

# FORTRESS OF SNOW

MELANIE  
DICKERSON



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

*Fortress of Snow*

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# ONE

## ENGLAND SPRING 1383



MAZY RAN HOME CLUTCHING THE FLOWERS SHE'D GATHERED in the meadow where the sheep sometimes grazed. She hurried through the enormous front door and up the stairs to her father's bedchamber.

"I picked you some flowers, Father," she called as she ran. Bathilda, the head house servant, caught her by the arm.

"Don't make so much noise," she hissed in a raspy whisper. "You're too old to be running around and yelling in sickrooms."

"I'm sorry, but I brought Father these flowers. They will cheer him."

"It may be too late for that." Bathilda wiped her eyes with her apron and Mazy noticed the tears on her face.

Still clutching the flowers, she rushed to her father's bedside, ignoring the physician, who sat on a stool with his arms crossed.

"Can you see the flowers, Father? I picked them for you, the blue and pink and yellow ones that you like."

Her father barely opened his eyes. "Thank you, my child." His voice was so weak. What had happened? After being deathly ill for weeks, he had rallied earlier that morning, talking and even taking a bit of food. He was getting better. Now he seemed paler and weaker than ever.

"Father, can I do anything for you?"

"Pray for me."

Mazy took his hand gently in hers and began praying softly under her breath, a rote prayer she'd learned from the priest intermingled with her own pleas for her father's health. When the tears choked off her voice, she prayed silently, *O God, if Father dies, I will be so alone. I don't want him to be in pain any longer, but please, I need him. What will I do if he leaves?*

Mazy's mother had been gone since she was five. Surely God would not take her father as well. Her father was her protector and her voice of wisdom. He was such a good father, giving her opportunities to learn anything she set her mind to. She loved him, and he loved her. He was the only person in her life she could talk to, the only person who really listened to her.

The pain in her chest was nearly unbearable. He couldn't die. It hurt so much to think she might never hear his voice again, never talk to him again.

And if he died, she would be all alone. What would become of her? She rarely saw her brothers, who no longer lived at home.

Her brother John had gone to train as a knight when she was very little, and she had no other family besides her half brother, Warin.

Warin did not care for her, and he would inherit this house when Father died. Would Warin send her away? Where would she go? He would marry her off to the first man who asked for her.

*God, please don't take Father. I love him and I need him.* Her breath seemed to stop before it reached her chest.

But when she opened her eyes and looked at her father's face, he was so still, his chest no longer rising and falling. Surely nothing terrible had happened while she was praying.

His hand was limp inside hers. She moved away, her flowers dropping onto his chest.

The physician came forward and placed his cheek just above her father's face for the longest time. Then he pinched her father's nose and put his cheek on her father's lips. Finally, he straightened and looked at Mazy. He shook his head.

A sob escaped her throat. She ran out of the room and all the way to her own bedchamber and closed the door.

Painful sobs wracked her chest as she tried to stop thinking, to let her mind go blank. But thoughts forced themselves on her, refusing to be pushed away.

"God, I am all alone," she croaked into her pillow. "What will I do now?"

She pressed her hand against her chest. It hurt so much. Her father had been her friend. She'd loved him with all her heart, and now God had taken him from her.

The tears poured from her eyes. *Forgive me, God.*

She should not blame God, for He was her only hope, and the only One who knew what would happen to her now that her father was gone.



Warin arrived the next day with his wife, Edith, and their eighteen-month-old son, Percy. Mazy watched them from her second-floor window as they walked from their horses to the front door.

Warin was a baron now, inheriting that title from her father as well as the only home she'd ever known. He looked quite pleased, a small smile on his thin lips, not sad at all that his father was dead. But perhaps she was wrong to think that, to judge Warin by his expression.

She splashed some water on her face, dabbed her eyes with a cloth, then found her looking glass. Her eyelids were only slightly puffy and red, even though she had been crying all morning. If only her brother John would come home from Bedfordshire, where he was training squires with the Duke of Strachleigh. John would understand her pain, and she would not feel so alone if he were here.

