was terrified she was going to kiss him. "Some silly person has wedged your door with a nail. Come and I'll show you. Look! We pull it instead of pushing and there it is on the flags – just like magic. See you at the ball." As they rode off she blew him a kiss.

After they were out of sight Minda congratulated Terence on his part then questioned him about what had happened. He was confused about how she could be Tom's lover and the Humfrey's lover at the same time. She explained it was play acting to see how he would react. A bit like dropping a hammer on the ground behind an unknown horse to see if it was easily scared.

## Humfrey trapped

That afternoon Mister Bob got a visit from Humfrey at the Tax Office. Minda was there dressed normally. She welcomed him very properly with an extra 'how pleased to see you' smile. She made an excuse to leave them to sort out their own problems. Humfrey told Mister Bob of the earlier outrage and wanted to know more. Was she his employee? Certainly she was and now Humfrey could see why she was so useful to a tax man who needed to make people volunteer their taxes. He shouldn't get upset. In fact it was vital to his own safety that he didn't. If she says she'll have the first dance then she will.

"But I don't take orders from a girl."

"Yes you do if you've any sense."

"I won't."

"She disembowelled the last person to annoy her – alive – and I know your life hangs by a thread. She has a lot of merchant friends who expect to get paid for goods and services you've had and most of the low-life criminals are on her side. She could have half a dozen knives put in your ribs for a few shillings. This is your test Humfrey. I have been a friend of your father since before you were born so listen to what I have to say. Minda has shown you her disregard for danger and convention. Lostnock loves her. She has told me plainly that if you disrespect the merchants she will kill you. It's as simple as that."

"That's traitorous. She should be arrested."

"So do you intend to pay your bills?"

"Of course."

"When Humfrey?"

"In due course."

"Oh dear. Minda won't like that."

"Damn her! Are you soft in your old age?"

"As your father's close friend I am giving you sage advice. Have you heard what I've been saying?"

"You're bewitched by a country girl – Half blacksmith. Half hag! She can't go round threatening to kill me. If you won't do something then I will!"

"What?"

"She must be locked up."

"What for? Who will you find to swear against her?"

"You will."

"No I won't. I had hoped that you would use this as a chance to mend your spend-thrift and coarse ways but I see you have been spoiled beyond repair. Your fate is in your hands. If I was you I'd see a priest and get a confession. Your time may be short."

"She is a witch. It's obvious."

"And who are your friends in the clergy who will support you? You have made too many enemies here Humfrey."

"Are you part of a conspiracy against me?"

"Yes. Sadly my choice is clear. You are not worthy to inherit a dukedom and if you die a worthy person will."

"Who?"

"Do you know you have a lawful sister? It is a close secret."

"No. But I will inherit regardless."

"That wasn't my point Humfrey. You will waste the dukedom, bring discord and poverty just for your silly vanity. She will make it fruitful and blossom. So it is better you die or otherwise pass the Dukedom to Minda."

"Minda! That monster is my sister? Never!"

"I'm afraid so. Born so ugly and crippled she wasn't expected to live and when she did she was raised on a remote estate to become the force you have seen with your own eyes."

"More reason she should be put to death for witchcraft. I do have some friends in Lostnock I can rely on. You know them. And I think you might be arrested as an accessory."

"You live in a land of dreams Humfrey."

"Milton! Guards! To me!"

Nothing happened. Humfrey called again but gradually realised his guards weren't coming. There was silence in Mister Bob's room but noises of a commotion from the public office. Minda quietly walked in.

"I am sorry to interrupt Mister Bob but apparently word has got around that this gentleman would pay all his debts here at four o'clock." Mister Bob guessed immediately that Minda was behind the rumour. "There is quite a crowd and they're insistent. Oh and also the party he came with are dead drunk in the cellar. I think he needs our protection Mister Bob. What do you think brother? It's quite an angry mob. Will you see them now?" Mister Bob was appalled and excited by Minda's scheming. Not a blade in sight. "Now tell me brother – am I threatening to kill you?"



"Yes."

"What! By helping you escape from the good citizens of Lostnock. I specially asked them to leave their weapons with the door warden. How is that threatening to kill you?"

Mister Bob broke the deadlock. "Minda could have killed you anytime in the last three days if she'd wanted to but I know she has a weakness. She wants to dance at the ball. All her life she's been prevented from dancing by her bad foot but she's found she can do it and is making up for lost time. Sadly you have deprived her of the chance to dance with the Duke's son. It's all for the best but Humfrey you're a dead man."

