

THESE LATTER DAYS

Chapter I

I will try to be brief in the relation of my early years. They form a tale that will give neither entertainment nor edification, the greater part of which God in His mercy has seen fit to make dim in my memory. It was a different world, one from which I was saved and taken away by unforeseen agencies and in this I am sure the hand of Providence was at work. I know the main facts and chronology of my childhood and will set these out as forthrightly as possible. Actual remembrances come back less assuredly, filling me with the cold of infantile fears but without definite knowledge of its cause, or making me wonder whether they are memories of real events, or mere fancies built up as time has gone on. Whatever the exact truth, I am thankful that they come to me now as echoes of a world long disappeared, as lamentable tragedies that might have involved only a stranger.

From my experience I know that a new life is open to men. In my own way, I am witness to the power of the Lord in the raising up or the casting down of mortals. One man might start his life as God's Prince, holding sovereignty, and end it having nothing but a brief rent on the executioner's block. Another man might set out upon his way surrounded by ignorance and hopelessness, yet win through to his seat, or at least the prospect of it, amongst the Saints. Do we gain, or lose, anything? God disposes, so it is said: giving and taking away; and some few of us will wrestle in our consciences to extract the meaning and lessons from His gifts and His demands.

As far as facts are concerned, I was born in the second year of King James' reign near the hamlet of Caldbeck in County Cumberland. My father, John Fisher, was a man of no great means and a sore trial to my sisters and brothers as much as to my poor mother. He was a taciturn man, unused to speaking or emotion, unless he drank heavily which he did sometimes, which is to say, all too frequently. Although the event was before my time, I often heard how he had been forced out of his good land at Egremont by the old Lord Westmoreland and how they had been evicted with no reimbursement of fines and with a crop in the ground. With my sister Elizabeth two years old, and my brother Joseph a babe in arms, they had trudged to his brother's farm at Wigton where they found a welcome only slightly less cool than the autumn squalls through which they had walked, until they settled on some poor and debateable ground up towards Caldbeck Fells, away from roads and on a hillside so unpromising that no man cared sufficiently about its ownership to shake them off. There they stayed, a squatting or heather family, in a shack my father built with stones from the ground and timber hauled from Wigton, and help from his few kinsmen, and it was there that I was born, one year later, and two weeks before the death of their son Joseph from the smallpox.

Even such a short recital of the circumstances of my coming into this sorry and wonderful world contains two points which have, ever since, impelled me onwards and sustained me, causing me much grief yet showing me how thorough is God's design. One of these points is the malignant influence of the popish Westmoreland and his brood, which affected me before I was even born through their avarice and the impoverishment of my family; which influence and its unexpected effects will be revealed in due time. The second point is the sturdiness and strength with which I have been blessed, securing me at such an early age against the violence of the pox. Even in these more enlightened days or in families of comfortable living, it is an uncommon thing for a new-born to survive it; how much more so, in a wet and windy shack where my father and mother sought unsuccessfully to find ease against the harshness of the land and respite from the sharpness of hunger.

My first impressions of this life were such that had I not been an innocent baby, full of acceptance, I would have lamented the hour of my birth and perhaps tried to end my days before they had properly begun, as people have been known to do when despair conquers all, even the

most basic christian ordinances. I remember a night of terror when our biggin was full of screaming and noise, frightening even the sleepy milk cow at the animals' end of the house. My father seemed to have turned into a demon, against which the only shield my sister and I had was our mother, who intervened to her great hurt. At length she ran from the biggin with us and a thin threaded blanket, and we spent a cold sobbing night huddled together in the darkness under oaks down by the stream. And so it often was, when he had money from his labour or from selling the soft soap that he and my mother made to the fullers in Keswick, he would spend a portion of it at the ale-house in Caldbeck, and much good it did except to inflame his anger at all the disappointed hopes and setbacks he had been dealt, which anger he would mindlessly vent on his family after the landlord of the ale-house had tired of his blasphemies and threats. More than once he spent the night in the stocks at Wigton, where there was no lock-up for the drunkards but a sure aid to sobriety in the exposed green where the wind from the hills would quickly chase away the heaviest intoxication.

From these earliest years I was painfully taught the lesson that felicity and attachments of love on this earth are fleeting things, temporary reliefs from the harshness of life, at best; at worst, distractions from the real, permanent place of consolation that God keeps for his children and that we must set our faces towards. As I grew into young boyhood, my sister Elizabeth, herself a stripling, took the care of me and although I do not remember it in any clarity I still feel across the gulf of years the emotion of comfort and closeness which I had from her. Times when we had leisure and full bellies were spent with her down by the cool cleanness of the stream and the woods, or on the warm hillside of the fells above our bothy when summer invested the hills; times of hard work were made lighter by her help and the songs we would sing together as she taught me to lay out the peats my father dug, or where we spent the long days as hirelings reaping in the fields from which I remember sights and smells of the green sea, far away to the west. When my younger brother, little John, had just begun to crawl amongst the bracken and ashes of the biggin, Elizabeth was taken away from me by drowning in a summer flood in that stream which always had seemed so friendly and thenceforward there was a coldness and hollowness to the world that took many years to be properly mended.

By the time I was in my tenth or eleventh years there were two more babies, one of whom had died unmourned and unnamed on a freezing hungry winter night shortly after my mother had borne her; the next one, Margaret, being a crying and sickly child who struggled noisily through her first years in spite of lacking nourishment, warmth or love. As I became older and more perceptive, it seemed that my father grew more sullen and aggrieved, whilst my mother's eyes seemed to slowly lose the vitality I had remembered seeing there, leaving her as a mechanical sort of person who sang and whistled less and less often. I was forced to go with my father wherever he went for hiring, and frequently was obliged to put myself out for work when my father was not inclined, to get some pennies and shillings to put by for bigg, rye, eggs, even pork and beef if I could afford though necessity and my father's prompting had made me an accomplished chicken thief and poacher from an early age.

There was no time for idleness, and the only learning I had was the hard learning of work, so that by the time other boys might have been sent off to prentice, I was already a handy labourer in the fields and at the shearing and dipping of the fell sheep, and when winter began to come on I would walk miles in my rags and bare feet to sell the rushlights we made, or to gather bracken and firewood, for the potash or the cooking fire: anything to have more pennies to buy the food our poor soil could not provide or to buy warmer clothes for the little ones. Yet this must not be taken as

merely a catalogue of complaints, for we were neither worse nor better off than many other families whom circumstance and unchristian landlords had cheated out of a tolerable life; no worse off indeed than thousands still in the north, or in the harsher lands of Scotland and Ireland, who even now know, as I did, the brevity of ease and pleasure in summer and plenty, but equally the dread and calamity of bad harvests, high prices and foul winters when there is little food and no succour.

