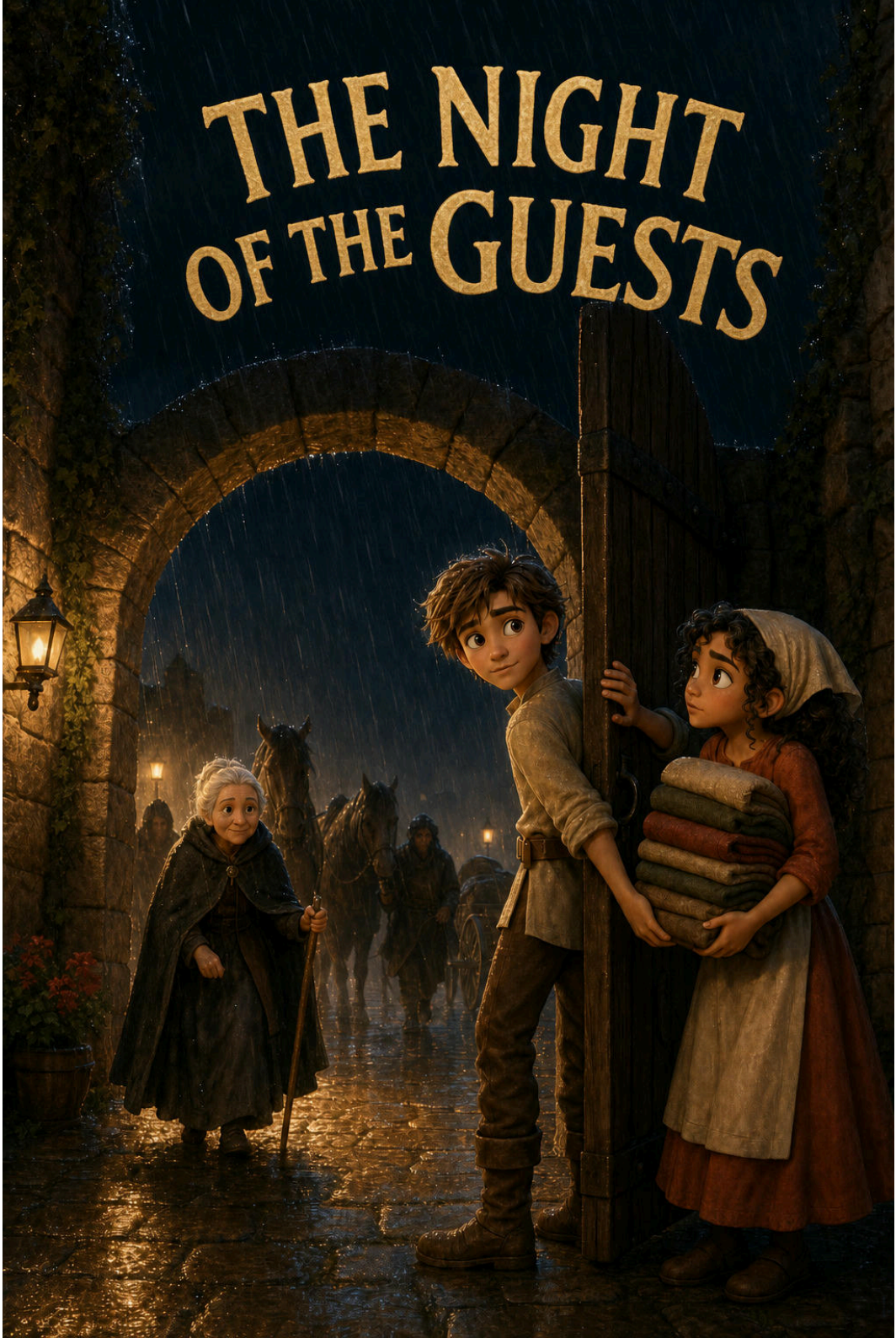

THE NIGHT
OF THE GUESTS

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# About This Book

## At a Glance

- **Reading level:** English level A2- (CEFR) · British English
- **Age:** 8+
- **Length:** 12 chapters · ±16,000 words

## Edition

This is the **first edition** — version 1.1, published August 2026.

| Version | Date | Notes |
|---|---|---|
| 1.0 | July 2026 | First edition. |
| 1.1 | August 2026 | Language corrections |

# About the Story

## The Series

Castle Brightstone is a friendly, lived-in castle on a green hill above the village of Appleton — no soldiers, no swords, just a busy household, a great Chronicle two hundred years old, and four young pages learning everything a castle can teach: Miles, Anne, Mabel and Hugh. Sir Edmund's old rule guides them all: be honest in small things, be kind before you are clever, serve first, sit last — and never be ashamed to say "I was wrong."

## This Book

Rain comes down the valley at dusk. Then a horn sounds at the gate — and it is not one rider. Two-and-twenty travellers stand in the storm with eleven wet horses. They are going to a wedding at Thornbury, two valleys on, and the wedding will not wait.

Sir Edmund gives the only answer Brightstone knows: the gate opens.

Now Miles, Anne, Mabel and Hugh must find beds for a crowd, bread from an empty flour bin, and dry clothes for a boy nobody counted. Then morning shows them the valley road: a fallen tree, a slipped bank, twenty paces of road simply gone.

There is no way to Thornbury. Could one old page in the castle's Chronicle remember a road nobody living has walked?

## Chapter One: The Sky with a Storm in It

The day after midsummer, Castle Brightstone woke up slowly.

The whole shire had come to the hill. There had been games on the green. There had been a great feast. Anne had read the lost year out loud. Now it was over.

The castle was tired. It was also very pleased with itself.

On the green, men took the tables apart. Carts rolled home along the valley road. Boys carried benches back up the hill. The grass was flat where the shire had sat.

“Two hundred guests,” said Bess in her kitchen. “And they ate for three hundred.”

Miles was at the gate before breakfast.

The great gate had two thick wooden halves. Each half hung on iron hinges. A hinge is the iron piece that lets a door swing. Twenty carts had come in through that gate. Twenty carts had gone out again. Now the lower hinge was loose.

Miles pushed the gate. It swung. It groaned.

“Hear that?” he said.

Gib was crossing the yard with two buckets. He stopped. He listened.

“I hear it,” said Gib.

“It has gone loose,” said Miles. “The pin has worked its way up.”

That was the sort of thing Miles knew. His father was the blacksmith of Appleton. Miles had known iron since he could walk. He went for a hammer. Then he knocked the pin down again, tap by tap. The gate hung true.

He swung it once more. No groan.

“Good,” said Gib. He went on with his buckets.

In the kitchen, Mabel was counting.

She had a slate in one hand. She had chalk in the other. She counted along the shelves. She called the numbers out to Bess.

"Six eggs," said Mabel. "Half a cheese. A little butter. Two hams — no, one ham. And a bit of the other."

"Go on," said Bess.

"Onions, plenty," said Mabel. "Honey, plenty. Salt, plenty." She was very merry about it. "Meat, none. Cheese, nearly none."

Bramble the cat sat on the flour shelf. He watched the chalk.

"And the flour?" said Bess.

"I will do the flour last," said Mabel.

She was cheerful, and she had a good reason. Two hundred people had eaten at Brightstone. Every one had gone home full. That was worth an empty shelf or two. The mill at Appleton would grind. The carts would come up the hill. The kitchen would fill again. It always did.

"Mind you do it," said Bess.

High above the yard was the mews. That is where the castle's hawks lived.

Hugh climbed up to it with his glove already on. He was eleven. He was the smallest of the four pages. He liked the mews best of all. Up there the world was quiet.

Only this morning it was not quiet.

The birds were restless. A restless bird cannot keep still. It shifts from foot to foot. It turns its head. It opens its wings a little. Then it shuts them. Then it opens them again.

Duchess was the oldest hawk at Brightstone. She was Sir Edmund's own bird. She had a grey back and fierce eyes. Duchess did not fidget for anybody. This morning Duchess would not settle either.

Hugh stood still. He watched her a long time.

"What is it?" he said. "What have you heard?"

Duchess did not tell him. She turned her head. She looked at the window.

Hugh looked too. The sky out there was soft summer blue. Nothing moved in it at all.

He brought Duchess in from the outer perch. It was hours before he needed to. It seemed the right thing to do. He fed the birds early as well.

Down the cool stone passage was the library.

Anne sat at the great table. The Chronicle of Brightstone lay open in front of her. The Chronicle was the castle's book. Every castellan for two hundred years had written in it. They set down the castle's story, year by year.

Today Anne was writing the entry for midsummer.

An entry is one piece of writing in such a book. One thing that happened, with its date. The whole midsummer gathering would be one entry. The games. The feast. The shire on the green. The found year, read out loud.

She wrote slowly, in her best hand.

Master Cole stood at her shoulder. He read as she wrote. His fingers were black with ink, as always.

"'And the shire came up the hill,'" he read. "Good. Plain and true. Do not put in that it was a fine day."

"But it was a fine day," said Anne.

"It was. In a hundred years, nobody will care." Master Cole tapped the page with one black finger. "Numbers. Names. What was done. That is what a chronicle is for."

Anne dipped her quill again. She smiled a small smile. She liked this. She had liked the reading aloud too. But this was better.

At mid-morning, Sir Edmund rode down to Appleton.

He was the castellan of Brightstone. That is the knight who keeps a castle for the king. He was grey-bearded and slow to speak. He went down about the hay. The hay had been cut before midsummer. It lay in rows in the low fields.

"Two more days of this sun," he said. "Then it comes in."

"Two more days," said Lady Margaret. "Then you may have your hay. And I may have my castle back."

He laughed. He rode away down the hill.

It was just after noon when Gib stopped.

He was in the middle of the yard. Gib carried water most of the day. He set the buckets down by the well. He stood up straight. He looked west.