Minda saw Humfrey tense and reach for a weapon. He jumped up trying to slash at her but she moved in and twisted his wrist so hard she heard it break. He confused himself by screaming with the pain and was off-balance so Minda easily crushed him against the wall and knocked the remaining breath out of him. He doubled-up in pain using the wall for support. Minda picked up his sword and gave it to Mister Bob. She grabbed Humfrey by the hair. "You stupid fool. You have made me cross. Pike! Get a bandage for this idiot's wrist and bring his horse to the private door he's going home."

Mister Bob was thinking as fast as he could. Had Minda got an execution planned. If so... ..Thank goodness not in his office. He'd better do his best to look after her. He had admitted to being a conspirator so he ought to do his bit. "What can I do?"

"Please wait Mister Bob."

A crumpled Humfrey was hustled down the back stairs, pushed onto his horse and the reins put into his good hand. Unfortunately Flor had let the crowd in the public office know the back stairs escape was planned so a number of respectable merchants were there insisting on being paid. Minda shouted clearly to him "Now ride straight home quickly Humfrey and make sure you're on time for the first dance tomorrow."

Minda addressed the merchants. "I have done my best to get the rat to meet his debts to you. He drew a sword on me – Lord Levendale will show it to you – so I broke his wrist. There's nothing more I can do. It makes me so cross when people try to stab me or slash me. I need a drink to calm down. Let's go and drown our sorrows. Come on Mister Bob. Let the taxes collect themselves for an hour."

He knew this public performance was cloaking a dirty deed. There was nothing he could do and it was for the best. He realised he might be accused of being an accomplice so an hour in public view with Minda might be a good idea.

When the news came the duke's son had been killed on the Bartonbry road with two arrows in the head a lot of people knew where to point the finger but had no evidence. Minda had respectable witnesses so she couldn't have done it herself although some efforts were made to suggest witchcraft. Witnesses also said she had told him to be on time for the dance and explained in the inn how she'd been to his house that morning to claim the first dance. Her servant Flor was with her and Lucky was skittling with witnesses at the Crown. Henry couldn't have shot like that and he had been surveying an estate in the other direction, a chapman confirmed seeing him there. It could have been any one of a number of cheated merchants. It was confusing who was where when. Of course the coroner tried every underhand way to implicate Minda but the facts were against him. Like the rest of the town he knew it must have been Minda and ironically it was the very lack of evidence that was proof.

When it emerged that Minda would inherit the Dukedom her guilt was taken as fact by everyone, but by now she was a legend and who knew where reality and fantasy met.

To be continued

**2 Minda inherits**

A decayed dukedom needs pulling up by its bootstraps. Powerful and greedy enemies will stop at nothing to thwart her. How will Minda cope with endless administration, corruption and royal politics?

**3 Minda falters**

Now a rich and powerful duchess with a dozen useful projects to keep her busy, but when things go wrong she has difficulty coping.

**4 The Black Team escapes**

Fresh from murder and rebellion the Black Team make friends and enemies in Lanconia.

# Commentary

It is easy to see the appeal of *Minda grows up* to older school-age children, especially girls. It has elements of adventure and is set in a mediaeval world which is curiously different from our own but isn't magical fantasy. When the author was at school he detested turgid and worthy set texts in which were supposedly hidden gems of 'great writing'. That is why this book is 'a story with bits you might want to think about on the way'.

## Heroes for girls

The most basic point is that the heroine is a girl who gets into adventures but doesn't follow the traditional male story-arc of leaving on a quest, doing adventures far away, reaching some achievement and revelation then returning. (Monomyth.) Girls do their heroics by 'sticking it out at home'. They use their own resources not magic swords. They work for the result, especially benefits for others, not personal glory. The book would make a boring film because there isn't a 'problem that the hero must solve'. Instead it is a series of episodes where the main character develops and the reader colours-in the changing scenery.

## How to make a hero in 600 words

After a day of extreme effort on her first day's riding at Trowstead (pages 34 to 35@@@) there is a very powerful scene finishing with an emotional 'punch line' ...*but Minda was asleep*. With these words the reader should be completely committed to cherishing a very special person. How is the intensity of this effect achieved?