There was no help from the Parish: I doubt whether my father would have gone to them in any event. In times of famine the Parish would have been of no assistance because of the sheer numbers suffering and dying, so it would have been futile to approach them; in other times we would get by without help or hindrance; looking neither for aid in times of our trouble nor expecting interference from others; a family without masters but without any protection also and it was this that meant our downfall. I knew nothing of the Gospel, and the land was so difficult and remote that there was never any serious attempt to force us into kirk attendance, the kirk being several miles distant and that an unresided one where the incumbent rarely appeared and to which we only had recourse when my parents knew there would be Sunday sports on. The tithes were farmed out to a brother of Westmoreland but to the best of my knowledge they never had anything from us; our poverty was apparent to all.

Other problems faced us, the main recurrent one being enmity between my father and the farmer of the steading further away down the valley nearer Caldbeck, a man called Amos Sackthwaite who was a copyholder under Westmoreland, and who objected both to our presence and our crossing and re-crossing his land. In fact, almost anything we did was a source of annoyance to Sackthwaite and he would take delight in setting his dogs upon us if he spotted any of us abroad. I doubt not that this was entirely unjustified, since my father was no compromising man and sometimes took liberties, such as hiring out all the sheltered fields to the Scottish drover-men and their herds when they came down to Rosley for the autumn markets, whether or not he had any right to take rent from them, and often being careless about where he went fishing for the salmon or running our dogs out for the rabbit. For many years this enmity never progressed beyond harsh words. The two of them were cousins, but the only things they had in common were their kinsmen, some of whom were settled around Wigton and Cockermouth and would from time to time appear in our valley to encourage them to the ways of mutual toleration.

In spite of all this, there abide with me still a few snatches of pleasant memory, as there are long moments of sunlight in glory between the most inclement of weathers which, while they last, will almost convince that life on earth is a thing good and desirable in itself and not merely a passage through a strange land in which we are hugged in by His jealousy. I remember in the winter, on the Christmas-Time when we would always have a brave fire and eat well for the day, whatever the weather and whatever dearth might face us the morrow; many candles illuminated the rough inside of our biggin, and we would be warm inside in spite of the wind and sleet hammering on the lattices over the window and through the thatch, comfortable in our fatigue, lulled by the rhythm of mother's spinning wheel. Or in spring, sitting on the fells in bright breezy weather, where my father would break off from his graving peat-turves to rest his cramped fingers, and we would forget work for hours at a stretch whilst he gave me lessons in playing tunes upon the elbow-pipes; in summer in the barley and corn fields around Kirkbride or Arlosh where we worked for journey hire in the hay-making and reaping; myself and Little John following the reapers with their quick scythes, gleaning for as many hours as they cut, resting in the heat of the mid-day with bread, cheese, small beer and spring water that the farmers' wives brought out on a cart.

At the beginning of the harvest and towards its end, when spirits were as yet undampened by toil, or had become lifted by knowing that the days of back-breaking labour would soon be done, there would be singing at the close of day in the barns or outhouses where all we stranger workers

gathered, and it was there that we met with many Irishmen who came over for the reaping, some of whose English was scarce sufficient to explain their names or state their price for hire. Gaelic and Papist though they might have been, I took delight in their strange lilting tongue and the beauty of the music they played on their pipes and fiddles; in the naivety of my hearing it seemed that even the most battered man amongst them could play a tune fit for angels when the flute or whistle was passed to him. The hours were too short, the work too hard for me to learn more than a handful of the airs and dances they carried within them.

In the autumn, as winds cut steadily deeper, the Scots would come down, hill-people who cared nothing for Man nor God, but only for their herds that they brought, to Rosley or other markets of the county. My father would always visit the market, to see the Scots and offer them grazing on the fell. The drovers came like a blast of wind even wilder than the northerlies which blew their long beards and plaids, men old before their time from a life on the mountains and moors, besides which our own hardships seemed trifling. I have memories of them at the market ale-house, getting drunk before they sold their kine so that they would have little money to lose or gamble away; of them complaining in broken English about the weakness of the beer; falling silent and pensive when one of them began to play on his bag-pipes, a sweet and simple yet aching melody which, one of them told me, was a lament for their old chieftain, and of them as they came over the fells to our biggin, rough red-haired men, bareback on shaggy ponies with open swords stuck through their belts.

Hard though these early years were, they were almost carefree when set against the vicissitudes that were being prepared for me. I have already mentioned the Lord Westmoreland and I will shortly relate how he was instrumental in destroying my poor family. The only time I saw the old Lord was when I was walking from my father's brother's house in Wigton on a wet blowy April afternoon, having spent a couple of days there helping him with the harrowing of his fields. My father and I were walking on the higher ground to keep away from the cold mire and muck of the road, in which a man might sink to his thighs, and saw a coach and four stuck in a hole, one coachman ineffectually putting his shoulder to the back of the vehicle, his fellow at the front giving the horses frequent and vicious lash. Someone leaned out of the coach window and called over to us.

"Ho! Come down! Come down, you men!"

"Let us see what ails them," my father said to me, and we ambled over to the coach. A wizened man with blackened beard and moustachios peered out at us from the carriage window.

"You two seem strong rogues," he declared. "Go to the back. Help my fool of a servant to push us out."

"It is hard pushing with three behind and five inside," my father replied as he stood up on the step and poked his head into the coach. "Indeed, I have better respect for my guts than to burst them while others sit in comfort. But if you gentlefolk would like to step out, we will gladly help."

I heard various noises of complaint within the coach, concerning country roads and country boors, but at length they all alighted, five people as splendidly coloured in their cloaks and doublets as was the coach in its paint of green and gold. The four men, three of them younger than the one who had called us, wore boots of gleaming leather; the fifth passenger wore iron pattins to raise her out of the mud, and a robe of grey velvet and fur, her face covered by a lace vizard. To me in my simplicity, they appeared like creatures from a rich and wondrous world, perching daintily on the clean grass and giving out orders to the three of us in the mud. With no weight in the carriage and my father's strength to heave at the axle, the thing was soon out of the hole and back on level quagmire.

"Thank you, brothers," the coachman said, wiping sweat from his brow and managing to make his face even more besmirched by mud. "We had like to have been here all day had you not

come.”

The passengers climbed on board again, only the lady favouring us a word. “Here, for your trouble.” My father just extricated the shilling before it disappeared into the churned ground near our feet. He spat and told me he hoped the coach overturned and killed them all; as we went on our way he told me whom it was we had helped. A few minutes later I heard a creaking noise followed by a melee of shouting. The coach had collapsed into the mud further along the road; from the angle made by the back wheels I surmised the axle had broken.

“Holla! You knaves! Come back again! Ho!”

“Feign deafness”, was the advice my father gave. “Next time we will get no extra shilling nor any more thanks than before.”

