

thing. I could not believe it was merely because I'd seen the steward in the forest the night before.

Once within the woods, I decided to go to a high rock which stood near the forest edge and overlooked our village. Though the rock was difficult to climb, I'd done so before on one of my solitary rambles. It was to be hoped that I'd see something to help me understand what was happening.

It was not, however, till midmorning—which I knew by the position of the sun and the ringing of the church bell proclaiming Terce—that I reached the rock.

Once having made sure I was alone, I climbed. While the rock was not an easy ascent—at some places it was little less than a cliff—I reached the pinnacle. Once there I took the further precaution of lying down. Only then did I lift my head and look about.

Before me—like some rolled-out tapestry—was my entire world, beneath a sky as blue as Our Lady's blessed robes, a contrast to the greening spring that lay abundant everywhere. Overhead, swallows flitted, free as birds ever are.

To the west meandered the river Strom, glittering like a silver ribbon in the golden sun. At this point the

river ran at a shallow depth. Like most, I could not swim, but for much of the year, one could wade across. Above and below this ford, depending on the season, the water ran quite deep.

A few paces from the river's bank, on the village side, stood one of the stone crosses that marked Stromford's western limit. Covered by mystic markings, this cross had been erected where Saint Giles had once appeared.

There, on the river's low, tree-lined banks, stood our noble's house—Lord Furnival's manor—the grandest house I knew. It was where the steward had lived for many years in the absence of the knight.

With stone walls two levels high and small windows, the manor was to me like a castle, high, mighty, and impenetrable. Inside—I had never been allowed to enter, but I'd been told—was an arched hall with a long trestle table and benches, several sleeping rooms, and a chapel. On the walls hung pictures of saints along with ancient battle shields. The lower level was a large storage place meant for the wheat and other foods the village produced.

Opposite the manor house, across a road, was the mill. Smaller than Lord Furnival's dwelling, it was built of

stout timbers, with grinding wheels of massive stone. These wheels were turned by river water delivered by a run.

Not only did the mill grind our wheat and barley—at a cost—it contained the ovens where we villagers, by the steward's decree, baked our bread, which required yet another fee.

A road led from the riverbank. Once a traveler had crossed the river, a road lead east and reached another road that ran north and south. Where these roads met, our stone church, Saint Giles by-the-River, stood with its ancient bell.

Above and below the church were our dwelling places, some forty cottages and huts of wattle and daub, thatch and wood, dirt and mud, all in varying shades of brown.

North of the village was the commons, where we peasants grazed our own oxen and sheep. Here too were the archery butts where men of age were required, by King Edward's decree, to practice every Sunday. It was also the place where the public stocks and gallows stood.

The land for growing crops was laid out in long, narrow strips. One of three strips was planted with barley; another, wheat. The final third lay fallow for the grazing of the manor's cattle.

As for the two roads that passed through Stromford, all I knew was that they led to the rest of England, of which I had no knowledge. And beyond England, I supposed, came the remaining world: "Great Christendom," our priest called it. But in all my life I'd never gone past the boundary crosses, which marked the limits of our village.

Everything—from the woods, the cottages, the manor house, the mill, the roads, the growing lands, the commons, even the church itself, to the tiny crofts behind our cottages used for planting herbs and roots—*everything* belonged to Lord Furnival, who held it in the King's name.

Indeed, the steward said we belonged to our lord as well. Like all villagers, we were required to ask the steward's permission to be excused from work if ill, to grind our wheat, or bake it, to buy or sell, to travel from our parish, to marry, even to baptize our children.

In return we gained two things:

When we died there was a hope of Heaven.

And Lord Furnival protected us from the Scots, the French, the Danes, and the wicked infidels.

But that morning I had little doubt: I'd never be protected again.