

# Dearer Than Life

## Chapter I

### Middleton Hall

TOWARDS the close of a warm day in the summer of 1366, a party of travelers were winding their way through the wooded slopes of Oxfordshire. They had left the chalky downs of the Chiltern Hills behind them, and now their road lay through woods of oak and beech, and the horses had to step warily, for the ruddy weed-grown bridle path was known to have several dangerous bits of bog and morass here and there; and although it was the high road between London and Oxford, these were not the greatest dangers that beset a traveler who was bold enough to go so far from home.

As the horses and sumpter mules stepped cautiously along the ruddy road, master and servants kept a sharp eye on the trees and undergrowth

DOWNNS: *open, rolling hills*

MORASS: *marsh*

SUMPTER: *pack*

of bracken, for thieves and bandits found a convenient shelter in these woods, and it was not for display alone that Sir Hugh Middleton and his son traveled with such a retinue of servants. The thrushes and linnets flew out before them, and they caught occasional glimpses of the wild duck and moor-hen, but nothing more formidable than a few wild swine dashed across their path, and threatened to upset the order of the cavalcade. Nevertheless it was a great relief to reach the clearing on the edge of the forest, for now the dangers of their long weary journey from London were over, and not until King Edward summoned his next parliament would these have to be encountered again.

At the stone cross that marked the boundary of the village and of the forest clearing stood a palfrey with a young lady mounted upon it, and beside her was a lad, evidently her brother, from the strong likeness between them. There were the same dreamy blue eyes and bright golden hair; the lad's tresses falling in long careless ringlets on his shoulders, the lady's gathered back under the band that crossed her forehead and passed under her chin. A sweet, thoughtful, though somewhat anxious face looked out from the broad-brimmed summer hat; but at the first glimpse of the travelers a bright smile dispelled the anxiety, and the palfrey was at once urged into a gentle trot to meet them.

RETINUE: *procession*

PALFREY: *a saddle horse other than a war horse*

PLENISHING: *supply*

“Maud, Maud, thou art beyond the stone cross,” cried her father in some dismay, as he recognized his daughter. Close as they were to the village, they were scarcely beyond the reach of danger, if an extra strong party of bandits should spring upon them from the wood.

The young lady reined in her palfrey, and waited until her father’s tired horse should reach them; and then followed embraces and congratulations, until Sir Hugh suddenly inquired, “Didst thou get my letter, Maud, that I sent by the peddler going to Oxenforde Fair?”

“Yes. My grandam thought someone might bring tidings of thee, and so she sent Roger and Diggory with the packhorse, to buy a plenishing of salt; but a sore mischance happened while they were gone.”

“Nay, nay, Maud,” whispered her brother, “ill news will keep; vex not my father ere he hath rested.”

But the knight had overheard the whisper, and said quickly, “Now, tell thy news, Maud. Is little Madge well?” he added, with a slight quaver in his voice.

“Yes, yes, Father, Madge is well,” said Maud, reassuringly; “’tis only another story about the begging friars.”

“They have been selling their pardons in the village again, I trow, and Father Ambrose is wroth that his penances are despised, and absolution is

TROW: *suppose*

PENANCES: *voluntary punishments for sins committed*

ABSOLUTION: *formal forgiveness of sin*

got at a cheaper rate than he can sell it;" and the gentleman laughed.

"Father Ambrose is wroth enough," said the lad, hoping by this means to put an end to the discussion, until his father should reach home, and hear the whole story in quiet.

But Maud was too full of the news she had to tell, and hastily added, "Oh, it is much worse than Father Ambrose being angry."

"Well, tell us all about it," said her elder brother, who was riding beside his father, but who had hitherto held his peace, as became a traveler returning from so hazardous a journey, and to whom village news was of small consequence now.

Maud looked from her father to her brother, and seeing both were impatient to hear her story, she dashed into it. "The friar sold old Gillian a bone—a Jew's sheep bone, he said it was—which, if thrown into the well where the cattle drink, they will never ail aught again."

"And the witless old woman paid him a good round sum for it, I doubt not," said Sir Hugh, with a smile.