West is where the sun goes down. From the yard you could see a long way west. You could see over the valley and the Combe woods.

Mabel came out of the kitchen with a bowl for the goats. She saw Gib standing there. She stopped.

"Gib?"

Gib said eight words.

"Wind first. Then rain. It comes at dusk."

Then he picked up his buckets. He went on.



Mabel looked west too. There was a long grey line low down over the hills. It did not look like much.

But Gib had said something else, only yesterday. He had said the sky had a storm in it. Gib was never wrong about skies. Every soul in the castle knew that. So did every soul in the village.

Mabel went and told Lady Margaret at once.

By three in the afternoon, the light had changed.

It was not blue light any more. It was a strange, thick yellow-grey. It was the colour of old brass. It lay on the walls. It lay on the grass. It lay on the faces of the people in the yard. It made them all look ill.

The air went still. The birds in the mews went quiet.

Then the wind came.

It came up the valley from the west. It hit the hill hard. The great oak by the well began to move. First the small leaves. Then the branches. Then the whole tree, swinging and roaring.

Lady Margaret moved through the castle like a wind of her own. Shutters closed. Washing came in off the line. The hens went into their house. Buckets went under cover. Sir Edmund came up the hill at a trot. His hood was up. There was rain on his shoulders.

"You were right," he called to Gib.

"Wasn't me," said Gib. "It was the sky."

The rain came at dusk. It came hard and straight. It hissed on the stones of the yard. Inside, the fires were lit early. Bess put a pot of broth over the kitchen fire. The four pages sat by it with their feet tucked up. They listened to the water on the roof. It was a good sound to be inside of.

Then the horn sounded at the gate.

A horn is a curved brass tube. You blow it, and the call carries far. Travellers sound one to ask a castle to open. Brightstone did not hear it often.

Everyone in the kitchen looked up.

"A rider," said Mabel. "Out in this?"

But the horn did not stop. It sounded again. And again. Under it came another sound, up the hill through the rain. Wheels. Hooves. Voices.

It was not one rider.

## Chapter Two: Two-and-Twenty at the Gate

Miles reached the gate first. He always did.

Gib came a moment later with a lantern. Sir Edmund crossed the yard. His cloak was over his head. The rain was too loud for talking.

“Open it,” said Sir Edmund.

Miles lifted the bar. He and Gib pulled the two halves wide. The gate swung easily. It did not groan once.

Then they all stood still and looked.

The road up to Brightstone was full of people.

There were three carts on it. There were eleven horses. Men and women walked beside them. They had sacks over their shoulders. Small children were being carried. Water ran off every hood and every hat. It ran off the carts. It ran off the horses’ noses in little streams.

They were soaked. Soaked is wet all the way through. Wring out your sleeve. The water runs out of it. That is soaked.

Steam came off the horses in the lantern light.

It was a crowd. A crowd is a great many people in one place. Brightstone had a crowd at its gate. In the dark. In the rain.

A small woman came forward. She was old. She was straight-backed. She stood in the rain and made a proper bow.

“Sir,” she said, “I am sorry.”

“Come in first,” said Sir Edmund.

“I must say it now.” Water ran off her hood as she spoke. “My name is Dame Alys. We are two-and-twenty souls. We have eleven horses and three carts. We are going to Thornbury, two valleys on. My granddaughter is to be married there. I am her grandmother. This is her wedding party.”

A wedding party is not a feast. It is the people who travel to a wedding. Family. Friends. A carter. A cook. Three small children. They should have been in bed hours ago.

"We meant to be at the inn at Combe tonight," said Dame Alys. "We are not at the inn at Combe."

"No," said Sir Edmund. "You are here."

"I am putting two-and-twenty people at your gate. At night. In a storm. With no warning at all." Dame Alys lifted her chin. "I know what that means for a house. I have run one. I am sorry, sir."

Sir Edmund looked at her for a moment.

Then he gave the old answer of Brightstone.

"The gate opens," he said. "Bring them in."

He did not know where they would all sleep. He did not know what they would all eat. Nobody had counted a single bed yet. He said it anyway. Miles heard him say it. Miles did not forget it.

Then the yard was full.

A big slow man came up last. He led two cart horses. His coat was black with water.

"Rob," he said. "Carter."

"What happened to you, Rob?" said Sir Edmund.

"The ford," said Rob.

A ford is a shallow place in a river. There is no bridge. The water is low. You can walk or ride straight through it. The ford at Combe was the way south. The whole valley used it.

"We came down to it at three," said Rob. "It was fine. Low and quiet. We stopped to water the horses." He rubbed his face with a wet hand. "The sky went yellow-grey at three. Then the rain came off the hills. That water came up a foot, sir. We stood and watched it come up. A foot in ten minutes."

"And the road behind you?"

"Under, by now," said Rob. "The whole valley bottom is under."

That is a flood. A flood is water where water should not be. Over the fields. Over the road. Over the low walls. Brown and fast and full of sticks.

"So you came uphill," said Sir Edmund.

"We came uphill," said Rob. "There was nothing else to do. We saw your light."

Lady Margaret had come out into the rain. She said nothing for about four seconds. She stood and looked at the yard full of people.

Then she turned the whole castle over.

"Bess! Fires in the guest hall. Every fire in the place, lit." She was already walking. "Miles, the guest hall shutters. The wind has one off its catch. Mabel, water on to heat. Every pot. Gib, the eleven horses into the stable. The carts under the wall."

"Yes, my lady," said four voices at once.

"Anne! Get the chests open on the upper landing. Every blanket in this castle comes downstairs tonight."

A blanket is thick woollen cloth. You put it over you in bed. Brightstone had a great many blankets. It had a great many beds. But it did not have two-and-twenty beds standing empty. Everybody knew that.

"And the great hall floor gets strewn," said Lady Margaret. "Fresh straw, a hand deep, right across."

To strew a floor is to spread something over it. Straw, or dry rushes from the stream. It makes a warm dry bed to lie on.

"Hugh," she said, "the small children go to the kitchen fire first. Before anything else. They are the coldest things in this yard."

"Yes, my lady," said Hugh. He was gone.

The chests came open on the landing. A chest is a big wooden box with a heavy lid. Castles keep things in chests. Linen. Blankets. Old clothes. Things put away for a day just like this one. Anne knelt down in front of them. She worked as fast as her hands would go.

"Dry clothes," said Lady Margaret over her shoulder. "Anything that fits anybody. Nobody sits in wet wool tonight."

Anne pulled out a pile of old tunics. Some were older than she was. She did not care. An hour later, the two aunts wore them. They did not care either.

It took an hour to get them all in and dry.

The great hall floor turned yellow with new straw. The guest hall fires went up. Wet cloaks hung on every hook and every chair back. There had never been so many people in the castle. Not in Anne's whole life.

And it was, in a strange way, wonderful. Miles carried wood till his arms ached. He grinned the whole time. Mabel had never had so many mouths to feed at once. Hugh had three small children asleep by the fire. Dame Alys had not even got her own boots off yet.

Only Bess was quiet.

Mabel noticed it first. Her aunt had gone to the corner by the wall. Her hand was on the lid of the flour bin.

A bin is a big wooden box for grain or flour. The one in Bess's kitchen was as tall as Mabel. It was twice as wide. It had fed Brightstone all through midsummer. Two hundred people. Three days of baking.

Bess lifted the lid.

She said nothing. She looked into it for a long moment. Then she put the lid down very gently. Bess did not put things down gently, as a rule.

"Aunt Bess?" said Mabel.

"Get me the lantern," said Bess.

Mabel got the lantern. Bess held it over the open bin. Mabel looked in too.

You could see the bottom boards. There was flour in the corners. There was a small heap in the middle. It would make bread for one morning. Two, perhaps.



There were two-and-twenty guests asleep in the halls.

“We shall send to the mill in the morning,” said Mabel. “Appleton will grind for us. They always do.”

Bess did not answer. She was looking out of the black kitchen window. She was looking down towards the valley. The rain had not stopped.

The mill at Appleton stood on the stream at the bottom of the hill.

And the bottom of the hill was under water.

## Chapter Three: Serve First, Sit Last

Nobody at Brightstone went to bed early that night.

The rain kept on. The wind kept on. In every room, somebody was working.

In the kitchen, Mabel worked hardest of all.

She had every pot on the fire. She had bread in the oven. She had wet boots along the wall. A small child slept in the corner. She had never been so happy.

“Cups,” said Bess.

“Cups,” said Mabel, and got them.

Dame Alys came to the kitchen door. She had dry clothes on now. They did not fit her at all. She looked very small in them.

“I have come to say thank you,” she said. “Properly. To the kitchen. The kitchen always gets left out.”

“There is broth,” said Bess.

Broth is a thin hot soup. You make it from bones and water. You put in whatever else you have. It is not grand. On a wet night, nothing is better.

Dame Alys took a cup in both hands. She stood in the doorway and drank it. She would not sit down.

“We shall be away in the morning,” she said. “You will hardly know we came.”

“You will have breakfast first,” said Mabel.

“Bread will do.”

“You will have a proper breakfast,” said Mabel. “A wedding breakfast. Hot, and on a table. You are going to a wedding. You have slept on our floor. You will not leave this castle on a crust.”

Bess said nothing.

Bess only lifted one eyebrow. It went up slowly. It stayed up.

Mabel did not look at her aunt. Mabel had seen the flour bin. The Appleton mill had always ground for them. The rain would stop. The water would go down. The carts would go and come back. That was how it worked.

"Then thank you," said Dame Alys. "That is very kind."

In the guest hall, the rain was coming in.

It came in at the north corner. That is where the roof meets the wall. It had done it before in bad rain. It always did it in bad rain. Tonight it did it over nine sleeping guests.

Miles came up the ladder. His mouth was full of nails.