Mazy had only been five years old when he was sent away, and their mother died the winter after John left. Mazy couldn't remember her mother's face, only that she was gentle. She did remember her mother's laugh, though, when her father would tell amusing tales at bedtime. And she remembered her father

and mother staring into each other's eyes, smiling and embracing each other. Mazy's life had been rooted and strong in her parents' love.

She had missed John and had longed for him to come home. Once, when he was ten years old and she was eight, he came for a visit. He knelt in front of her and said, *"I will be a noble knight someday, and I will always protect you. If anyone tries to harm you, you must send me word. Understand?"*

In awe of her strong and courageous older brother, she'd believed him with all her heart. But that was eight years ago. Did he remember his promise? Was he even at liberty to fulfill it? John had not been able to come home often, and the last time she'd seen him was two years ago. But with her father gone, she needed him now to be her protector.

She knew little about Warin and nothing about his mother, except that when she had died, Warin had gone to live with her family. She had seen him only two or three times in her life.

One memory of him remained with her, one she had recorded in the book of blank pages her father had bound together for her, where she wrote down her thoughts, poems, and things she found interesting. Warin had been about eighteen years old and she was ten. He had cornered her on the staircase when no one else was around. Staring at her, his upper lip curling, he spat out, *"Father may like you and your brother best, but I will inherit this house. And when I do, you and John will not be welcome here."*

Mazy went straight to her father and told him what Warin said.

*"Warin was always cruel and ungrateful,"* Father said in a

growly voice. Then he'd patted Mazy's shoulder. *"But don't you worry. I am going to be around for a long time. And I will find you a good husband, someone rich and well able to care for you and give you healthy children."*

*"But first, we will go to new lands and see many sights, Father, remember?"*

"Yes, of course," Father said, smiling affectionately. *"I shall not forget my promise. I shall take you to see London, to the lakes, to the mountains, to Scotland, and to the Continent."* His voice became raspy and full of wonder as he spoke of all the far-off places.

In the meantime Father indulged her every desire to learn whatever skills she fancied, many of which were not considered suitable for a woman—as one of her tutors had argued. But Father had told him to mind his tongue and do as he was hired to do.

She learned archery, how to throw knives and axes, and how to fish and snare a rabbit. She was as good as any man at horseback riding, being able to ride astraddle and sidesaddle. She could play the lute, and read and write in Latin, German, and French.

After his steward died, Father allowed her to keep his books, and she recorded the figures and details of the household, the crops, and the tenants.

Father also indulged her with books, every kind of book, but especially books about all the places he promised to take her. But already her father's indulgences seemed like something in the distant past, now that Father was gone and Warin and his wife and son would be living in her home.

Bathilda burst into her room without knocking. "Come. We must go down and meet the new master of the house. He must be

welcomed.” She bustled over to Mazy’s trunk and pulled out her best dress, a pink-and-blue silk bliaud with embroidered flowers. Before Mazy could say anything, Bathilda was taking her woolen kirtle off over her head and pulling on the fancier one.

“We should cover your hair with a veil, like a proper young lady, and you must be on your best behavior. No running around and turning somersaults like a jongleur.”

“I’m sixteen. I know how to behave in company.”

“Come, come. Sit and be still.” Bathilda arranged her long brown hair quickly, fastening on the veil to cover it.

Mazy started down the stairs with Bathilda, and her stomach did a sickening flip. What would Warin and Edith, whom she had never met, say to her? Was Warin still cruel? Her emotions were still so raw. One unkind word and she’d probably either explode into a rage or dissolve in tears.

She was halfway down the staircase when Warin looked up and saw her.

“Is that you, Mazelina?”

She felt herself bristle at her full name, which she didn’t particularly care for. John and her father always called her Mazy. But Warin didn’t love her as they did, so perhaps he shouldn’t have the privilege of calling her Mazy.

“Yes.”

“Edith, this is Mazelina. And, Mazelina, this is my wife, Lady Wexcombe.” He smirked at his wife as though she were some prize he had won.

“Good day to you, Warin. Lady Wexcombe.” She nodded respectfully at each of them.

Edith stared at her from beneath lowered eyelids but said not a word. She was as thin as Warin was plump, and she wore a pinched expression.