From the very start we have some conflict the heroine has to resolve. Internally she's irritated by Delphia's prettiness, but the reader doesn't really get involved until the dialogue when they can feel Minda's irritation and be proud of the way she doesn't lose her temper. We'd all like to be calm in a crisis. Understatement and controlled anger are little riddles in themselves which make us pay attention. But here's the main trick: The reader can see the funny side. We're laughing at character in the situation, we are superior and also sympathetic at the muddle she's in. So the author has caught the reader with two easily-felt emotional hooks at the same time. When Minda threatens Delphia with a dagger we know it isn't going to be used any more than a puppy is going to be kicked. We are also keen to adopt Minda on 'our side'. Anyone who makes fools of silly people must be a good-egg.

Now the reader has another reason for getting emotionally involved. Their heroine has a lot of pain that demands our sympathy. In contrast to the preceding verbal banter we are with her in the silence trying to use inner courage to ease the physical sensation. We understand the pressures inside her and admire her for controlling them. Before it was external, now internal.

Now we switch from conflict to cooperation – Resolution. Mistress Marline gets immediate contrition from Minda. Any decent hero will own-up, so once again the

reader is proud of 'their' Minda and wish we were like that. She explains quite clearly why we should feel sympathetic. Of course suffering with great nobility is the mark of a hero. Notice that she doesn't feel sorry for herself, she's not asking for sympathy just understanding. Before and after we have the reality of close-up pain of the moment but here she reveals to us that her life is a constant struggle. So the emotionally involved reader will extend their sympathy beyond 'ow ow ow my foot hurts' to 'what a brave girl in general'.

If you see people helping somebody then you are likely to want to help as well. That is basic group psychology. Unbinding and rebinding the foot are intensely 'female' moments. Doing jobs that aren't nice with tenderness and care and intimacy. The reader cannot fail to recognise the 'mother' role and the effect is heightened by focussing on the practical, physical nature of the task.

Finally Marline's mothering talk, the sort of soothing 'sweet-dreams' talk that we instinctively relate to, reminds us that Minda does twice as much as ordinary people. She's won somebody else's heart so the reader can feel in good company.

After all that emotional involvement in less than 600 words, the girl we all love for her composure, courage, strength and honesty is asleep. At this moment all our pride, respect and sympathy is channelled into an instinctive reaction to watch over her and care for her in this moment of release.

This passage is not simply about creating a noble heroine who has admirable traits, you can read that in history books, but inveigling the reader to become more and more emotionally involved to the point where it is focussed on a child we want to love and protect. Throughout the book Minda steals people's hearts and wins their loyalty. Now the reader understands.

## Executing the rapist and murderer and aftermath

This very gruesome episode (pages 253 to 261@@@) is notable because the extreme brutality is 'acceptable'. There's no discussion of the morality, we're not looking at it from a 21<sup>st</sup> century point of view. Of course Minda is 'proving she can kill in cold blood' which is something that will make her powerful and feared in a violent world but there is more to it.

In the build-up we have a by now familiar pattern where her team are working to a plan and Minda tightens-up slackers. The plan only runs up to catching him and there is nothing mentioned about what to do then. When Minda is interrogating him she isn't expecting instant execution, she's focussed on getting information about the child and if threats of violence are necessary then that will suit her mood fine.

Even in mediaeval times you weren't supposed to carry out summary executions. Brand orchestrates the deed with quiet orders in the form of requests. Of course Minda obeys and the reader recognises she's not worried about right and wrong, or what people will think of her, or showing compassion, but being able to do the job

properly. Brand has told her there is more to come so best she gets on with it. –Girls are good at 'getting on with it'.

What is the purpose of Minda's "you're all bastards" rant? Quite understandably she's upset, and there's irrational anger at people who won't sweep unpleasantnesses under the carpet, but there's something much more fundamental: Coming straight after Mister Trenchard's 'well done *men*' speech she calls them useless at dealing with real shit. It's men in general she's talking about. She will do the woman's bit of courage that starts where theirs stops. She will deal with the sorrow and futility as women have always had to do. This speech could never be made by a man.