A ladder is the thing you climb. It gets you to a high place. Two long poles. Short bars between them for your feet. Brightstone's ladders were old and heavy. This one was as tall as three men.

Sir Edmund held the foot of it. He held up a lantern as well. But the wet corner was above the light. It was in shadow.

So Miles mended it in the dark, by feel.

To mend a thing is to make it whole. You do not build a new one. You find the broken place. You close it up. It serves.

Miles could not see the crack. He could feel it. He ran his fingers along the wet stone. He found the gap. The mortar had gone. He pushed tarred cloth into it. A bit at a time, with his thumb. Then he set a strip of wood on top. He nailed it home.

"How bad?" said Sir Edmund from below.

"Bad enough for tonight," said Miles. "It wants doing properly in the dry."

"It has wanted that for eleven years," said Sir Edmund.

The water stopped coming in. Nine sleeping guests never knew.

In the stable, Hugh had eleven horses. None of them knew him.

Eleven strange horses is a great deal of horse. They were restless. They stamped. They pulled at their ropes. Every new noise rolled their eyes. And there was a new noise every minute.

Gib went down the line. He put a hand on every neck. He said three words to each of them. Hugh never found out what they were.

Ten of them settled.

The eleventh was a grey mare. A mare is a female horse. This one stood out in the rain. Her head was up. She would not come in.

Rob tried. Two of the aunts tried. Gib tried, and Gib did not try twice.

"She'll come," said Gib. "Or she won't."

Hugh did not pull her. He did not push her. He went and stood inside the door. He kept a good way back. He held some hay down at his side.

Then he stopped moving.

Hugh was very good at not moving. He could sit an hour in the mews. He never lifted a finger. He stood in the lantern light. He looked at nothing much. He let the mare look at him.

The rain ran off her. Steam came up off her back.

It took a long time. Hugh's arm went numb. Then there was a step. Then another step. Then a warm nose came into his hand.

"Well," said Gib.

That was high praise, from Gib.

In the great hall, Anne sat down. She had a wax tablet.

A tablet is a small wooden board. It has a low edge all round it. Inside is soft wax. You write in the wax. You use a pointed stick. Then you rub it flat with your thumb. Then you write something else. Master Cole used one for rough notes. Paper was for things you meant to keep.

Anne was making a list.

It was not a list of things. It was a list of people. It said where each of them would sleep. That was much harder. Things stay where you put them.

*Great hall floor: Rob, two carters' men, four of the party.*

*Guest hall: Dame Alys, the two aunts, the eldest child.*

*Upper landing: nine.*

*Kitchen corner: the two small ones by the fire.*

She kept rubbing it out and starting again. Two guests moved. They wanted to be near their horses. One aunt would not leave the children. The three children would not be parted.

But in the end she had them all. Every name had a place.

Supper was bread and hot broth. They ate it on the floor.

There was no room for tables. The straw was warm. Guests and household sat down together. They filled the great hall. Everybody had a cup in both hands.

Sir Edmund stood up. He was at the top of the hall.

"For this food, and this house, and one another," he said. "For a dry roof on a wet night. Help us to serve well, and to be thankful."

Then he said the old rule of the house. The four pages had heard it a hundred times.

"Serve first. Sit last."

He took a jug. He went down the hall. He filled cups all the way down. He had eaten nothing yet. Lady Margaret came the other way. She had the bread. They were the last two to sit down.



It was a good supper. It was one of the best ever. Somebody's aunt started a song. The small children joined in on the wrong notes.

Anne sat with her tablet on her knees. She counted her list one last time.

Twenty-two.

Dame Alys had said the same at the gate. Two-and-twenty souls. Anne let out a long breath. She rubbed her thumb across the wax.

Hugh came in from the stable. His hair was flat with rain. He stood by the fire to get warm.

Cloaks hung all round it. They hung on chairs. They hung on hooks and bench backs. They steamed gently in the heat. There were rather a lot of them.

Hugh was the sort of boy who counts things.

He counted the cloaks.

Then he stood very still. He counted them again, more slowly.

"Anne," he said. "How many guests are there?"

"Twenty-two," said Anne.

"Then come and look," said Hugh. "There are twenty-three cloaks."

## Chapter Four: The Twenty-Third Cloak

Anne counted the cloaks herself.

She got twenty-three too.

“Count the people,” said Miles.

They counted the people. It took some time. People kept moving. But the answer came out the same every time. Twenty-two guests. One in the kitchen corner. Three asleep. All of them there.

Twenty-two people. Twenty-three cloaks.

“We tell Lady Margaret,” said Anne. “Now.”

Nobody argued. That was the rule at Brightstone. You did not sit on a thing like that. You did not wonder about it on your own.

Lady Margaret came at once. So did Dame Alys. So did half the hall.

“Whose is this one?” said Lady Margaret.

She held up a small brown cloak. It was much too short for a man. It was too big for the three small children. It was the wettest thing on the whole line.

The smallest child sat up in the straw. She rubbed her eyes.

“That’s Kit’s,” she said.

“Who is Kit?” said Lady Margaret.

“Kit put it on me in the cart,” said the child. “So I would not get wet.”

Dame Alys went very still.

“Rob,” she said. “Where is your sister’s boy?”

Kit was Rob’s nephew. Your nephew is your brother’s son, or your sister’s.

Rob the carter stood up slowly. He looked round the hall. He looked at the door. His big face went slack.

“He was at the gate,” he said. “He was holding the horses at the gate.”

“That was three hours ago,” said Sir Edmund.

They went out with two lanterns.

The rain had gone soft, but it had not stopped. The yard was black and shining. The three carts stood in a row under the north wall. Their covers were roped down.

And there, beside the last cart, a boy was standing.

He was about eleven. He was thin. He had wet fair hair stuck flat to his head. He had no cloak. He had a rope in each hand. He was holding the cart covers down against the wind.

He was shivering.

Shivering is what your body does in the cold. You shake all over. You cannot stop it. It is not your own doing. This boy had been shivering for a long time.

"Kit!" said Rob.

"Uncle," said Kit.

"What are you doing out here, lad?"

"Holding the covers," said Kit. "The wind was getting under them."

"Three hours?"

"You said hold them," said Kit. Then, in case that sounded rude, he added: "They're all right. Nothing's wet inside."

Miles took the ropes out of his hands. Kit's fingers had gone white and stiff. He could not open them by himself.

"Nobody told me to come in," said Kit. He said it as a plain fact. It was not a complaint at all. "I thought I was meant to stay."

Hugh took his arm. He steered him to the kitchen.



Mabel had him on a stool by the fire. She had broth in his hands inside a minute. Bess put a blanket round him without a word. Then she went back to her pots. Bramble the cat got off the warm shelf. He thought about it. Then he sat on Kit's feet.

Nobody asked where he came from. Nobody asked what he was doing there. They fed him first. They asked afterwards. That is the Brightstone way round.

Then Dame Alys came in.

She stood in the kitchen doorway. She looked at the boy by the fire. She was upset. When you are upset, something has gone wrong inside you. It is not quite anger. It is not quite crying. Dame Alys had come through a flood that night. She had not turned a hair. Now her hands were shaking.

"How long?" she said.

"He's all right, Dame Alys," said Rob.

"How long, Robert?"

"Three hours, about."

Dame Alys shut her eyes for a moment. Then she turned round. She went back into the great hall. Everybody followed her. You do, when a small old lady walks like that.

She stood in the middle of the floor.

"I have a list," she said.

A list is names written down in order. Dame Alys had made hers a fortnight before. Every soul going to Thornbury was on it. She had checked it three times.

"Kit is not on my list," she said. "He came to us the night before we set out. His uncle wanted a pair of hands. The boy said yes. And I never wrote his name down."

The hall was quiet.

"That is my fault. Nobody else's. I counted my party twice at that gate tonight. I said two-and-twenty. I was wrong. We are three-and-twenty. And the one I left off stood out in the rain."

She turned to the kitchen door. Kit had come to it. The blanket was round his shoulders. The cat was under his arm.

"Kit," she said. "I am sorry. You are the first name on my list from tonight. Not the last."

Kit went red to his ears. "It's all right," he said.

"It is not all right. But it is put right," said Dame Alys. "That is the best I can do at this hour."

Sir Edmund had been by the great hall door the whole time. He had said nothing at all.

"A guest is a guest," he said. "Counted or not."

And that was the end of it.

Kit slept by the kitchen fire that night. It was the warmest place in the castle. In the morning he was up early. Before everyone but Miles. By the next midday he had turned into Hugh's shadow. He stayed there.

One more thing happened that night. Nobody noticed it at the time.

Jack came into the great hall.

Jack was the jackdaw from the north tower. He was black. He had a grey hood and pale silver-grey eyes. He was bold as anything. Mabel had named him last week. Sir Edmund had let him keep a stolen silver spoon. Jack had his own ideas about this household now.

A hall full of strangers was new. And their bags lay open on the floor. That was better than new.

A market is a place full of stalls and people. You walk about. You look at everything.

Jack worked that hall like a market. He walked. He looked. He put his head on one side. He was in no hurry at all.

Then he found the saddlebags by the door.

A saddlebag is a bag you strap behind a saddle. It carries what a rider needs on the road. One of them was open. Half its things lay on the straw beside it.

And on top of the pile was a buckle.

A buckle is the metal fastening on a strap. This one was off a harness. It was as broad as a man's thumb. It had been rubbed bright. In the firelight it shone like nothing else in that hall.

Jack picked it up.

Nobody saw him go. Nobody would think of it again for a day.

Near midnight, the hall began to settle. The fires burned low and red. Dame Alys sat down on a bench. She had a cup in her hands. She let out a long breath.

"Well," she said. "One night's trouble, and no harm done. Tomorrow we go on."

"You will want an early start," said Lady Margaret.

