

# Before the Dawn

## Chapter I

### A Royal Wedding

IT was a gay and animated scene upon which the sun looked down one bright cold day in January, 1382; and the little village of Charing, not far from the royal palace of Westminster, was crowded with a merry throng, who came through the fields of Holborn, or along the road by the river, all bent on the same errand—to see the wondrous plays and magnificent pageants, and join in the festivities that everyone was welcome to partake of on this, the wedding day of King Richard the Second.

Of course, the main topic of conversation was the bride—her beauty, accomplishments, and piety; and, foreigner though she was, and deeply as all foreigners were hated by the English as a nation, it seemed that she had already won for herself a place in the hearts of her people.

GAY: *light-hearted*

PIETY: *devotion to God*

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“This is a bright day for England, neighbor!” exclaimed an old man in a leather jerkin, whose brown hands proclaimed his work in the smithy.

His companion grunted, “It might have been, if brave Wat the Tyler had gained for us all he asked; but look ye, it is not for naught the conduits and fountains have been filled with wine and ale again and again by King Richard. But Englishmen will not always submit to be amused like children and slaves; they are beginning to think for themselves, and to feel that the chains gall, and—”

“Faith, neighbor, cease thy grumbling, for this day at least, when our good lord the king would have all men merry as himself,” interrupted his friend.

“Ha, merry, forsooth! He would have us drink of his wine because he knoweth that when the wine is in, the wit leaketh out, and he would fain keep us a nation of witless villeins, who dare not ask wherefore new taxes are imposed, or why the king should fix every man’s wage.”

“Nay, thou hast no cause to grumble at thy wages; thou hast thy full fourpence a day, like any master mason or carpenter; wherefore then, dost thou complain?”

“Because I would fain buy or rent a small plot of land, even as I would have been a yeoman, could I have tilled the soil and tended mine oxen without doing body-service for it to the lord of the land.”

“Then ’tis the body-service, and not the wages,

JERKIN: *short, sleeveless jacket*

GALL: *cause great irritation*

FAIN: *rather*

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thou art complaining of? Troth, I am somewhat of thy opinion in that matter.”

“If thou art any better than the hammer that thou wieldest thou must be of the same opinion; for are we not all of us in slavery? The men of the towns, doubtless, have more privileges than the villeins; but they cannot buy or sell at any fair or mart they please, and our wives may not wear an inch of Flemish broadcloth, and—”

“Nay, if thou art going to bring women and their whimsies about cloth into thy quarrel with the king, thou wilt never come to an end of thy complainings. We must be patient, neighbor; and I say again, this is a bright day for England.”

“When she is still a nation of slaves, and brave Wat lies in a dishonored grave?”

“I was not speaking of the sorry insurrection of last year, or even of the king, but of our good Queen Anne. ’Tis of her all men are talking, and many have cause to talk, too; for ’tis to her that many owe their lives, and that they are abroad this day instead of pining within prison walls. Didst thou not hear the story of how she went on her knees before the king to beg for the pardon of all rebels; and the king in his great love could in no wise refuse her request?”

“Ah, but, ’tis said, too, she is no friend to Holy Church, but favoereth these Lollards, like the queen mother and the Duke of Lancaster,” rejoined the mason.

VILLEINS: *farmers who owe service to a lord*

YEOMAN: *free farmer*

INSURRECTION: *revolt*

“Well, I have naught to say against the Lollards, they are a peaceable people, honest and—”

“Peaceable!” exclaimed the other, “when they rail against Holy Church, and say that men should read the Scriptures for themselves, and judge what is done by the Church!”

“And wherefore should we not judge for ourselves in the matter of religion, as in other things?” asked a man in a bright pink tabard and a broad white collar.

The mason stared, wondering whether he was the herald or pursuivant of some great lord, who would report all he had heard to his master; but he soon saw that the man wore no armor beneath the short gay tunic, neither was it embroidered with coat of arms or ensign of any sort, and so the gossips breathed more freely.

After a few minutes’ silence the man repeated his question, and this time in a louder tone, as though he wished all the crowd to hear it: “Wherefore, I say, should not a man judge for himself in matters of religion? Are we not as able to do this as an idle, ignorant priest, or a lazy, begging friar? We would not heed them in matters of business or daily work, and what know they more than we—at least, more than we can learn if we will?”

Many in the crowd looked shocked, while not a few applauded the bold speech; but a nun who stood near, eager as any to see the fun, and

TABARD: *tunic*

PURSUIVANT: *assistant herald*

GOSSIPS: *close friends*

SERGE: *a heavy fabric*

displaying a bright ribbon of gold tissue over her black serge dress, turned her angry face toward the man, and said, "Thou art over-bold to teach thy Lollardism to this crowd; but the Church will crush the evil heresy even yet." And then she turned away from his contaminating presence, while a general move in the crowd, and a loud shout from those in front, attracted everybody's attention to what was going on.

"The fountains are pouring forth right goodly drinks!" exclaimed one.

"Ha, ha! here is wine and ale for all comers; every man can be his own drawer, and none say him nay!" shouted another voice in the crowd.

Of course, everyone was eager to press forward to the fountains just set flowing with strong ale and wine, and there was a good deal of pushing and screaming; but on the whole the crowd was very good-tempered, and as they drew nearer the palace gates there were other attractions provided besides the wine and ale fountains. There were minstrels and mummeries and mountebanks, besides a grand tournament; and in the fields of the nunnery close by there were mystery plays, and games of various kinds going on, in which all were welcome to join.