The old Lord, the one who had called us, was a man riddled with distemper who did not live much longer than two years more, which, when I heard of it, pleased me with a quiet satisfaction to be assured that God’s reaper comes in due time to us all, however great, however low; however good, however evil. Two of the men with him were his sons; the other two people, his daughter and son-in-law; all rich, well-clothed and well-fed. None of them escaped the vengeance of the Lord of all.

But on that day of wetness and casual meeting, there was no conceivable hint of the direction Providence was to lay down before us, nor was there any indication that the glistening shilling was the last good fortune my family was to know. The Whitsuntide, usually a high time of holiday and merry-making, was clouded that year by the death of Margaret whom God took from us in a sudden rashy fever which burned her weak life away, leaving us all disconsolate since we had grown solicitous for her, even Little John, young though he was, but our sorrow would have been less had we known what a mercy an early death can sometimes be. When we took Margaret’s little corpse to the kirk at Uland where the burying-ground was, the sun shone and the birds sang in the hawthorn thickets and it was difficult to decide whether the beauty of the world at spring was a consolation to our grief or a mockery of it. Margaret’s winding sheet and her dead face were as pale as the last flowers on the blackthorn; as aloof from the earth as the whiteness of the clouds. My father had strapped her body to the hand-cart that I was wont to use to carry my rushlights from place to place; the head of a sad small procession.

The churchwarden at Uland was a fat, pompous freeholder whom we eventually found haranguing his servants outside the kitchen of his house, which was as comfortable as ours was miserable. In his own good time he favoured us with his attention, but with expressions and words as though we had come in trailing excrement into his best room; doubtless this was in truth how we appeared to him, in his arrogance and cruelty. While my father talked and began to fall into argument with him, I could smell the cooking of meat from the kitchen, overcome with envy that people should have meat at that time of year, and while I stood there at a respectful distance with Little John and my mother, my eyes were opened for the first time to the evil that is in the world. I saw it in the swollen intemperate face of the churchwarden; one who although not ordained claimed to be part of God’s Church but was even now trying to dismiss my father contemptuously. But in spite of his other faults my father was a stern man and not easily put upon.

The fat man in his plush moleskin and bright buttons was offering various reasons why my sister could not be buried in the kirkyard; - the priest was not in the area, there had been no notice; he was not sure we were of that parish. As their voices rose, their inflamed tempers cast dissembling aside and brought to utterance the nearer truths of the matter, - the death of a pauper’s brat, a bastard for all he knew, was of too little consequence for the warden to waste time upon when he had important things which needed his attention; we might be Papists; most importantly, we had no silver for the burying-fee.

“Does God sell His hallowed ground for pieces of silver?” My father shouted, standing nose

to nose with the Churchwarden. Because of the lack of a few shillings, which his word should be ample credit for, would an innocent soul be condemned to purgatory by lying in unblest earth? , he asked the warden: if it was so, then the Church that countenanced it had the soul of the very devil and would face a reckoning at the good Lord's hand. To which the Churchwarden replied, that hallowed ground of the kirkplace would not benefit the dead child or any of her family; he saw from the marks of our poverty that we were utterly without blessing or election and should follow the example of the baby on the cart and hasten to the damnation that was waiting for us.

The stillness of their confrontation was broken by my mother shouting for her husband to come away. It was plain that he was about to attack the fat man physically rather than argue further; perhaps this was what the warden had been attempting to provoke him towards. I asked myself, why should anyone be so wicked? I never returned to ask the man directly, nor ever found out what happened to him. He was no creature of Westmoreland's, nor anyone with whom we had had quarrels before; just another pious man whose only righteousness was self-righteousness, who cared nothing for his fellows so long as there were some against whose misfortunes he could measure himself and find himself to be one of the Chosen.

My father was in a white fury. "Come away, Jack! Step back, husband!", I heard my mother shouting to him. The servants had disappeared except for a couple of old women who squinted out of the kitchen and worked their shrunken lips at each other. "Hell has a place for you," he said to the Churchwarden, "and I will see you there. What times we will have then." He offered no blows, but spat full in the man's face. Green-speckled phlegm rolled down a fat red cheek. I would have gone over to my father but my mother checked me. Unspeaking, we retraced our steps with the hand-cart along the bumpy lanes and although my childish mind had many questions I let them remain unvoiced. Why were we not blessed? And how could the fat gentleman know this? I knew little of God or His goodness but could not imagine what crimes our poor family had committed that warranted being punished in this way: nor did I know the difference between the hallowed ground that my father had asked for and the quiet stretch of loam under the beech-trees where he dug a deep hole and laid poor Margaret's corpse to earth, yet it seemed that we ourselves had transgressed in some way to be treated thus, and for Margaret to have only a cairn of stones in a wood rather than a proper carved cross on a plot in the kirkland where wild dogs and foxes would not come to sniff and scratch.

Silence reigned in our biggin for many days, all of us too despondent to get on with the business of living and trying to find the wherewithal to get by. I tended our animals in a cursory manner but was unable to attend to Little John's incessant questions because I myself understood so little of what was happening. My mother seemed weary of it all: my father growled at us. When we were finally without rye or barley for bread or malt for beer, my father then stirred himself, shouted at mother until she darned the holes in his best smock, and before dawn the next morning he, the donkey and myself went of all equally loaded with potash over the fells to Keswick. Thankfully the memory of fatigue and discomfort caused by such trials, of ten miles over the wet fells and under windy Skiddaw with no food in our bellies or coats on our backs, is something quickly forgotten even if replaced only by new tribulations. Our problems were not over on arrival for when we got to Keswick none of my father's usual men would trade, it being unbeknown to us the Sabbath, and so we had a cold evening and night waiting on their pleasure and like to faint from hunger while we stamped and blew to keep warm.

In the early night a well-fed gentleman rode by and interrogated us on our homeland and business, and did not seem pleased with the surly answers he had from my father. He declared himself to be Mister Phillipson, the local Justice, and was apparently keen to see us either in the lock-up or whipped out of the place for vagrancy, as we were certainly not of the Justice's parish.

Only the intervention of a few of the Keswick men who assured him that we were in truth John and Matthew Fisher from over Caldbeck Fell come on plausible matters of selling made him desist and carry on his own business. Later, in the dark moonless quarter of the night, the Justice weaved his drunken way past us again, on horseback, this time with a serving man holding the bit in one hand and a lantern in the other.