"We must," said Dame Alys. "The wedding is at Thornbury at noon, three days from now. We are to be there the evening before. That gives us two days. And there is a great deal to do that last night."

Anne looked up from her tablet.

Miles looked up from the fire.

They both thought the same thing. Neither wanted to say it. Then Miles said it. Somebody had to.

"Dame Alys," he said. "The road to Thornbury is the Combe road."

## Chapter Five: Bread Enough

The storm blew itself out in the night.

The morning came up hot and clean. There was no yellow-grey in that sky. It was blue from hill to hill. Water dripped off every roof. And off every leaf. The oak by the well stood there dripping. It looked very pleased with itself.

Down in the valley, the water lay brown and wide.

It had come up over the low fields. It had come up over the lane. From the castle wall you saw hedges in it. You could see the tops of gates. The stream had gone. There was no stream any more. There was just water, all the way across.

Mabel was awake at five.

She lay on her straw for a moment. Then she remembered what she had said. She sat up fast.

*A proper breakfast. Hot, and on a table.*

She went down to the kitchen. Bess was already there. Bess stood by the flour bin. The lid was up. She was looking in.

"Aunt Bess," said Mabel. "I said a thing last night."

"You did," said Bess.

"I told Dame Alys she would have a wedding breakfast."

"You did that too."

Mabel looked into the bin. In the daylight it was worse. Flour in the corners. A little heap in the middle. Enough for one baking. Not a big one.

She did not run away from it. She went straight up to Lady Margaret's door. She told her the whole thing before breakfast.

"You promised twenty-three people a hot breakfast," said Lady Margaret.

"Yes, my lady."

"With that in the bin."

"Yes, my lady."

Lady Margaret looked at her a long moment. Then, oddly, she almost smiled.

"Well," she said. "Then we had better find some flour."

Miles and Gib went down to Appleton at dawn.

They came back at seven. Miles's boots were wet to the knee. He was not smiling.

"The mill is standing in it," he said.

Everybody in the kitchen stopped.

"How deep?"

"Above the wheel. The stream came over its banks in the night. The whole mill yard is under. Old Ned has his sacks on the top floor."

"Can he grind?"

"Not today," said Miles. "Not tomorrow either. He says the water must sink first. Then the wheel must be cleared. There will be sticks and mud in it. Half a tree, most likely. Three days. Maybe four."

To sink, for water, means to go down again. A flood comes up fast. It sinks slowly.

"Then there is no flour in this valley," said Bess.

"There is no *ground* flour," said Miles.

That was the useful part.

Brightstone had grain.

Grain is the seed of wheat or barley. Flour is made from it. The castle kept its grain in the granary. It stood in wooden bins, dry and cool. There were sacks of it up there. Sacks and sacks.

But grain is not flour. Grain is hard little seeds. You cannot bake with it. Somebody has to grind it first.

To grind a thing is to crush it to powder. You crush it between two hard surfaces. A mill does it with two great stones. That is why every village needs one.

"We have no mill," said Mabel.

"No," said Bess. "We have a quern."

Kit and Hugh fetched it up from the cellar. It took both of them.

A quern is a little mill you turn by hand. It is two flat round stones. One sits on the other. There is a hole in the top one. You pour your grain in at the hole. Then you turn the top stone round and round. There is a wooden handle for it. The grain gets crushed between the stones. Flour comes creeping out at the edges.

Every castle had one, before the water mills. Brightstone's had sat in the cellar for years.

Miles cleaned it. He set a new peg in the handle. He made the stones sit true. Then he turned it twice. He nodded.

"It works," he said.

Mabel put her hand on the handle.

"Then I will start now," she said.

"How long do you think that takes?" said Bess.

"I do not know."

"One person, one quern, bread for twenty-three?" said Bess. "All morning. Your arm will give out at the second sack."

Mabel stood with her hand on the handle. This was the part she was not good at. She was very good at saying yes. She was very good at carrying three things at once. She sang as she did it.

She was not good at this.

"Aunt Bess," she said. "I cannot do that on my own."

"Nobody said you could," said Bess.

And that was all. Bess did not make anything of it. She put her head out of the kitchen door.

"THE KITCHEN WANTS HANDS," she shouted. That voice carried across the whole yard.

Hands came.

They ground that grain in turns all morning.

To take turns is to go one after another. You do a piece. Then you stop. Someone else does a piece. Then it comes round to you again. Nobody has to do it all.

Miles went first. Miles could turn a handle a long time. Then Rob. He had arms from a lifetime of carts. Then two of the aunts. Then Kit. He would not stop. Hugh had to pull him off. Then Hugh. He was small, and he stuck at it anyway.

Dame Alys took her turn with the rest.

She pushed her sleeves up first. A sleeve is the part that covers your arm. A coat has two. So has a dress. Dame Alys had good sleeves. She pushed them up. She had done this before. She ground her whole turn. She said not one word about her age.

The three small children fetched.

To fetch is to go and get a thing. Then you bring it back. That was their work all morning. They were proud of it. They fetched grain from the sack. In cups. They fetched the flour away in bowls. They fetched water. They fetched Bramble out of the flour bowl, twice.

Anne kept count on her tablet. Nobody did two. Nobody did none.

The bread went into the ovens at ten.



They ate at half past eleven. In the great hall, at proper tables.

It was not a grand breakfast. It was hot bread and butter. It was honey from the castle hives. It was broth in cups. All twenty-three guests sat down with the household. The smell went right through the castle.

Dame Alys stood up before she ate.

“I have been to a great many breakfasts,” she said. “I have never eaten one I helped to grind.”

Mabel went as red as the honey pot. Bess looked at the table and said nothing. Her face was doing something odd.

“You made the promise,” Bess said after. “You did not keep it by yourself. That is not the same as not keeping it.”

Mabel thought about that all day.

The garden had been thirsty all summer. One wet night would not mend that.

Meanwhile the hawks still wanted water.

Hugh carried it up himself in the middle of the morning. One bucket at a time, with Kit behind him. The mews stair went up inside the wall. Halfway up there was a narrow window. Out of it you saw the whole Combe valley.

Hugh stopped on the step to change hands.

Then he looked out, as he always did.

The water had gone down. You could see it had gone down. The hedges stood higher out of it. The lane showed in two places, shining and brown.

And down there, across the Combe road, lay something. Something long and dark.

Hugh stood still. He looked at it a long time.

"Kit," he said. "What is that?"

"What is what?"

"That," said Hugh. "That was not there yesterday."

## Chapter Six: What Lies Across the Road

Hugh did not stand there and wonder about it.

He put the bucket down. He took the water up to the mews. Then he came straight down again. He found Sir Edmund in the yard.

“There is something on the Combe road, sir,” he said. “It is long. It is dark. It was not there yesterday.”

Sir Edmund looked at him.

“Show me,” he said.

They looked from the top of the wall. Sir Edmund looked a long time. He did not say what he thought it was. He said one thing only.

“Gib.”

Gib took three of them down the hill on foot. Miles, Hugh and Kit. Puck came too. Puck carried the tools. Two baskets, one on each side. Nobody rode. The lane was no place for riding that day.

The lane was mud.

Mud is wet earth. It is soft and heavy. It holds your boot. Pull too fast, and the mud keeps the boot. It gives you back your foot. It came over their ankles in the low places.

Kit fell over twice. He did not complain either time.

They went down past the last hedge. Then they turned the corner by the two oaks.

And there it was.

A tree lay across the Combe road.

It was an elm. An elm is a big tree. It has rough grey bark. It grows tall and wide. This one had stood on the bank for a hundred years. Now it lay across the road. Its roots were in the air.

The roots were higher than Miles.

Nobody said anything for a moment. Then Miles walked up to it. He put his hand on the trunk. He was already reckoning. That was how Miles looked at everything.

"It is not so bad," he said. "It is big. But it is one tree. Ten men, and axes, and a day. Cut it in three and roll it off. Puck could not shift it, but oxen could."

"Aye," said Gib.

"So we could open the road."

"Aye," said Gib. "Come and see the rest."

They climbed over the elm. On the far side the road went thirty paces. Then it stopped.

The stream ran along below the Combe road. A stream is a small river. It had been three steps wide the day before. Now it was brown and fat and loud. It had eaten its way sideways into the hill.

Below the road was the bank. The bank is the sloping side. It holds a road up above the water.

That bank was not there any more.

It had slipped. To slip, for earth, is to give way and slide. The rain had gone into it all night. Then the stream had pulled at the bottom of it. And in the dark it went down into the water. A piece of hillside as long as the great hall.

The road went with it.

There was a clean brown edge. That was where the road stopped. Then there was nothing. Then, twenty paces on, the road began again.

Between the two ends, the hill fell into the stream. You could see grass down there, still growing. It lay flat under a foot of brown water.



Miles stood at the edge. He looked at it a long time.

He said nothing about ten men and a day.

“Could it be mended?” said Hugh.

“Yes,” said Miles slowly. “You would have to build the bank up again. Stone first. A lot of stone. Then earth on the stone. Then you must let it settle. If you do not, the first rain takes it out again.” He rubbed his face. He left mud on it. “And you cannot start before the water goes down.”

“How long?” said Kit.

Miles did not answer. He looked at Gib.

Gib stood with Puck’s rope in his hand. He looked at the broken hill. His face said nothing at all.

Gib said nine words.

“Not this week, that road. Not this month either.”

And that was that. Gib was never wrong about skies. He was not often wrong about roads.

They went back up the hill. Puck was pleased to be going home. Nobody else said much.

Halfway up, Hugh spoke.

"Somebody has to tell Dame Alys," he said.

"Yes," said Miles.

They told everybody at once. In the great hall, with the guests there.

That was Sir Edmund's doing. Miles would rather have told the adults first, quietly. Sir Edmund would not have it.