"Yes, he persuaded her to give him a mark for it; but the worst was, it was her son Roger's money, for she had none of her own, and Roger had saved this to rent the corner croft, which you had promised he should have. Well, when he heard where the money had gone, he made such a rabble and stir

CORNER CROFT: *a small plot of land*

MANCIPLE: *an official*

BY THE HOLY ROOD: *by the cross; used as an oath*

BROOK: *stand for, tolerate*

about it, that the manciple of the monastery heard about it, and accused Roger as well as Gillian of encouraging the friars to come about the village selling false pardons, and so, to punish him, they have begun to take in the corner croft."

"Take in the corner croft!" exclaimed her brother, while her father, in his surprise and anger, dashed the rowel of his spurs into the horse's flanks, without much regard to the poor weary beast, as he exclaimed, "By the holy rood, I will not brook this insult!"

"The prior hath long wanted that corner croft, my father," said Harry, the elder son.

"Aye, and he hath taken this as an excuse for seizing it; but, by my halidame, it shall never be joined to the monastery lands. Lend me thine horse, Stephen, lad, and I will ride to the croft now, and beat down the fence they have put up."

"Nay, my father, they have but marked out the place for the posts to be driven, and cut down part of the monastery hedge, that it may march the better with it," said Maud, quickly.

"Hugh Middleton's land shall never be seized by a pack of fat, hooded crows while he has a strong right arm to defend it;" and mounting his son's horse, which was far less weary than his own jaded beast, he galloped on, leaving the rest of the party to follow at leisure.

Maud looked from one brother to the other in

PRIOR: *head of the monastery*

BY MY HALIDAME: *by that which is holy; used as an oath*

MARCH: *border*

JADED: *worn out*

some dismay, as the three went along in silence. "What will my father do, think you?" she asked.

"Give the monks a sound rating, and perchance the knaves who are at work a taste of his good whip," said Harry, with a laugh.

"And bring upon us a lawsuit that will eat up every rood of land before it is over," said Stephen, somewhat ruefully.

Harry looked more sober as he thought of this contingency. Certainly it was possible, nay, even probable, for there was nothing that a convent of monks loved better than a lawsuit by which something was to be gained for the honor or profit of the house to which they were attached.

Now, the monastery had long desired to possess this little corner croft, and every monk in the establishment would, if possible, fight tooth and nail rather than give it up, now that it had once been claimed, although the pretext was a slender one.

So the brothers and sisters may be forgiven for looking anxious and concerned; even Maud, who was the youngest, was old enough to understand that it was no light matter to be at feud with the neighboring monastery, to say nothing of the fact that their uncle was one of these monks, and would be sure to side with his brethren of the monastery—ah! and be upheld in it too by their grandam, who ruled over them, and would be sure to make them feel her displeasure. So they rode through the village, each lost in thought, and scarcely

RATING: *rebuke*

KNAVES: *male servants*

ROOD OF LAND: *a quarter acre*



Sir Hugh on His Way to the Corner Croft





noticing the greetings of the villagers, who turned out to welcome the travelers.

As they rode up through the courtyard of the Hall, a stately old lady appeared at the door, and asked in an imperious tone for Sir Hugh.

“He hath gone to the corner croft, I doubt not,” said Harry, springing from his horse, and bending before the old lady, as he took her hand to kiss it dutifully.

“And wherefore hath he gone thither?” she demanded, raising her head out of the ample folds of her gorget, and casting a searching look at Maud.

The young lady dropped her eyes, for she knew she had offended her grandam grievously by laying aside the cumbrous head- and neck-gear known as the gorget, and adopting the newer fashion of a band of Flemish ribbon across her forehead and under her chin. Such worldly frivolities as a fashion in headgear changing every few years, was unheard of in her young days; and the old lady protested against the vanity of the new fashion by wearing her gorget higher than ever, so as almost to cover her ears and mouth as well as her chin. But, in addition to this, Maud knew that her grandam wished to give her own version of the appropriation of the corner croft by the prior of St. Anselm’s; and although it would be difficult to convince her son that this was anything but unjust, still the old lady believed she could make

IMPERIOUS: *haughty, commanding*

GORGET: *a cloth covering for the neck*

CUMBROUS: *bulky*

him acquiesce quietly—or with only a little grumbling—in this arrangement, if she talked to him first about it; but if he had heard Maud’s account of the transaction, there was no telling what might be the end of the matter. So she said, in a sharper tone, addressing her granddaughter, “Wherefore hath thy father gone in such hot haste to the corner croft?”