It was a merry, motley throng that was gathered round the scattered buildings of the convent and the church close by, where a "glutton mass" had

MUMMERIES: *masked frolickers*

MOUNTEBANKS: *sellers of quack medicines*

MYSTERY PLAYS: *religious plays*

GLUTTON MASS: *church feast*

been provided for the refectation of the hungry, while from the branches of the bare, leafless trees that enclosed this rich domain of the Church floated pennons and banners of every color and device.

Beneath the trees walked parties of nuns chatting gaily to some young knight or noble lord, for as yet the rule was not imperative upon nuns to keep within the walls of the convent; and, although this was their home—or, rather, abiding-place, for the sweet, sacred name of “home” is almost desecrated by being applied to such institutions—they still mingled rather freely with the world. Monks, and noble ladies in their new-fashioned high-peaked headdresses, and courtiers in parti-colored dresses and shoes a yard long, all mingled with the crowd, while the gay and glittering trappings of the horses lent an additional splendor to the moving panorama.

Our two old friends, the blacksmith and mason, had been separated for a time, and when they met again the first had taken an old lady under his protection. By her dress it was easy to see that she was a foreigner, and the rough boys and ’prentice lads, bent upon extracting fun from everything that came in their way, had teased the old lady sadly until the blacksmith had interfered on her behalf.

She thanked him in broken English, and said she would go home again, but that her little grandson would be disappointed if she failed to tell him

REFECTION: *refreshment*

PENNSONS: *pennants*

PARTI-COLORED: *multi-colored*

all about the shows and pageants when she went back.

“Then thou shalt see them all, good dame, if a stout arm can aid thee,” said the blacksmith.

“And our little Conrad shall himself thank thee for thy kindness to an old woman,” she replied, as she accepted his proffered help to reach a good position for seeing all that was going on.

“Tut, tut; but wherefore did not thy Conrad come to take care of thee himself?” asked the blacksmith.

The old woman smiled for a moment, but it was quickly followed by a sigh as she said: “Our Conrad is a child; but if he were not he would not be able to come here like other boys, for he is sorely crippled, and cannot even stand upright. He will never learn the use of his feet, I fear!” she added.

“Poor little lad! ’twere well if his journey of life were a short one, an it be with so much suffering. I will come and see him, to help thy memory about this day’s gay doings, if it will please the child.”

“He will be right pleased to talk to thee. We lodge in the house of one Hugh Ryland, in the lane that goeth toward Holborn Fields, hard by the Temple-house.”

“What, the cottage that stands near the gate of my Lord of Lincoln’s Inn?”

“Yes, that is Hugh Ryland’s cottage; and our Conrad will be right glad to see thee, for thou wilt

PROFFERED: *offered*

HARD BY: *near*

be able to tell him more than I can of the shows and mummeries.”

“I know the spot, and will come ere long and—” but his speech was here interrupted by his former companion, the mason, being pushed against his elbow; and the next minute another small party of friends had edged their way to his side.

“Lollards!” whispered the mason, looking keenly at the newcomers.

But the blacksmith did not heed the whisper. “’Tis pleasant to see the face of a friend in a crowd like this,” he said, as he welcomed them to the little sheltered nook he had discovered.

“’Tis a brave sight,” said one, looking round.

“Ha, and ’tis a brave day for England,” said the blacksmith, heartily.

“’Tis true, then, that the new queen will show favor to our reformer, Master John of Wycliffe,” said one, in a lower tone.

“All men think so, for ’tis well-known that she is a diligent reader of the Holy Scriptures, and favored some in Bohemia who hold views like Master Wycliffe’s.”

But cautiously as the blacksmith had spoken, his new acquaintance had heard his words, and she drew away from him as far as possible, while a look of hatred and disgust was darted toward the small party of friends who had been called Lollards. She had only just learned the meaning of that word; but to learn it was to hate it with a more rancorous

ERELONG: *before long*

RANCOROUS: *bitter*

hatred than even the bishops and clergy felt against Wycliffe himself.

“I thought we had left the evil thing behind us—that it was far, far away from this England, and that, coming here, I might save the child from the pestilent heresy of his—” and there the old woman stopped, and, forgetting where she was, she covered her face with her hands, and groaned as if in bodily pain.

“Faith, and art thou ill, good dame?” asked the blacksmith, who had heard the woman moan.

“Nay, nay, ’tis naught; attend to thy friends, and heed not me,” said the old woman, half-angrily, and trying to push her way through the crowd to get away from such objectionable company.

“The crowd is too much for thee, I trow, good dame,” said one of the men; “I fear thou wilt not be able to reach home just yet.”

“I will e’en try,” said the woman, shortly; for she was determined to get rid of her present company, though she fell a victim to the ’prentices’ persecution in consequence.

But the crowd was too great, and too eager to maintain its present position, to allow her to push her way through, so she was reluctantly compelled to accept the help of the blacksmith’s stalwart arm again; and even with him to champion her, it was some time before she could reach a spot where she could, without rudeness, tell him that she no longer needed his help. By that time his kindness had

PESTILENT HERESY: *harmful and false beliefs*

TROW: *think*

STALWART: *strong, sturdy*

so far won upon her that, in spite of the strong suspicion she still entertained of his leaning toward Lollardism, she could not but thank him, and say Conrad would be glad to see him, although she hoped that he would forget her, and all she had told him about her grandson, before the next day.

It was useless for her to think of getting more than a passing glimpse at the shows now that she was left alone; and, wearied with the pushing, squeezing, and all the din of music, shouting, and laughter, she was glad to turn her steps toward the quiet lane where she lived.