"They are grown people on their own journey," he said. "It is their road. They hear it when we hear it."

So the whole hall heard it together. Miles stood at the top with mud to the knee. He told them what he had seen. He did not make it better than it was. He did not make it worse. He said the elm. He said the bank. He said the twenty paces that were gone.

Gone is a small word. It is not the same as broken. A broken road can be mended in a day. The Combe road was not broken. It was gone.

Then Sir Edmund did the sums out loud.

A sum is a piece of arithmetic. You put down what is true. You add it up. You look at what it comes to. You do not argue with it afterwards.

"The Combe road is out. That is the first thing," said Sir Edmund. "The ford at Combe is under water. That is the second. The mill lane goes nowhere but the mill. That is the third."

"There is the hill track over the top," said Lady Margaret.

"There is. It comes out at Marden. Marden is the wrong way. That is two days. Then a day back. Three days to Thornbury by the hill track."

"They must be there tomorrow evening," said Lady Margaret.

"Yes."

Sir Edmund stopped. Everybody waited. He never filled a silence just to feel better.

"Then I do not know a way," he said. "I have kept this castle eleven years. I have ridden every lane in this valley. I do not know another road to Thornbury. I am sorry. That is the honest answer."

To be honest is to say what is true. You say it even when it helps nobody. Especially then. It is not the easy answer. It is the honest one.

Rob the carter said the same. In three words. "Not with carts."

Dame Alys sat very straight on her bench. She did not cry out. She did not blame the weather. Or the castle. Or her own list.

"Then we shall miss it," she said.

Nobody spoke.

"Well," said Dame Alys. "It is not the end of the world. It is only the first wedding in that family for nine years. I am the oldest of us. I said I would stand at the front. I said I would see it." She stopped. Then she put her hands flat on her knees. "It cannot be helped. You have been very kind."

Bess turned round to the fire. She made a business of the pot.

And then a voice came from the back of the hall. It came from the bench by the library door. Anne had sat there quietly for two days. Her tablet was on her knees.

"There was another way once," said Anne.

Everybody turned round.

Anne went red. She had not meant to say it out loud.

"There was another way once," she said again, smaller. "Not a road. A crossing. The Combe road was not always there. The carts went another way once."

Sir Edmund got up out of his chair.

"Anne," he said. "How do you know that?"

"I read it," said Anne.

## Chapter Seven: The Year of the Mill

The library had never held so many people.

Anne got there first. She had the door open. Nobody else was off a bench yet. Then the whole hall came after her. Sir Edmund. Lady Margaret. Master Cole. Dame Alys with her stick. Rob. Bess with a spoon still in her hand. Miles, Mabel, Hugh and Kit in a knot by the door.

"Give her room," said Master Cole. "Give the girl *room*."

The great table stood in the middle. On it lay the Chronicle of Brightstone.

The Chronicle is the castle's own book. It is huge. It is bound in brown leather. Every castellan for two hundred years has written in it. What was built. What was mended. Who came. What it cost.

Anne opened it near the middle.

"Last week," she said, "we found a lost year."

Some of the guests had heard about that already. Servants talk. It was a good story. A whole year had been left unfinished in the Chronicle. That was forty years back. The castellan before Sir Edmund had left it. His name was Sir Roland. The pages had found his lost notes in an old chest. They had put the year together again. Anne had read it out at midsummer, to the whole shire.

"It was the year the mill was rebuilt," said Anne.

"The Appleton mill?" said Dame Alys.

"Yes. The old wheel broke. The village and the castle built the mill again. It took the whole summer." Anne was turning leaves as she talked. Her fingers knew the way. "And they had to bring the beams from the far woods."

A beam is a great squared piece of timber. It is the bone of a building. The beams of a mill are as long as three men. They are as thick as a man's body. You do not carry a beam. You drag it. It takes oxen.

Oxen are big strong cattle. They work in pairs, in a wooden yoke. They are slower than horses. They are stronger than anything.

"Here," said Anne.

She had it.

The whole room leaned in. Anne put her finger under the line. She read it out slowly. The hand was Roland's sloping old one. She had learned to read it that week.

*"Item: the great beams out of the far woods. Six in number, drawn by two teams. Not by the Combe way. That road was soft with the wet summer, and its banks were poor. We went over the old dam at the mill pond. It carried them dry. It has carried wood since my grandfather's time."*

Nobody spoke.

"Read the last part again," said Sir Edmund.

"*Over the old dam at the mill pond*," said Anne.

A pond is a small still water. Not a river. Not a lake. Water that sits.

A dam is a wall built across water. It holds the water back on one side. The Appleton pond had been made that way, long ago. Then the mill always had water to turn its wheel. The dam that held it was broad. It was built of stone.

And a broad dam is also a way across.

Master Cole had got round the table by now. He bent over the page, his nose almost on it.

"Is it his hand?" said Sir Edmund.

"It is his hand," said Master Cole. "I learned my letters copying that hand. There is the long *s*. There is the way he crosses a *t*. Too high." He straightened up. His eyes were very bright. "It is Roland. It is his year. And it is *useful*."

He said that last word almost with a laugh.

"Forty years we did not have that page," he said. "And now it is the one page anybody needs."

"Grandfather," said Anne, "there is more."

She read on.

*"The dam stands sound. It is of stone, and broad as a cart. The men go over it dry when the Combe way is foul."*

Miles said one word. "Stone."

"Stone," said Anne.

"Where is it?" said Rob. "I have carted this valley twenty years. I never saw a dam."

"You would not," said Bess from the doorway. "There is no pond there now."

That was the first cold water on it.

The mill pond had gone. Not all at once — ponds do not go all at once. The stream had shifted after some old flood. The pond had emptied slowly over the years. What was left was a marsh.

A marsh is wet ground. It is not water. It is not land. Reeds grow in it. Willows grow in it. You cannot walk across it. You cannot boat across it. Alder and bramble grow thick round the edges. After forty years nobody goes there at all.

"There is your dam," said Bess. "Under forty years of bramble, if it is there."

"Could we look?" said Mabel.

"Look, yes," said Lady Margaret.

Her voice had a full stop in it.

They all turned. Lady Margaret stood at the end of the table. Her hands were folded. She had let them all talk. Now she was going to be sensible at them. Everyone knew it.

"Look, and gladly," she said. "But hear me first. That is a stone wall. It was built before I was born. Nobody has walked it in forty years. Nobody has *mended* it in forty years. Water has gone through it every winter since. So has the frost."

"It says it is sound," said Miles.

"It says it *was* sound," said Lady Margaret. "In a book. On a page."

She put two fingers on the Chronicle.

There are two kinds of page at Castle Brightstone. There is a page like Miles. That is a boy or girl learning the household arts. And there is a page like this one. A leaf of a book. Writing on both sides. Miles had heard that joke since he was ten. Nobody was laughing now.

"A page is a page," said Lady Margaret. "It is not a bridge. I am not sending twenty-three guests and eleven horses onto forty-year-old stones. Not on one good word from a dead man."

That was fair. They could all feel it. Sir Edmund was nodding slowly.

"Then we look at it," said Sir Edmund. "And we promise nothing before we have. Miles, you and Gib—"

"It is not the same as seeing it," said Lady Margaret. "Somebody would have to *know* that dam. Somebody who has stood on it. And there is nobody left who has."

And a voice said, from the doorway:

"I have."

They all turned round.

Gib stood there with an empty bucket. Nobody had heard him come. Nobody ever did.



"You have what?" said Lady Margaret.

"Stood on it," said Gib.

The room went quiet in a new way.

"I was eleven," said Gib. He put the bucket down. "Stable boy. The new wheel turned that morning. The whole valley was down there. I was on the dam. Right in the middle of it. My feet on the stones. Half the village behind me."

He looked at the Chronicle on the table. Then he looked at Anne.

"That book says the beams came over the dam," he said. "The book is right. I watched them come."

## Chapter Eight: Gib Walks It

They went down after the noon bell.

Gib went first. Miles went, and Hugh, and Kit, and Anne. Puck came behind. He had the tools on his back. Sir Edmund walked down as far as the mill lane. Then he stopped. He let Gib take them on.

Mabel did not go.

She wanted to go very much. She stood in the kitchen doorway. A wooden spoon was in her hand. She watched them cross the yard.

"Go on, then," said Bess.

"There are twenty-three people," said Mabel. "They will want supper. And that is two more bakings. One pair of hands cannot do two bakings."

"No," said Bess. "It cannot."

"So I am staying."

"Yes," said Bess.

She did not say well done. Bess never did. But she put her hand flat on Mabel's head for a moment. She had done that when Mabel was six.

Anne had a page in her sleeve.

Not the Chronicle's own page. Master Cole would sooner give away his right hand. He had copied Roland's words onto a slip. He wrote them in his own careful letters. He blew the ink dry and folded it once.

"Read it *on the ground*," he told her. "Words and ground together. That is how you know."

Anne pushed the slip up her sleeve. She held her arm a little bent. All the way down the hill.

The mill lane was passable.

The mill itself was not. They came round the corner and there it was. A grey building in brown water. Up to its windowsills. Old Ned stood on the top step. His arms were folded. He lifted a hand to them.

"Not that way," said Gib. "Round."

He took them off the lane. They went along the top of the old pond bank. There was no path. There had been one once. Gib walked it all the same.

Then the bramble began.

A bramble is a long thorny stem. It has berries on it in autumn. Blackberries grow on brambles. So do thorns, hundreds of them, all pointing backwards. Brambles grow over anything that stands still.

"That's what the cat is named for," said Kit.

"It is," said Hugh. "Mabel named him."

The brambles had been growing here for forty years. They had gone up over the fallen fence. They had gone over the old sluice posts and up into the alders.

An alder is a small tree. It likes wet feet. It grows in marshes and along streams. It grows in thickets. Its wood is dark. It does not mind water.