“I have told him about it, Grandam,” said Maud, in a subdued tone.

“And wherefore didst not thou bridle her tongue?” she said, turning quickly upon Stephen. “Did I not tell thee but yesterday that we must proceed warily in letting thy father know of this matter? and now this girl’s witless tongue hath spoilt it all. Go to thy chamber!” she commanded, turning again to the young lady.

Maud slowly descended from her palfrey, wishing now that she had followed her father at once, to see what was going on at the corner croft, instead of coming home with her brothers first. But, much as she wished to go on to this part of the home farm, no thought of questioning her grandam’s command ever crossed her mind. With a silent, regretful pat on her palfrey’s neck, she resigned him to the servant who came to lead him away, and passed through the great hall, where her brothers stood playing with their numerous dogs, and went up to her chamber.

ACQUIESCE: *agree, yield*

GRANGE: *farmhouse*

DONJONS: *inner towers or keeps*

COMMODIOUS: *spacious*

Middleton Hall was no bad emblem of the times of which we write, combining as it did something of the old Saxon grange with the later Norman castle, fitly typifying the blending of the two estranged races that Edward the Third's long and costly French wars had done so much to bring about. Brothers in arms, Saxon and Norman forgot their mutual jealousies, and remembered only that they were English, fighting against a common enemy; and so, when times of peace returned, they could settle down together; and the gloomy donjons of the Norman castle were abandoned, and dwellings were built more comfortable and commodious, with large windows instead of mere slits in the masonry. Middleton Hall was one of the first of these mansions, for Sir Hugh was thoroughly abreast of the times in which he lived, and, having inherited both Saxon and Norman blood from his ancestors, he had gladly quitted the old castle for the more commodious house he had built for himself near it, and had sunk the proud Norman baron in the more genial Saxon franklin; or rather, the two had been combined in Sir Hugh Middleton, as it was in many another English gentleman and sturdy yeoman.

And now the strength that had been worse than wasted in internecine quarrels was being roused against a foe that had grown to leviathan

FRANKLIN: *a medieval English landowner of free birth*

YEOMAN: *a farmer who owned his own land*

INTERNECINE: *internal*

LEVIATHAN: *enormous*

proportions. Ecclesiastical power threatened to dominate king, lords, and commons, not to mention the supremacy it claimed over the individual souls of men. King John had consented to hold the crown of England as a fief of Rome, and in token of his submission had paid a yearly tribute of seven hundred marks, with three hundred more for Ireland; and this tribute, with some few intermissions, had been paid by his successors, until Edward the Third attained his majority, when it again lapsed, and little was heard of it for thirty-three years. But now Pope Urban had sent to demand the payment of this year's tribute, and all the arrears since the king's majority.

Had His Holiness possessed but a little common sense instead of the boasted infallible wisdom, he would have known enough of the present temper of England to let well alone, and not arouse public attention to the power that was stifling the liberties of the country, and was at the same time an enormous drain upon her resources.

The demand for the payment of this tribute had roused all the fiery independence of the king and his parliament; and Sir Hugh Middleton had returned from attending the meeting of parliament, thoroughly determined to resist all ecclesiastical claims that might be made upon him; so it may be imagined in what temper he received his daughter's story of monastic aggression upon his

ECCLESIASTICAL: *church*

FIEF: *territory*

MAJORITY: *the age at which he could legally rule as king*

ARREARS: *unpaid tribute from previous years*

paternal acres. His proud Norman blood instantly made itself felt, and was not likely to be speedily cooled, with the Saxon obstinacy and tenacity of purpose to back it up; and Dame Middleton, his mother, watched for his return with no small anxiety.

She knew nothing of the larger question that was exercising the minds of statesmen and the wisest in the land; but she knew enough of her son to believe that whatever he might do about the corner croft in his anger today, would be followed up by the cooler steps taken tomorrow; while the monks would be equally tenacious, and only too ready to rush into the costly luxury of a lawsuit. So while Maud dressed herself in a new white linen dress to greet her father's homecoming, his mother awaited him in the great hall, more than usually anxious over his prolonged absence.

INFALLIBLE: *unable to make an error*

MONASTIC: *the monastery's*

PATERNAL ACRES: *inherited lands*

TENACITY: *stubbornness*