Where to go from this intense scene as there must be a lull before more emotion? In contrast to the lead-in there is a lot of internal anxiety about how to cope with what happens next. It is mostly left to the reader to imagine ahead to how Minda will hand a dead child to its mother. The reader wouldn't like to be in that position. Then by the stream something happens that will completely change the whole feel of the mission. It was going to be 'Minda literally carries the burden herself' now it becomes 'we can see a way of dealing with this socially'. In those times religion was ubiquitous, powerful and inescapable. Here Lucky manages to use it for their personal mission in a way that the reader hadn't expected a couple of pages back in what is a much more satisfactory contrast to the violence and heroic rant of the first part. They somehow manage to get through the ordeal together. Something about the scene in the village brings relief all round. Instead of Minda being drained and possibly damaged by taking too much futile responsibility all she needs is a wash, a nice dress and a day's rest and the world will become normal again. That's some powerful magic there Lucky!

## Smiths and the star-iron legend

The typical boy-hero starts and ends 'here' while their quest is in far away or mythical places. The everyday girl-hero deals with problems at home. There is a variant legend-girl-hero story-arc as described in the song at the Watts (page 271@@@) where the girl arrives, does her good deeds here and now, then departs, probably to become a legendary being that we like to think is looking after us kindly. A high-class girl arriving in a labouring man's world is obviously an outsider. Especially as Minda has a bad hand in a trade that requires brute strength. Minda brings happiness and shows them how to be stronger themselves. It is inevitable that the song will follow the 'and then she left but loves us still' pattern.

Notice that a girl-hero is good at relationships herself and healing the relationships of others. Boys do it differently.

Trade associations, sometimes called guilds in the middle ages, were commonplace. Some developed to control trade, to manage the supply, monitor skills and quality and also as a society of friends who would look after each other in days of no social security or pensions. (Girls as apprentices were not unknown in the cloth trade but Agnes Hecche in York in the early fifteenth century as an armour-maker was probably very unusual.)

All the smith-lore in the book has been invented. What's the point of being a writer if you can't add a little something?

## Lions

These are just fun, but see how legends grow. In Barrington they probably tell the story of 'Minda and the lion' to this day! We are charmed by little stories like this, possibly because we think there might be a little bit of truth in them, or maybe we just like to tell scary stories with heroes. What could be more special than being named Ilon after a mythical creature with a mighty roar.

Having a private joke is fun for two reasons. Firstly you can fool outsiders for amusement. Secondly when a group is seen to be jesting it is noted as a happy, cohesive, group. It's a good way to be remembered.

## Country and town

It is only hinted at in this book but the countryside is struggling economically. In mediaeval times there was a tendency for towns to require a continual influx from the countryside to make up for the appalling death rates.

What to us is a small market town would be large by mediaeval standards. Strangers would be obvious, sanitation and overcrowding awful, and smelly trades would be carried out in residential and market areas.

## Mediaeval life - not a simple picture

The period is lengthy and conditions varied dramatically from place to place. The economy, effect of waves of disease and political unrest changed circumstances sometimes drastically, very rapidly and permanently. Claims of 'in the mediaeval period something was the case' are likely to be a gross simplification. Trade, the workings of the church, food, clothes, crops, literacy, houses, guilds, taxes, health, standard of living and many other things varied enormously sometimes over short distances of space and time. For example two adjacent villages in Kent were managed completely differently in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. One had three manorial lords while the other was owned directly by the king and had a lot less bureaucracy and much greater freedom to develop economically.

Having said that, the practicalities of medieval life such as sleeping arrangements, the grip of religion, privacy, sanitation, travel, rigid hierarchy of authority and duty were so different from what a modern reader would expect that they have been quietly ignored. It is a fascinating historical period and anyone who has enjoyed this book is encouraged to skip down to the library and find out a bit more about the real people who walked lived in that different-same world.

## For what it's worth

The really interesting bits 'arrived' on the screen just by writing. I would recommend that people who want to write start with a few ideas and try some episodes until the

thing takes-off or doesn't seem to be getting anywhere. If it looks promising try a scene that will stretch your skills and if you're happy sweating over your work then throw the television away and get going. Keep jotting ideas down. Don't be afraid to let unexpected events, sometime the smallest things, get onto the screen as you never know where they may lead – you can always take out the trivia later. Perhaps a chair creaks when somebody sits on it... and turns out very rickety... an excuse to introduce a carpenter – what sort of character, problem, secret or skill might they add?

I know what happens next but I had to write the books to find out. She may be strong but she needs to be, and there are some inner vulnerabilities that are desperately hard for a teenage woman to deal with.