Miles cut. Kit pulled the cut stuff away. It was hot work. It was hotter for being noon. The flies liked it very much.

Then Gib stopped.

"Here," he said.

He was standing on stone.

They all stopped and looked down. The ground under the brambles was not ground. It was flat cut blocks, laid edge to edge. Grass grew in the cracks.

"Clear it," said Gib.

They cleared it. It took an hour. And a stone road came out of the bramble under their hands. It went straight out across the marsh.

The old dam.

It was as broad as a cart. Exactly as Roland had written. It ran forty paces. Right across the neck of the marsh. On both sides the reeds stood tall. Black water shone between them.

Miles went out onto it first. Slowly, looking down all the way.

Then he came back and looked at Gib.

"It is sound at this end," he said.

Sound means whole and strong. It is not about noise. A sound wall does not move. A sound tooth does not hurt. A sound boat lets in no water.

Gib went out to the far end and came back.

"Sound there too," he said.

"Then what is wrong with it?" said Anne. "There must be something wrong with it. You can see it from here."

She was right. Anyone could see it. In the middle, for ten paces, the stone road was not level. It sagged. It went down in a long dip. It was the shape of a bed with somebody sitting on it.

That is a slump.

To slump is to sink down in the middle. A sack of flour slumps when it is half empty. A dam slumps when the fill has washed out from under it.

The fill is what is inside. A dam is not solid stone all through. It is two walls of good stone. The middle is packed full. Earth, gravel, small stone, rammed down tight. That is the fill. The stone walls hold it. It holds the stone walls.

Forty winters of water had found a way through it. A grain at a time. It had taken the fill out into the marsh.

The stones on top had come down after it. Not fallen. Just settled, all together. Down into the hollow. That is where the fill used to be.

"Read it now," said Miles.

Anne looked at him.

"On the stones," said Miles. "Like your grandfather said."

So Anne walked out onto the dam. She stood in the middle of it. On the slumped part. The reeds stood on both sides. Her boots were on Roland's stones. She took the slip out of her sleeve. She unfolded it.

Her voice came out small at first. Then it got steady.

*"We went over the old dam at the mill pond. It carried them dry. It has carried wood since my grandfather's time. The dam stands sound. It is of stone, and broad as a cart."*

She stopped.

"Broad as a cart," said Kit. He paced it out, heel to toe. "It *is* broad as a cart."

"Forty paces," said Anne. "He says the wood came over it. It did."

Anne stood there on the old stones. The page was in her hand. She felt something new. She had never felt it in the library. The words were true. She had known they were true. Now she was standing on the true thing.



Then Miles began to work.

He walked the dam twice, end to end. He watched his own feet. He knelt down on it. To kneel is to go down on your knees. You get close, so you can see and touch.

He tapped the stones with the back of his hammer. One after another. A tap is a small light knock. You tap a thing to hear what it says. His father did it to iron in the forge. A good stone gives a hard flat note. A loose one sounds dead.

Miles tapped his way across the slump. On his knees. The others watched him and said nothing.

Then he sat back on his heels.

"It is not broken," he said. "It has only gone down. The two walls are standing. There is nothing under the middle of them. That is all."

"Can it be filled?" said Hugh.

"Yes." Miles was looking at the alders now. "Stone in first. There is a whole fallen garden wall at home. It is doing nothing. Brushwood between the stone to lock it. Not tipped in loose. Laid. Then more stone on top of that."

"Would it hold a horse?" said Anne.

"It would hold a horse led over quietly," said Miles. "Not a cart. Never a cart. The carts would have to stay." He stood up. "And I would want a rail down the open side."

A rail is a long pole. It is set on posts. It runs along the edge of a thing. You hold it so you do not go over the side.

Hugh looked out at the black water between the reeds. "Yes," he said. "A rail."

The sun stood high over them. Midday was well past.

Twenty-three people had to be at Thornbury by tomorrow evening. From this side of the marsh, the Thornbury lane was close. Two hours' walk. No more.

Miles looked at the slumped middle of the dam. He was still working it out in his head. He was not really talking to anybody.

"It can be done by dark," he said.

Then he heard himself.

He looked up. Gib was looking at him. Anne was looking at him. Hugh and Kit were looking at him. And every word was out in the air now. He could not get it back.

## Chapter Nine: A Day's Work by Dark

Lady Margaret went down to see it herself.

She would not say yes from the library. She walked down the mill lane in the heat. Her skirt was hooked up out of the mud. Sir Edmund came with her. So did Gib and Miles.

She went out onto the dam. She walked the whole forty paces. She stopped in the slumped middle. She stood there a long moment. Then she came back and looked at Miles.

"Say it again," she said. "All of it."

Miles said it again. Stone laid in first. Brushwood between the stone. More stone on top. A rail down the open side. No carts, ever. Horses led over, one at a time.

"And the carts?" said Lady Margaret.

"The carts stay," said Miles. "They can go round by the hill track."

"Rob will not be pleased."

"Rob is not pleased with the flood either," said Sir Edmund.

Lady Margaret looked at the dam a moment longer.

"Very well," she said. "But hear me, Miles Smith. I am not sending a soul over this. Not before *you* tell me it will carry. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, my lady."

He felt about nine feet tall. He also felt slightly sick.

Then the whole hill came down to the marsh.

There were twenty-three guests. There was the whole household. By two o'clock nearly all of them were there.

The stone came from the garden wall.

The kitchen garden wall had come down. It fell in the storm. Twenty paces of it, flat into the cabbages. They had all been sorry yesterday. Today it was

the best thing all week. They carried the stones down on hurdles. Two men at a time.

The brushwood came from the alders.

Brushwood is the small stuff. Thin branches. Cut boughs. Twiggy tops. It is no use for building. It is just what you want in a fill. Push brushwood in among the stones. It grips. It locks them. It stops the small stuff washing out.

Miles set Hugh and Kit to cutting it. They cut till their arms shook.

Then Rob came up the dam. He had three long boards on his shoulder.

"Planks," he said.

A plank is a long flat piece of sawn wood. There were good planks on those carts. They made the floor a cart stands on. Rob had cut and fitted them himself.

"For the rail," said Rob. "And for a way over the soft part."

Miles stared. "Those are your cart floors."

"Aye," said Rob.

"They will be spoiled."

"Aye," said Rob. He put them down. He went back for more.

Nobody had asked him. Nobody asked the others either. By three o'clock there were cart-planks in the works. And two spare cart shafts. And somebody's good travelling chest.

Dame Alys ran the children.

The three small ones could not lift stone. They could carry brushwood. A bundle at a time. They could fetch all day. Dame Alys sat on a flat rock. It was at the end of the dam. Her stick lay across her knees.

"Two more of the thin ones, please. To the *middle*. That's it. Now come back and drink some water. All three of you. Sit down first."

At four Bess came down the lane with the bread.

She had two baskets. Mabel had two more. The morning's grinding had made enough for two bakings. The second one was still warm. They gave it out on the bank of the marsh. Thirty-odd hot, thirsty, filthy people.

Mabel's promise had twenty-three pairs of hands in it.

And then, at half past four, it all went wrong.

Miles had made one choice that afternoon. He had told nobody. It was not a wicked choice. It was the choice of a boy watching the sun.

Laying stone by hand is slow. Tipping it in is fast.

To tip a thing is to turn it up. The load slides out. You tip a barrow. The stone goes in where it likes. It takes one minute instead of ten.

At the dam Miles had said the fill must be laid.

Then he had looked at the sun. He had looked at the slump. He had looked at the stone still waiting. And he had started tipping it in from the top.

He knew it was the quick way. He knew it as he did it.

The water found it at half past four.

There was a soft sound underneath. Then a long sucking one. The middle of the fill went down a foot. Brown water came up through it. Then out of the side of the dam. It carried gravel with it.

The fill washed out.

To wash out is what water does to loose ground. It takes it away, a bit at a time. Then all at once. It leaves a hole.

Miles was standing on it when it went. He went down to his waist in cold brown water.

Your waist is the middle of you. A belt goes round it.

He came up soaked to the waist. His arms were empty. Every soul on the dam had stopped. Every soul on the bank had stopped. Twenty-three guests and a whole castle stood there. They looked at the boy in the water.

This was the worst moment of Miles's life.

He knew what he wanted to do. He wanted to say the stone was bad. He wanted to say the water had come up. He wanted to say nothing at all. He wanted to start again quietly.

He climbed out. He stood on the stones. The water ran off him.

Then he said it out loud, in his own plain voice. The far end of the dam could hear him.

"I was wrong."

Nobody moved.

"I tipped it in," said Miles. "I said myself it had to be laid. Then I tipped it in to save an hour. That is why it went. It is my fault. Nobody else's. We must do it the other way."

He wiped his face with a wet arm.

"Stone laid across, one on the next. A wall lying down. Brushwood pushed in between. It is slower. It is the only thing that will hold."



Dame Alys spoke up from her rock. "Then we had better start."

And they started.

Sir Edmund said nothing at all.

He did not say well done. Praise is when somebody says out loud: you did well. Miles got no praise that day.

Sir Edmund walked past him at the water's edge. He put a hand on his wet shoulder. Then he went on carrying stone.

Miles found he could work six more hours.

They laid the fill the slow way. From five o'clock to the last light. Stone across. Brushwood between. Stone across. Anne kept the lines of carriers moving. Gib said almost nothing. He was always in the right place.

At eight Miles came off his knees. He set the rail on its posts. All along the open side.

Then they all stood back.

Gib walked over first. Slowly. In the middle. All forty paces.

Nothing moved.

Then Gib brought Puck. A pony is heavier than a man. Puck did not care for the reeds. He did care for Gib. He walked the dam from end to end. Then he stood on the far side and ate.