“Stinking Fisher father and son,” he slurred. “Enjoy the hospitality of Keswick’s table!” Something was thrown on the floor near us. Scrambling in the dark we found a half-chewed trotter. My father gave it to me to gnaw from it what I could; the noise of the pig on the horse had quite killed his appetite, he told me. On the morrow there were contentious arguments with the Keswick men, to whom we were accustomed to selling; these men in turn often sold what then became their potash to the fullers in Kendal for a higher price. There was nothing we could do even though they had unfair profit from the sweat of our labours. My father and I had no wagon nor horses to take the stuff direct to Kendal; so the poor always remain poor and those with wealth or credit accumulate it to themselves. My father fulminated against them; - there was ever, he said, an unchristian difference between the Keswick price and the Kendal price and he for one cursed the king who had ejected the Jews from England since they would give a man fair money for his goods. At a half-penny a pound, he said, he might as well let them steal it for nothing, or jettison it into the river, where he would know that no-one would be growing richer at his expense. The buyers would not budge: a half-penny a pound is what we had to take, far less than my father had hoped. He told me as we sat in the ale-house, drinking small beer and a weak slop of broth with bread, that it was God’s Truth the Justice had interfered with the buying men and told them to give us only a pittance, then he sent me away back home with about twelve shillings wrapped up in a handkerchief and with harsh warnings for me to go straight to my mother, not to stray or be waylaid on the moors.

For poor people to be cheated and despised in this way is a thing so usual that I will explain that I mention it in my narrative not in the expectation that any novelty will be found in it, but because it was, somehow, an integral and important part of our family’s downfall. I never found out what my father did after I left the ale-house; assuredly he drank too much but this was to be predicted when he had money with him, but all I know is that when he came back to our hut he was haggard and white. My immediate concern was that I had seen surveying men on the hillsides below the biggin, and this was, I had been told, always the prelude to the rich man enclosing the pauper out of what livelihood he might have, but father was not interested. He said he had seen the devil, who chased him over the fells and tried to push him into a burning door of Hell just this side of Threkeld; he would not let my mother bring clippers to his matted hair and beard that obscured his eyes and chin. Some days later, I came back from helping one of the neighbouring farmers at the sheep dips to find that my father had been taken away by the Constable and his men. When my mother had asked on what charge they were taking him, they laughed and said he would find out when he was before the Assize in Carlisle.

My mother was given the strength to act with energy and decision, for a time. She shut the biggin up, not that there was anything within it to protect except for our wooden platters, rattencrook and a few cooking things, and took myself and Little John first to her relatives where she begged and borrowed what money she could, and then into Carlisle where we stayed in a dank stinking room near the prison. I was not there for long, for which I was heartily thankful. It was no doubt the cheapest lodging my mother could find; vile though it was it was pleasant compared to the abominable place in which my father was incarcerated, a mouldering heap of grey stone such as a bad dream might invent, inside which the cold and the stench were equally intolerable, my few fleeting visits leaving me with a sense of fear and horror that even now can return unbidden. Behind the line of bars to which the gaoler had a massive iron key, was a large dim-lit dungeon where the prisoners sat or walked about in various degrees of agitation, all trying to fill up days that amounted

to eternities. I could not understand how such things could be allowed to happen; - while I watched, a few of the unfortunates were simply lying on the damp flagstones with only the occasional cough or moan giving evidence of life; one of them with her arms chained to the far wall, sitting in what appeared to be a pile of straw and excrement, was a howling woman who repeatedly cracked her head against the stone while a man on top of her was committing hidden unpleasantries underneath her skirts. The other prisoners were too apathetic and the gaoler too callous to intervene; several people with us on the free side of the bars seemed to take a strange amusement from it all. The shadows of rats could be seen scuttling around.

After my mother had talked with my father for a time, and argued long and loud with the gaoler about food and payments for him, the warden became affable and showed us all around what he called "his kingdom". As he swaggered up and down the stairs and corridors he explained how he was like a king, keeping control and order over a society which reflected the outside world. In the main dungeon, where my father was, lay the mass of those with no breeding or money, without privilege or succour, for whom the gaol was often the real judge since so many would die waiting for trial.

"Perhaps God's Judgement works more direct and swift through the gaol than through the Assize," ventured one of the spectators.

"I doubt God casts his eye on this place," the gaoler laughed.

"Fie for blasphemy!" shouted another. "Such talk can lead to even gaolers being branded!"

"I spoke only in a manner of jest," he wheedled. "No blasphemies intended."

He carried on his comparison as we looked at better quarters on the floor above, where the "gentlemen" lived, who had beds on which to lie and who were there perhaps for debt or through choice to avoid settling debts, or were recusants. Above them, in a room in the tower, a man hardly out of his youthful years, well dressed and handsome who greeted us politely when we were allowed to gawp at him - the cream of the gaoler's people, a Lord of somewhere being held for treason; in a bleak room in the other tower where those condemned to die spent their last days, inside the dumb grey walls sat an elderly man in black, whose crippled fingers could hardly hold the pen which he was using; - a jesuit priest, who expected to meet his Maker soon.

"Or eternal damnation," laughed the man who had warned the gaoler against blasphemy.

"All these are the subjects of my country," the analogy went on as he led us out again. "I have power as a king does; and as kings themselves are ruling under God, so I have a higher allegiance, to my Lord Westmoreland under whose grant the gaol is." And so it was obvious how the gaol existed, a place of evil from which the same man who had forced my father from Egremont drew profits. The gaoler was garrulous when it came to information; - he did not know the charge against my father; the Assize? Some time in September, the day depending on when the judge was sufficiently sober.

I could not stay long in the town, nor did I want to. The sights and sounds of all the travellers who continually passed through on their ways to and from Scotland that might have been novel and interesting at any other time were cast into a shadow, tinged with the loathsomeness that I had felt in the prison. The carters with their oxen drays; the post riders, pedlars, walkers, hawkers, beggars and men and women of many sorts, riding anything from donkeys to proudly-decked horses with plush saddles, were a stream of humanity whose only quality was, in my eyes, their blindness and

their ignorance of the wrong being done to my father. But why should they have been concerned? The fault was in my innocence which as yet had no inkling that every town through which these travellers passed had its gaol; every gaolless village had its share of iniquity. The time for men to concern themselves about these things would come far too late to be of help to my father or multitudes like him.

Even if Carlisle had been to my taste, it would have been impossible for me to remain there because the money my mother had was being quickly used up by the expense of paying the extortion required by the Prison Warder and by having to pay for rent, she fearing for her husband and not wanting to move back to the biggin which was too distant to walk daily. I was obliged to go off alone to the farms where we had helped with the hay-making and reaping in happier years, to try for paid labour and earn shillings. It was not easy; I was still but a lad, afraid to walk out in the day-time lest I be taken for an orphan or beggar boy and be apprehended by the Justices or pressed into unwelcome service, afraid of the night for the fear of losing my way in the moonless hours and of the boggarts whose presence I could feel all around me. No great success attended my venture; in farms where they did not know me from previous years the mistresses of the farm shooed me away thinking I was a pauper brat come for dole or the farmers did not take me seriously, telling me instead to go to the Church or the Parish. But above all the wetness of that summer and the poor late crop meant that there was little enough to gather in, and owners and labourers all worked out the few clement days scything and stocking the meagre grain, and looking forward with dread to the winter.