Then Puck again, with a full pack.

And Sir Roland's dam stood under the lot of it. It did not move at all.

The cheer went up off both banks. It startled every bird in the marsh. Miles sat down suddenly on a stone. Kit shouted himself hoarse. Hugh was laughing. Mabel was crying and pretending she was not.

And out of the evening sky came a black shape.

Nobody was looking up. They were all looking at the dam.

Dame Alys had a silver pin at her collar. A collar is the part that stands round your neck. A cloak has one. So has a dress. The pin was small and plain. It was worn bright. It had held her cloak all day.

Jack dropped. He took it neatly in his beak. He was up and away over the alders.

They watched him go. Over the marsh. Up the hill. Into the black window at the top.

They all laughed.

All except Dame Alys. Her hand had gone to her collar. It stayed there.

## Chapter Ten: Jack's Tower

Dame Alys said nothing about the pin. Not all the way up the hill.

That was the trouble. She was upset. She talked about the dam. She talked about Rob's planks. And every few minutes her hand went up to her collar. It found nothing there. It came down again.

Mabel saw it. Hugh saw it. Anne saw it.

"It is only a pin," said Dame Alys. "Please. You have all worked since noon. Sit down and eat."

Then she went and sat by the fire. She was very cheerful. Nobody believed a word of it.

So they told Lady Margaret. At once, in the kitchen.

Lady Margaret put down her cup.

"That bird," she said.

She had been losing silver pins for thirty years. Some of them came back. Some of them did not. She had never once been able to prove it. She had the face of a woman who has waited a long time. A fair chance, at last.

"Right," she said. "We are getting it back."

"I can climb," said Miles.

"You cannot climb that stair in the dark," said Sir Edmund. "The fourth step of every turn is worn hollow. And I am not opening that door at night."

"Then at first light," said Miles.

"No," said Hugh.

They all looked at him. Hugh went pink, but he kept going.

"If we go up, he will take it out of the window," he said. "He will not sit there and wait for us. He will carry it off. He will put it somewhere else. Then it is gone for good. He is not guarding it. He does not think it is his yet. Not nest treasure."

"How do you know that?" said Kit.

"Because of the spoon."

Hugh had watched Jack all last week. He had watched him from the mews window. It looks across at the north tower.

"He does not put a new thing away," said Hugh. "He plays with it. He sits on the sill in the morning. He turns it over. He drops it. He picks it up again. He did it with the tart-spoon for three days."

"On the sill," said Anne. "Outside."

"Outside," said Hugh. "In the first sun. He likes the sun on it."

Lady Margaret sat down slowly.

"Go on," she said.

"He does not keep things," said Hugh. "He takes the brightest thing he can see. That is all he does. So we do not take it off him." He looked round at them. "We give him a better one."

That is a trade. To trade is to give one thing and get another. No money. You have a thing. I have a thing. We swap.

"He is a bird," said Miles. "He will not trade."

"He does not have to know it is a trade," said Hugh.

They found the tin in Bess's back cupboard.

Tin is a metal. It is soft and pale and shiny. Kitchens are full of it. This was the lid of an old tin box. The box had lost its bottom years ago. The lid was bigger than a pin. It was much bigger than a spoon. And it was dull as a puddle.

Miles took it out to the forge shed. He polished it.

To polish a thing is to rub it bright. You rub, and rub, and rub some more. Miles used sand first. Then ash. Then a scrap of soft leather. He worked at it by candlelight for nearly an hour. Kit turned the candle for him.

He finished. You could not look at it.

"That is not a lid," said Mabel. "That is a small sun."

They set it out before dawn.

The well stands in the middle of the yard. It is under the great oak. Round the top is a low ring of stones. Flat ones. That is the well-head. The buckets stand there. Half the castle stops there to talk. And Jack took the silver spoon there. Last week.

The tower window looks straight down on it.

Hugh laid the tin on the flat stones. He turned it twice, to sit just right. Then he and Kit sat down against the oak. Ten paces off. They did not move again.

Being still is hard work. It is very hard work at eleven.

Still means not moving at all. Not shifting your feet. Not rubbing your nose. Not turning your head when a goat coughs. Hugh could do it. Hugh had sat an hour in the mews without moving. More times than he could count.

Kit had never done it in his life.

"How long?" Kit whispered, after four minutes.

"Until he comes."

Kit lasted eleven minutes. Then his foot went to sleep. He had to change it, very slowly. Hugh said nothing at all. That was worse than if he had.

After that Kit got the hang of it.

They sat there together. The sky went from grey to white to gold. The castle woke up behind them. Somewhere a door banged. Bramble came across the yard. He looked at the two of them. He decided they were furniture. He went away again.

And along the wall walk Lady Margaret supervised. At a careful distance.

To supervise is to watch over a thing. Other people do the work. You do not do the work. You make sure it goes properly. She had supervised a great deal. She had never enjoyed it as much as this.

She had a cup of hot milk. She had her second-best shawl. She had thirty years of lost pins behind her. She also had a very good view.

The sun came over the east wall. Twenty past four.

It came down the wall. A long slow line. It touched the oak. It touched the bucket. Then it touched the tin on the well-head. The tin lit up.

Up in the black window, a shadow moved.

Jack came out onto the sill.

He had the pin in his beak. He was doing exactly what Hugh had said. Sitting in the first sun with his new thing. Turning it. Putting it down. Picking it up.

Then he saw the tin.

Jack went very still himself.

He put his head on one side. He put it on the other side. He shuffled two steps along the sill. He considered.

To consider is to look at a thing and think. You think before you do anything. Jack considered that tin. A long half-minute. Twenty years of jackdaw in that tower. Nothing on the well-head had ever been as bright.

Then he dropped off the sill. He came down in three curves. He landed on the stones.

He walked up to the tin sideways. He always walked sideways.

He still had the pin in his beak.

A jackdaw carries one thing at a time. That is all he can do. Jack looked at the tin. He looked at his pin. Then he put the pin down on the flat stone. Quite tidily. Then he took hold of the tin.

Hugh did not move.



Jack got the tin up. It was heavy for him. He hopped twice. He went up past the oak. He went up the tower wall. And in at the black window with his new sun.

The pin lay on the well-head. In the sunshine.

Only then did Hugh get up.

Dame Alys came out into the yard. She was dressed for the road. She had been up since four. Hugh put the pin into her hand. He said nothing. Lady Margaret was already halfway down the steps. She was saying quite enough for both.

Dame Alys closed her fingers round it.

She stood a moment with her fist shut.

"Thank you," she said. "You will want to know something. Why an old woman makes such a work about a pin."

"You do not have to tell us," said Anne.

"It is not a jewel," said Dame Alys.

A jewel is a precious stone. Rings and crowns have jewels in them. This pin had no stone in it at all. It was plain silver, worn thin at the head. It was not worth a good hen.

"It was my mother's," said Dame Alys. "It is the only thing of hers I have."

Nobody spoke.

"And tomorrow," said Dame Alys. "At noon, in front of them all, I give it away."

## Chapter Eleven: The Old Dam Road

The little chapel bell went at five.

First light is the very beginning of the day. The sky is grey. It is getting whiter. The birds have started. The sun is not up yet.

Brightstone had been awake since first light. Packs were being tied. Bess was cutting bread for the road. Somebody was looking for a boot.

But at five, most of it stopped. For two minutes.

The chapel is a small stone room. It is by the great hall. It holds twenty people, if they do not mind their elbows. Sir Edmund went in. Dame Alys went in. So did Rob. So did four or five of the party. The four pages stood at the back.

"Keep them on the road today," said Sir Edmund. "And bring them to their own people safe."

That was all. It took less time than tying a pack.

Then they all went out into the grey morning. And down the hill.

The crossing took the whole morning. It was the best thing they had ever done.

There were twenty-three people. There were eleven horses.

Not one of them was ridden.

To lead a horse is to walk in front. You have the rein in your hand. The horse follows you. It goes where you go. It goes at your speed. On a good road you ride. On a bad one you get down and lead. Any stableman will tell you the same.

Gib went first with the first horse.

He walked out onto the dam. The rein hung loose. He did not look back once. The horse looked at the reeds. It looked at the black water. It looked at Gib's back, going steadily away. Then it went after him.

Forty paces. Then grass.

The whole bank cheered.

"One," said Anne.

She stood at the near end with her tablet. She counted them over. She wrote down every crossing. Nobody went onto that dam. Not till Anne said so. Nobody came off it without Anne writing it down.

Miles stood in the middle.

He stood there for four hours. He stood at the slumped part. It was the fill he had laid himself. His left hand lay flat on his own rail. He stayed for every single crossing.

He was not doing it to be seen.

He had said the thing would carry. Lady Margaret had made him say it out loud. If it moved, he wanted to be standing on it.

It did not move.

Hugh and Kit steadied.

To steady a horse is to walk beside its head. You keep it calm. You put a hand on its neck. You talk to it about nothing at all. You do not pull. A steady hand and a dull voice do it. They will get a nervous horse over almost anything.

Kit was good at it. Hugh was better.

The eleventh horse was the grey mare.

She came down to the water and stopped. She had stopped just so at the stable door. In the rain. Rob looked at Hugh. They all looked at Hugh.

Hugh did not pull her. He took the rein. He walked to the front. He stood where she could see him. Then he waited.

"Take your time," he said. "There is no hurry at all."

That was not quite true. The mare could not tell.

She came over the dam behind him. One foot at a time. The way an old lady comes down a stair. Miles stood at the middle. His hand was on the rail. His heart was going hard.

"Eleven," said Anne, and shut her tablet.



On the far side lay the Thornbury lane. Open and dry.

A lane is a small road between hedges. This one came up out of the marsh. It turned the shoulder of the hill. It went away east. Dry and green and ordinary. Two hours' walk. No water anywhere.