I was shown few favours by those who took me on, and I declare that I was worked as hard as any of the men for my shilling a week, which I was canny enough to bury in a secret place until I moved on, suspecting that the farmer would cheat me if I left payment until the end of work or that the Irish would steal from me if they could find money on my person. Yet I remember being grateful for some of the kindnesses shown to me; - having as much meat and bread and porridge and collops as I could eat and going to a sleep that may have been one of exhaustion but was also one replete with food; being given some time to glean while the others were still reaping and tying up; welcome breaks in the work as we finished a field and played throwing our sickles at the last stand of corn; having the farm wife come to me with pitchers of milk to save my stomach from the rough beer dished to the others; and in one place where the farmer would have short paid me by a florin for the last fortnight of the harvest, the Irishmen gathered round him and threatened to break his arms and take his money by force if he did not pay me up.

The talk in the farms and back in Carlisle Town was all of the bad harvest and the plague over the hills in the distant countries of Durham and Northumberland. Poor folk, already hungry, cast baleful glances at the sleek clergymen and rich gentry who posted through the town's main street with not a worry in the world, tossing a farthing or a half-penny to the cripples and beggars as if it were great largess. I gave my earnings to my mother who had removed to lodgings even more unwholesome than the previous place. Little John seemed thinner and had a bad cough; when I hugged him his body felt brittle and bony. At length my pleas persuaded my mother to give me some money to buy him a coat of rough wool, and as much bread and milk and meat as he could manage.

Making my way to the gaol, full of concern for my father who was still held there, this being now two months with no release or word of a trial, I was confronted with a door as banded and stern as if it would keep out an investing force; a door upon which my hand, rough and calloused though it may have been, was too small to make much noise. At length a peep-hole door opened and a moustachioed face squinted at me, to refuse me admittance unless I paid a good silver florin. Which, I determined, was not so lightly to be had since it was my own earnings, for better purpose than to wet the inside of a gaoler's pampered stomach. Whilst I argued ineffectually and shouted at

the gaoler, I was assailed by a waft of scent and camphor. A lordly gentleman, in a wide-brimmed hat and expensive leather boots with studded bucket-tops, stood next to me and tapped on the door with the basket-hilt of his sword. He wore a long but well-trimmed beard that rested on the whitest of ruffs; every inch of him the wealthy master.

“Ho within! Open!” he snapped in a peremptory manner, and for him the gaol door creaked open on its noisy hinges.

I asked the warder why I was to pay a florin for something that was free to others, and the warder’s boot was stayed by the gentleman asking what it was “the ragamuffin boy” wanted.

“I had thought people paid to leave, not enter, this Styx,” he said in an amused tone.

“The pup wishes to see one of the prisoners. I am under no obligation to admit him.”

“One of the prisoners, boy?” the rich man asked me.

“My father, so it please you,” I told him.

“For Pity’s sake, let him go in,” he ordered the gaoler. “Maybe the sight of the place will dissuade him from the path that leads to the gallows tree when he becomes a man.”

“That would be of no profit to me, my lord. If gaols were empty, how would I prosper?”

Nevertheless, I was in free at the lordly man’s behest and there it was that I saw my father for the last time, and although I was, in my extreme youth, too lacking in discernment to realise how in earnest he was in telling me things that on the face of them were a jumble of unrelated advices and premonitions, yet much of what he said has remained with me ever since like a lost voice that the years have dimmed but cannot silence. He told me to look after my mother and Little John, and to ensure that the Scottish drovers got their grazing in Caldbeck on the usual terms, giving me the names of the head cattle men to remember; - Angus MacKenzie, Red Jamie, David Linnox. He also told me that it was a fact as true as God created earth and Hell, that he was going to be hung when the judge came, regardless that he did not know his crime or accusers; because the judge was Westmoreland’s brother, and Westmoreland wanted my father hung.

I asked him, why they would not tell him his crime or his accusers, so that he could prove them wrong, but he said that they would not do this because he had no attorney to ask for him, the small amount of money we had being only enough to keep us alive, leave alone for a lawyer’s fee. While we spoke, the laments and wailings of the other prisoners provided a dreary background to our conversation and began to sorely fright me. My father seeing this, gave me leave to go, but before I quitted the place, his hands seized me and his bright, sunken eyes bored into mine as he asked me to promise that, when I was grown, I would think on all that I saw that day, and exact a just vengeance, against Westmoreland and against his family.

“As I gave you life,” he whispered to me, “promise that you will do that in honour and remembrance of me; condemned wretch though I am, promise you will take it as your duty to me.” And I promised that I would, my childhood knowing no law higher than my father’s command. A result often appears long after the cause has occurred and been forgotten and so it was with this promise because I had more immediate jobs that called for my efforts.

As I became more accustomed to going abroad in solitary, so I became bolder in walking out

and treating the lanes and moors as my own, and more adept at avoiding the watch or the tithing-men, who would often regard themselves as personal custodians of the local traffic and doings. After a couple of days loitering on the drove-lanes, living on bread that I had brought from Carlisle and a coney that I took from a keeper's trap, I encountered Red Jamie and his drove-hands on their way to the Michaelmas Fair at Rosley, with a vast straggling herd of longhorn cattle. Such was my need to make some livelihood for my family, that I had little hesitation in pulling the bridle of Red Jamie's pony to stop him and the whole drove, nor was I backward in offering him the grazing at Caldbeck on as high a term as I thought likely. Eventually we reached an agreeable compromise, to which I later realised I was in debt to Red Jamie's sense of humour, for his eyes twinkled as we bargained, he learning my father was in the prison and knowing that a "wee sprat" like myself could not hinder their staying or going nor command a rent them from against their wishes.

While some of his men went off to Rosley to search out buyers and begin the haggling in advance, and some of them took the kine to the fell-hollow where they would have pasture for a few days before going into market, I had to help one of the Scotchmen who was in sharp distress from a sword wound to his thigh and calf, from where they had had a run-in with reivers on the borders. I took him and Red Jamie to the bothy, where the man could at least lie in comfort and dry, and strip off the crusted bandages on his leg. Sent off by Red Jamie to try and find someone with the healing art, but not a surgeon since all a surgeon would do would be to take his saw to the thigh bone and kill the man anyway, I sought out the only one I could think of, Thomas Scatch, who lived up on the moor in a hut even more loathsome than ours, but who was a skilful mole-trapper and had the reputation of a Cunning Man.

After some needful persuasion, and complaint about the business of the season, he agreed to come with me, and once at the biggin he inspected the man, shook his head pessimistically when told that the injuring sword was not to hand, to bind it as well as the wound, then returned with various herbs and potions. I still remember the strangeness of that night, the four of us around the fire in the biggin's hearth; the wounded Scotchman stretched out on his cloak, young in years but pale and drawn by his pain; the old man's wizened face etched even more by the fire's light; Red Jamie beyond him scratching his thick beard and watching the preparations. With our common grime, our rags and our wildness, we could have been a different class of creature to the man who had spoken to me at the door of Carlisle Gaol.

Red Jamie had a harvest bottle full of usquebach which he passed around but was too fiery and bitter for me. I went down under the weak starlight to drink at the beck and bring water for the Cunning Man. When I got back, he was grinding things together in a bowl and muttering spells in a strange and ponderous tongue. He sliced up rotten crab-apples and tansy leaves and stirred in powders and liquids about whose nature I ventured no guesses, while all the time the air seemed to thicken around us into an atmosphere that I could only describe as arcane and ancient. It was as if we were turning into people who had lived on those same moors centuries before, before ever Gospel or churches came, or perhaps their presence was being re-kindled by Cunning Man Scatch. I recall, though, that I felt no menace from it, nor fear for myself, for I felt a strength and a warmth in it, a suspicion that there might be powers who concerned themselves to protect or at least recognise base men such as those gathered in the cottage. I was never to know what it was: God or the Devil speaking, or even the great powers that walked the earth before Adam, yet the memory of that night stays with me.

Scatch made a poultice, which they bound to the wound with tight cords and as the night wore on, the injured man slipped into an unsteady sleep, crying out from time to time and in his waking moments lamenting the burning pain in his leg. The other two drank the usquebach and talked together, of the hardships of their lives and the villainies of the nobility and bishops, such talk

as I had never heard outright before unless it was in my father's drunken diatribes. Yet in some ways, they agreed, they counted themselves fortunate in their lives that kept them separate from society in their differing isolations of moor or the droving, so that they could relatively unfettered unlike men from the low and champion countries with their landlords and masters, their fines if they did not show at church or were caught breeches down with a doxy, and the whippings and brandings if they spoke out of turn or too adventuresomely.

I asked Scatch and Red Jamie why my father should be hung, a truth of which they were convinced as much as he had been. Red Jamie said that they would hang a man on any pretext: that once someone was arrested it was a lesser matter to hang them than set them free. The Cunning Man said that the enmity of Westmore and would surely encompass my father's downfall, and that I must look to myself if I would remain safe. When I asked, was there no justice or God whose ears were open to an appeal from people afflicted with such wrong-doing, they laughed, not from malice, but rather amusement at my innocence.

"Young Matthew Fisher," Scatch replied, twisting his long beard between finger and thumb. "If the Messiah himself came to this country, He would be the first they would put into Carlisle Gaol. Such is the depravity of the world."

"Do you not believe there is any succour then?" I asked, at which they regarded each other and Red Jamie said that there had been many merry bonfires made out of people who believed too heartily, and beliefs served no purpose but to speed people to those shadows which engulf us all in due course.

These and like things I heard them discussing until the sky began to pale and Scatch left, saying he would return within a day or two during which time I remained with the Scotchman who needed ministration. His fellows came back with food and drink for us, giving me ample leisure to run into Carlisle at evening's end with some for my mother and Little John, and to investigate with uneasiness the lines of poles and trenches that were appearing as if of their own accord on the slopes between our bothy and Sackthwaite's farm.

When Scatch came back, his satisfaction at seeing a healing wound revealed under the poultice was as great as Andra's, by which name the Scotchman was known. He had little English, but that did not prevent us from sharing his relief and pleasure. While we helped him walk up and down on the long grass outside the bothy, to stir his legs' blood into motion, we were surprised by two ragged men in stained black clothes who came running down off the fells as if the Wild Hunt were after them. One was an old man, as old as Scatch, who dropped at the bothy's door, chest heaving like a man at the point of death. The younger man spoke in a strange accent and pleaded with us for hiding and shelter. Scatch motioned them into the bothy, where there was a covered place amongst the rafters.

Soon after this, a troop of a half dozen men came down from the hill and surrounded us. They were a couple of the local gentry and their servants, who all looked on us with great disfavour.

"Here is a fine devil's brood," said one of them. "Scatch himself, Fisher's brat and a damned Scotsman. If we do not find our Jesuits we could with equal reason hang these three."

Scatch out-faced them and their humourless laughter with questions about their business.

"Our business is Jesuit Priests," said another, a young man in a fine doublet and plumed hat. "and all those who harbour them. So, as we are under the sight of God, tell us quickly and truly

whether two stranger men have passed this way lately.”

Scatch kept silent for a time and I found myself hesitant to utter my first response, to direct them to the bothy and to the two Jesuits; men who, according to my father, were as much in league with Lucifer himself to capture weak English souls as were the fallen angels; hesitant because of what these gentlefolk said. If they were as ready to hang us when our crime was nothing more than existing, what respect or credence could I give to their condemnation of the two fugitives? Even if they were Jesuits, perhaps they were, like the three of us, ordinary men undeserving of punishment. And why should they be chastised? When, as my father said, the great Westmoreland himself happily and openly had the Latin Mass read by priests in his own gilded chapel?

“What warrant do you have for hunting heretics?” Scatch asked, and they laughed at him, one of them waving and tapping on a Bible and calling that they were on God’s work and needed no warrant other than that. They were about to enter the bothy, having threatened to put it to the flame and ourselves to the sword if they found anything amiss within, but all this was stopped at the last minute by the appearance of Red Jamie and his drovers who came up in high spirits, untrammelled by cow or calf. They rode between the hunters and the bothy at a few words from Andra. Their sheer number and their bare swords were enough to make the English gentlemen withdraw and continue their way down to Sackthwaite’s farm and off the hills.

Once hunters and fugitives had gone their ways, with their various expressions of defiance or gratitude, it struck me that both Red Jamie’s band and the gentry pursuers were acting without sensible and understandable cause; there seemed no good reason why two unarmed, ragged men should be hounded like foxes by hunters with a sword in one hand and a Bible in the other; nor why the drovers should put themselves at hazard for strangers whom they merely dismissed with a few curt words and a toss of the head once their danger had passed. But of the two there was no questioning where my childish sympathy lay, and I envied the Scotsmen their swords and their strength to stand their ground.

On the morrow they all left, full of song and laughter, to take back their money to the families and clans who had remained in their far-off hills and shielings with names that I could hardly pronounce. Andra, the one whom I had tended in my plain way, took horse shouting with joy. Like as not he had expected his riding days to be over from the wound he had got, but as it was not so Red Jamie gave me not only the shillings for the rent but also two golden Scottish Guineas from Andra; one for me, one for Tom Scatch. Which, Red Jamie said with a laugh, was what Andra had saved from not being at the ale-house at Rosley for these few days, and was small payment for a healed leg. I ran all the way off to Tom Scatch’s hut, then scoured the hills until I found him, running with my hand thrust in my breeches pocket and my fingers round the coins. When I caught him, bagging crows by a reedy tarn, we sat together on a rock in the sunlight, each of us staring at our gold piece and trying to decide how rich we were.