It was the dullest road they had ever seen. It was beautiful.

Then came the goodbyes.

Rob and his nephew came last. Rob shook hands with Miles. Man to man. "That's a good bit of work," he said. "You mind you tell your father I said so."

Kit came and stood in front of Hugh. He got very red.

Then he held something out.

It was a horse-brass. Brass is a hard yellow metal. It does not rust. People who love horses hang it on their harness. Small round pieces. This one had a moon on it, polished bright. It had hung on his uncle's lead horse. For as

long as Kit could remember. Rob had cut it off the strap that morning. With his own knife.

"For sitting still," said Kit.

Hugh took it. He turned it over twice. He could not think of a word to say.

"Come back at harvest," he said at last. "You could see the falcons."

"I will," said Kit.

Then Dame Alys stood in the lane. She gave Brightstone its thanks.

Thanks is what you say when somebody helps you. It is a small word. It is also, Anne thought, one of the biggest.

Dame Alys did not make a speech.

"You opened your gate to three-and-twenty wet strangers," she said. "You did not know where you would put us. Then you fed us out of an empty bin. Then you built us a road."

She looked along the line of them. Sir Edmund. Lady Margaret. Bess. Gib. Master Cole with ink on his fingers. The four pages, filthy to the elbow.

"I have kept a house," she said. "I know what all that cost you. And you never once let us see it costing."

"The gate opens," said Sir Edmund. "That is all."

"Yes," said Dame Alys. "I noticed."

Then she said, "I thank God for it." She said it plainly. That is how an old woman says a plain thing. She meant it exactly so.

She turned to Anne.

"You keep a book at this castle. So does my family. It is not two hundred years old. It is not so grand. But we write in it." She tapped the tablet under Anne's arm. "Brightstone is going in it tonight. And you will all be at the next one. That is not an invitation. That is a fact. I am eighty-one. I have no time to argue about it."

Then they went.

The four of them stood on the far bank. They watched. Twenty-three people and eleven horses went up the lane. The three small children waved. Then the hedge got in the way. Kit walked backwards a hundred paces.

Then the lane was empty.

They walked home over Sir Roland's dam. Nobody would ever call it the old dam again. From now on it was the dam road.

And the castle, when they got back, was quiet.

It was very quiet. The quietest thing they had ever heard.

There was nobody on the hall floor. No straw. There were no cloaks on the hooks. There were no small children under the kitchen table. There were no strange horses in the stable. Bramble came out into the empty yard. He sat down. He stared at them all. He wanted to know. Where had his people gone?

Mabel sat down on the well-head.

"I liked them," she said.

"So did I," said Miles.

Nobody had slept properly for two nights. Nobody could think of one thing to be done. It was the strangest feeling in the world.

It lasted about four minutes.

Then Lady Margaret's voice came out of the guest hall. It was a voice they had not heard before.

"Edmund," she called. "Edmund, come here. And bring the children."

They ran.

Lady Margaret was in the library doorway. Behind her the beds were half pulled apart. Two pallets had been dragged out from the wall. A shelf had come with them. It was the low shelf against the library wall. It had stood there for ever. Since before anybody could remember.

It stood a hand's width out from the stone. Behind it was a gap.

And in the gap, in the dark, lay a roll of parchment. Stiff and old.

Parchment is what people wrote on. Before there was paper. It is made from skin, scraped thin. It lasts. This roll was furred with grey dust.

It had been there a very long time.

## Chapter Twelve: What the Wall Kept

Nobody unrolled the parchment straight away.

That sounds strange. It was not. Lady Margaret took one look at the dusty roll. Then she said the sensible thing.

"It has waited a hundred years," she said. "It can wait till we have eaten."

So the roll was laid on the table. The shelf was pushed back. And the whole castle sat down to a late dinner. In a very empty hall.

Then they put Brightstone back together.

It took all afternoon. The strewn straw came up off the hall floor. Blankets went back into the chests. Every fire was raked out. Anne went round with her tablet. She made a list of what was broken. Things always are.

They found three things as they worked.

The first was Bramble.

He was asleep in the guest hall. He was on a shelf. He was curled in something soft and grey. It was somebody's best hat. It had been left behind. It now had a cat-shaped hollow.

"That is Rob's Sunday hat," said Miles.

"It is a cat basket now," said Mabel.

The second thing was in the garden.

Mabel had made a garland for the guests. A garland is a ring of flowers. And green leaves. You hang it on a door. Or carry it. Or lay it on a table at a feast. Mabel had made this one last night. It was for Dame Alys to carry.

In the morning rush it was left hanging. On the guest hall door.

Meg and Moll had found it there.

Goats do not think about weddings. Goats think about food. Mabel came round the corner. About a hand's length of garland was left. Meg had a marigold in her mouth.

Mabel stood still for a second.

Then she started to laugh. She had to sit down on the step. To do it properly.

"You are terrible," she told them. "You are the two worst goats in this shire. And I forgive you."

To forgive is to stop holding a wrong against somebody. You do not pretend it never happened. You say: that was wrong. It is over. We are still friends. It is one of the biggest things people do. Mabel was forgiving a goat. A goat with a marigold in its mouth.

The third thing was a buckle.

Anne found it in her list. In her own writing, from the second night. *Rob's man: strap buckle lost off the saddlebag.*

"Jack," said all four of them at once.

"He has the tin as well now," said Hugh.

"He has the tin," said Lady Margaret. "And the spoon. And a button. And half of everything else in this castle. That tower is richer than a market stall."

"We owe them a buckle," said Sir Edmund.

That was the end of it. Miles went down to his father's forge. That evening. Old Tom looked at the drawing. He grunted. He cut a new buckle. Out of good brass. It went into a bag with a note. It was ready for the carts next week.

Jack kept the old one. Up in his tower. He was very happy.

That evening Sir Edmund had them all into the hall.

Household and pages. Bess and Gib. Master Cole with his ink. It was the first time in three days. The hall held only its own people.

"I am going to do the reckoning," said Sir Edmund.

A reckoning is when you add it up. What a thing has cost you. Then you say the total. Sir Edmund did it standing up. In front of them all.

"The stores are empty," he said. "Not low. Empty. There is no meat. There is almost no cheese. The flour bin has one morning in it. We are buying from the shire till harvest."

Bess nodded once, grimly.

"The garden wall is down. Its stones are in a dam. Down at the old mill pond. We shall build that wall in the autumn. It will not build itself."

"No," said Miles.

"Half the hay took the storm. Then it took three days without turning. Some of it is spoiled."

Gib said nothing at all. That was Gib agreeing.

"We owe Rob a set of cart-planks. And a chest, and two shafts. We shall pay that back. In good wood, not old."

He stopped.

"And I would do it all again tomorrow," said Sir Edmund. "Because the gate opens. That is what this house is for. A castle that shuts its gate on a wet night is nothing. Only a heap of stone with a flag on it."

Nobody cheered. It was not that sort of speech.

Mabel put her chin on her hand. She thought about the empty flour bin. She found she did not mind.

Then Master Cole cleared his throat.

"If nobody objects," he said, "I should like to write this down."

They went into the library.

The Chronicle lay open. Master Cole sharpened a quill. He did it badly. Anne took it off him. She did it right. Then he wrote. The four of them stood round the table. They watched the ink go on.

He wrote the arrival, and the number. Two-and-twenty, then three-and-twenty.

He wrote the flour and the quern. And the hands on it.

He wrote the fallen elm. And the slipped bank. He wrote Sir Roland's forty-year-old page. And the old dam under the bramble.

He wrote that a boy of thirteen said it out loud. In front of the whole company. That he had been wrong.

Miles went scarlet and looked down.

Then Master Cole put the quill down.

"An entry wants a name," he said. "You four found it. You name it."

They looked at each other.

"The Dam," said Miles.

"The Bread," said Mabel.

"The Two-and-Twenty," said Hugh.

Anne said nothing for a moment. She was looking at the first line. The rain and the horn were there.

"The Night of the Guests," she said.

Master Cole wrote it at the top. In his best hand.

And then, at last, they unrolled the parchment.

To unroll is to open out a rolled-up thing. You do it slowly. The thing is old. Master Cole put a book on each corner. As it came open. Anne held the middle flat with both palms.

It was a map.

It was a map of the Brightstone lands. It was beautiful. There was the hill. There was the castle on it. Drawn small and neat. It had a tower at each corner. There was Appleton. There was the Combe. There was the mill pond, full of water. The dam lay across its neck.

"Older than the mill year," said Master Cole softly. "Look at the pond."

There was no name anywhere on it.

Every map in that library had a maker. A maker is the person who made a thing. Mapmakers are proud people. They put their name in the corner. Usually with a flourish and the year.

This one had nothing. No name. No year. No mark.

"Grandfather," said Anne. "Look at the garden."

The walled garden was drawn in little squares. Careful ones. Exactly where it still stood. And in the middle of it was a pool. A small round one. Three wavy lines came out of it.

Beside it was one word.

*Spring*.

A spring is a place. Water comes up out of the ground there. By itself. Not a well. You dig a well. Not a stream. A stream comes from somewhere else. A spring rises out of the earth. And keeps on rising.

The four of them looked at each other.

There was no spring in the walled garden.

There was no water in that garden. There never had been, in anybody's lifetime. All summer Mabel and Hugh had carried buckets. Up from the well, twice a day. The beans had drooped all summer. The ground had baked hard. The whole garden was thirsty.

"Master Cole," said Miles slowly. "Whose hand is this?"

Master Cole had been a chronicler fifty years. He knew every hand in that library. He knew Roland's sloping letters. He knew his own master's before that. He knew hands two hundred years older than either.

He bent over the map a long time.

Then he straightened up. He looked completely at a loss. None of them had ever seen that before.



“I have never seen this hand in my life,” he said.

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