For a golden guinea, he told me, you could buy an old mare or a young gelding; or a saddle such as princes’ arses sat on; or boots, or a cloak, to last you a lifetime; or a good French fowling-piece; or an evening at cards with a tavern full of Knights and Barons. Having little else to do, I stayed on with Scatch for some weeks while late summer drew into autumn and the dews became a little heavier with each morning, for in spite of his silences and his strange animal smell, he was good company in that he was a man of much lore and he taught me about herbs, and mole-catching, and hunting. He told me weird stories about hollows and stones on the fells we walked over, but they were not stories of a christian sort and my later learning has made me think they were only figments Scatch dreamed up to people his solitude. He had a passion for the hunting and old though he was, he was a nimble rogue and I was often hard put to catch him if he heard the hounds or hawkers’

cries in the distance and ran off to see them. He taught me which mushrooms could be eaten and which avoided; which roots would make a warming brew; how to open walnuts without pulping the fruit; and how to tickle the trout that hid in the river's cool brown depths.

One squally morning when a wind from the east was pulling away at mists that hung heavy on the heather, I was out following Scatch and his two lurchers, quietly away over hills to Threkeld after hares and then onto a farm where Scatch had heard word that there would be a badger bait later that evening. He suddenly stopped and looked around in the dank air as if listening to news or a distant shouting. He turned away from me, and told me in blunt hollow words that my father was dead, but I did not believe him until at his insistence I went along the tracks to Carlisle the next day and there encountered my mother and Little John walking disconsolate back to Caldbeck.

It was a grievous meeting, my little brother pale and withdrawn and my mother hardly seeming to notice me and any conversation she started broken by a wild keening that was wrenched out of her as if by force. Their shoes, their coats and their blankets had gone, all sold to pay for the gaol bills and their own lodgings in the town and they were both thin and gaunt. While cheerless days in the bothy carried us on to crisper mornings and colder nights and I searched for bedding and food for them, I found out my father's fate, piece by piece as my mother's misery revealed it. The judge, Westmoreland's brother, finally arrived at Carlisle and on one morning declared he was of a mind to send a few arrant evil-doers to the gallows tree that day, which he performed as promised, shouting at accused prisoners and growling at and intimidating witnesses and counsels. My father's alleged crime, it transpired, was the theft of three chickens, value fivepence each, which made them worth over a shilling and as such a hanging felony. There was no appeal, nor mercy shown. My father knew as little of the meaning of the Romish language the Court used as did my mother, but the meaning of the black cap and the hammer on the justice's bench needed no interpretation. The words were spoken, the gavel cracked down and my father dragged away with no benefit of clergy to be summarily hung in the market place after the trial and his body carted next day to a grave unknown. Even as he had said to me, it had come to pass and I felt somehow fortified in my grief by the knowledge that the promise I gave to him in the gaol was as definite as had been his premonition of death. My mother gave me the names of those who had stood and testified against him; small, malicious farmers all, whom I committed to memory. Chief amongst them had been Amos Sackthwaite, from whose fields the first strands of the encloser's web were creeping.

The bad summer quickly gave way to a dismal autumn of rain and despair everywhere at the ruined harvest and the price of corn and bread, which increased daily. Plague had a grip on the villages and towns on the flat land towards the sea and the border, and even though I avoided the crowded places as much as possible the tolling bells of mourning from all the churches was an unmistakable report of the passing of its victims. My golden guinea did not take long to run out, even though we ate sparingly on pease-meal, old bread, porridge and cheap meat. I had managed to put only a little aside from the gleaning, and when bands of men marauding for food came to our bothy, they pitied rather than oppressed us for our misery and declared that if they could they would have supplied us rather than stolen from us. Yet they had nothing and contented themselves with throwing down the enclosures that Sackthwaite had builded. I heard that carts on their way from the mills were plundered by the starving fellsmen, whose need forced them to it and that the gentry thus cheated of their profits took sudden justice with the militia's help in hanging poor men on mere suspicion of their involvement.

Even so long after all this happened, older people still talk in pained reminiscence about that winter, which laid waste whole tracts in the north and through which no family passed unscathed. Between Famine and Plague none but the lucky, the strong or the rich made their way to the next summer, and doubtless it was God's Providence that spared me for other things though at the time I

would rather have been taken along with my dear ones. Winters days of alternately wet and sharp coldness made travel almost impossible and the nights were the longest and iciest I have ever known. We ran out of our supply of wood and peat and even dung to burn and each day foraging brought in less and less, except a mounting despair and ache in my feet and hands; I brought in anything I could find that Scatch had shown me could be eaten and several things that only famine will make palatable.

After the solstice, while the days were growing longer but at the same time bleaker and even less hospitable, my mother and Little John succumbed to the plague, brought up to the biggin by wandering beggars whom I had beaten away with my home-made weapon of a stick with nails in the end. Freezing the air inside might have been, it did not cool their fever nor dry the sweat that stood on their brows and cheeks. Pitiful wretch that I was, I weeped and wailed for them, vainly cradling their dear heads to my shoulders as if I would impart my own health to them or at least contract the ague from them, so that we could together pass on to a brighter place where God would take us in and free us from the terrible misery and futility of the world. The water I brought them did not slake their thirsts, nor could they stomach the small food I was able to offer. Not knowing what else to do, I kissed them and told them that I would go for help. The only help I knew was Scatch, for whom I stumbled across the fell in a blind panic at dead of night, sinking into ice-cold bogs, oblivious to the sprites and demons abroad, aware only of my mother and brother in sore straits and alone without assistance.

More by luck than navigation I came across Scatch's hut, a blacker shape in the moor's blackness, and crashed in through his door too full with grief to utter anything apart from cries and moans which startled his lurchers into baring their fangs and threatening me until I was recognised. Scatch refused to leave until the first grey light because he was afraid of the winter goblins that he said were out on the fells searching for meat, and when he did agree to come with me, reluctantly but accompanying me nevertheless, it was to find that my mother and brother had no more need of the help of any man and were finally safe beyond the reach of pox or hunger.

No words could express my desolation at being left so alone in a cold, hostile world. Scatch departed, anxious to get away from a plague-house, and I was left alone with them, for many hours uncertain of what to do until a strange calmness settled upon me, almost as if it was an external force or presence. I remember washing down their pallid faces and combing out their hair, talking to them as if they were capable of sensibilities about the liberties I had to take to arrange them in postures of repose such as I had seen the crones do to a man killed under the wheels of a hay-cart one harvest-time near Wigton. Next I went to a quiet place near the beck and began to dig with an iron bar, which I had to wield quick lest with the frost it stuck to my poor hands, and an old mattock. The ground was as hard and flinty as the hearts of all those who had wittingly or unwittingly brought me and my family to that pass; it gave way to my blows a piece, a clod at a time and the short daylight dimmed under the bare trees while I worked.

My excavation was interrupted by the arrival of a crowd of men with lanterns who came up from Sackthwaite's direction, a motley group of farmers and serving-men amongst whom I saw the local Justice and the whole band led by Scatch. They gathered round me and I recall that I stopped digging and asked them their business; there seemed no reason for anyone else to intrude upon my grief.

"I summoned them, Matthew," Scatch told me, then went on to explain how the only thing possible for me was to rely on the Parish, as if aware he had committed a treachery that needed justification. There was nothing for me to do but accept: they were many and would not allow my digging further and my weariness afflicted me to the extent that I no longer really cared so that I

might throw myself down to join my mother and dear Little John in an oblivion of death and some sort of unconsciousness. I went back to the bothy to bid farewell to them and then went with Scatch, the Justice and a few more down the long track to Caldbeck, numb both in body and soul. Some way down the track, as I stumbled unfeelingly through crisply iced ruts and stones, I heard an altercation between Scatch and the Justice, the former shouting that they had reneged on their word for a burial in Christian ground, the latter replying in like voice that it was a plague place and their souls had already gone to God or Devil regardless. Only the sight of flames in the distance gave me a dim realisation of what was happening but my strength failed me when I tried to throw myself at the Justice's throat, reducing my attack to a strangled cry and a dead faint from which I emerged many hours later.

It seemed all one what happened to me after that and I withdrew myself into an interior place where no light or darkness or outside occurrence penetrated. After being fed and sheltered at the Justice's own house for a time, where they put me in a room with curtains and a bed with a pillow and blanket, I realised that these men who were part of the world which had had ordered my family's destruction were also ordering my unwanted future for me. Since the Parish had no funds to sustain an orphan like myself, it had recourse to the usual custom of leaving me in the hands of any man who could promise to take me to trade or prentice, in order that with man's help and God's blessing I might at length make some life for myself. What this was, as everyone knows, was servitude to any little master who might care to come to the Parish to buy me up and a worse slavery could not be imagined when I was told I was bound for Sackthwaite's farm.

In the friendlessness of my orphaned state and in the chaos of famine, there was no-one who would speak on my behalf against such an infernal mockery. Any man with a vestige of feeling can imagine into what agony I was plunged by this consequence of my bereavement. Sackthwaite knew he had a slave, not an apprentice, and knew that he could mistreat or starve or slay me and the world would pay it no mind nor would it condemn him. Although he was ever keen to be seen on his pew seat behind the squire on a Sunday I never found anything in his conduct to make me believe he worried about Heaven's condemnation either.

I will pass over the time of torture I spent at Sackthwaite's farm, where I was beaten and kicked and served most brutally, and will only mention it to use it as an example of how everything, however despicable, has its place and how God can use even the most unpromising settings and circumstances to further His Glory and cast His Light upon those who are in darkness. It is my consolation from those awful times that it was I who suffered then but later profited mightily from God's Grace, whereas I know for certain that Sackthwaite and his mean, lecherous wife both suffer torments now. They had as much work from me as I could manage from the poor fare they provided, and every bowl of old pease pudding or scrap of bacon fat was preceded by Sackthwaite's grace, which said how thankful I should be to him.

Oftentimes my spirit would rise up against the oppression he tried to drown me under, and stripes would not hurt me nor quell my defiance of him and his family, for in some way I sensed that I was close to my father's spirit and drew strength from him. At length I became no more than one of the animals; merely a sort of beast fit for more intelligent work than giving milk or pulling a plough or harrow. The barn was my bed, and I had more comfort in the company of the farm's dogs and horses than in that of my fellow men. My only small happiness was, when I thought I was unnoticed, to play old tunes learned from my father or the Irish and new ones improvised from my pain, on my sole possession, the elbow-pipes that were my father's, and when my fingers slipped over the holes I felt the trace of his presence near me. On a couple of occasions I went to see Scatch but in spite of my pleas he would not take me in, saying he could not afford to offend Sackthwaite and in any event had little enough wherewithal to fill his own belly let alone that of a growing youth. At Sackthwaite's

I grew into a wild thing, divorced from decent human intercourse, learning nothing, having no pleasures nor even setting foot near a church to hear some of God's words.

After months of this, Sackthwaite began to understand that buying me from the Parish was not the unmitigated profit he had expected it to be. My rancour against him became stronger with the passage of time, ever-fuelled by the constant sight of the burnt bothy up near the fell, and the only reason I did not run away was that I knew of no-where to run to. This all changed one afternoon when the Hand of Providence pointed at Sackthwaite Farm and a messenger of the Lord took me away from that purgatory. What happened, was this: that on an autumn Sunday after church service, men came back to the farm from Uland, bringing the warden and a travelling preacher with them. I had been put out to bird-scaring in one of the fields that had just had a sowing of rye but I cared nothing for the fate of his seeds and was sitting near the field gate enjoying the late sun. Sackthwaite was showing his visitors around his land and began to call me out and scold me with harsh words when he spotted me.

"This boy would fray the patience of Job!" he complained to the others. "He does nothing but sit silent amongst the animals and eat my larder empty. I rue the day I took him from the Justice. A less grateful urchin there never was. If any man full enough of Christian Charity would want to take such a heathen and a vicious one at that, I would thank him till the end of my days."

The men laughed amongst themselves at my expense, except for one, a thin man of dark complexion, thin face and lambent blue eyes. I remember perfectly this first time I saw him, standing at the gate in black travelling gear and a black hat, closing his eyes as if the better to hear some inner voice. When he looked out again, it was to stare at me and say, "If the boy wishes to come with me, I am willing."

The others joked and were about to move on but this man in black with blue eyes stopped them.

"You are in earnest, surely, Mister Tarriman," one laughed.

"Do you wish to come with me?" I was asked, and there was no doubt or question in my mind, although I knew nothing of this man, not his family nor his motives nor his plans.

"Gladly, Sir," I told him. "I am in Hell here and have great need of help."

"Pig filth!" Sackthwaite shouted, picking up stones with which he began to pelt me. "Ingrate! Heathen!" The churchwarden told him sternly to desist which he did but with exceeding bad grace. Mister Tarriman, whoever he was, opened the gate for me and I said to him that if he was speaking sincerely I was prepared to go on the instant when I had taken my pipes from their hiding-place.

"Well, come then," he said softly. "To-night I lodge in Carlisle and you shall come with me." And that was how, in such a rapid and unforeseen manner, I was rescued from my trials at the hands of Amos Sackthwaite and that example of how God can protect and help His children has bolstered me up and seen me through many hard days. But of Mister Tarriman himself, I will write an length in a new chapter for I would not consider it proper to commit him to the same page which holds Amos Sackthwaite. A better, godlier man than Hezekiah Tarriman never set foot in the pulpit or rode the King's Highway, and my meeting with him at the rye-field's gate marked a turn in my fortune for which I have given thanks to God ever afterwards.