"It seems as though you're still unmarried," Warin said, his attention now on Mazy as his smirk turned into a grimace. "I would have thought Father had found a husband for you before now." Warin raised his brows and frowned. "Had he found someone?"

"No."

"*Hmm.*" Warin and Edith exchanged frowns.

Mazy's stomach dropped at the way her half brother and his wife looked at her, the sour downturn of their mouths, the narrowing of their eyes.

If Father had known he would suddenly become sick and die, he would have betrothed her to someone, but he had been in no hurry to marry her off. "*There is plenty of time for that. You are not anxious to leave your home and your father, are you?*" he would say if she asked about any potential suitors, wondering about her future.

She had happily said no. Why would she want to marry when she had a happy home and a father who loved her?

But now she had no one to care if she lived or died—no father and no husband—no one except her brother John. And she had heard nothing from him in over a year.

The rest of the day went by slowly as she tried to speak politely and kindly with Warin and Edith. She even tried to help with their eighteen-month-old, Percy, but the child mostly

cried and only wanted his nurse, adamantly refusing to let Mazy console or entertain him.

“He’s unhappy,” the nurse said with an apologetic expression. “His new teeth are coming in. But when he feels better, I’m sure he’ll want to play with you.”

Mazy smiled and nodded, then went into the small room where her father’s body lay in his coffin.

She sat on the stool beside him and whispered, “Father, why did you have to leave me?” She’d been stuck in this little village, in this old, drafty castle her whole life, while John had gone away training and having adventures, learning to fight with the sword—which was the one thing she asked to learn that her father refused to teach her. John even occasionally did heroic deeds, helping to defend castles against would-be conquerors. He wrote few letters, but the ones he did send made his life sound very exciting and valiant.

*“Do not worry,” her father would tell her. “One day I shall take you to see all of the king’s castles and go to all the places your brother has been. We shall have many adventures too.”*

*“When shall we go, Father?”*

*“Soon, but we have plenty of time. You are still so young.”*

When she turned sixteen a few months ago, she had pushed him to set out on their journey. *“I am not so young now.”*

*“You must wait until the summer. Summer is when men go on journeys.”*

But when spring came, her father fell ill. And now her adventure with her father, the thing she had looked forward to all her life, was never to be.

As she sat alternately staring at her father's face—because she would never be able to look upon it again—and looking away from it because it hurt too much to see him lifeless, she heard someone come into the room behind her.

"There you are." Warin clasped and unclasped his hands as he came toward her in a strange shuffling gait, as if he couldn't quite decide whether or not he wanted to walk forward. But he finally made it halfway across the room to her.

Mazy did her best to wipe the tears from her face before he noticed them.

"So, did Father have some potential husbands in mind for you? Someone he was thinking of betrothing you to, perhaps?"

"He never told me of any."

"Surely he must have known you would need someone to provide for you." He placed his hand against his chin, as if he was confused and mulling over this quandary.

*He probably thought you would provide for me. You are my brother, after all.*

"Perhaps I can find someone suitable, but I must say, I thought Father would have taken care of this."

She wanted to tell him not to trouble himself with finding her a husband, that she would try not to disrupt his life too much or eat too much food, and she could find her own husband among the villagers, perhaps a butcher or baker whose wife had died. But Father said sarcasm in a girl child was extremely rebellious. She did long to say it, though, just to see the look on Warin's puffy face.

"Well, I shall do my best." Warin sighed heavily. He did not

progress any farther into the room, did not view Father's body in his coffin, and said nothing to comfort Mazy before walking out.

She hated to admit it, even to herself, but she had been hoping that Warin would show her some compassion. Any half-decent person would have expressed some sympathy on the loss of their father. As a brother, he could have commiserated with her in grief and the prospect of never being able to talk to their father again. Though Father had never seemed very fond of Warin, he was still his father.

Perhaps Warin resented that Father had sent him away after his mother died. Mazy could not remember her father ever saying a kind word about Warin's mother, calling her a cold, selfish woman. Her father's animosity seemed to have spilled over onto Warin, as he rarely spoke of his oldest son, and when he did, he sounded predisposed against him.

Still, she had thought Warin would have at the very least pretended to mourn the father who was leaving his title and all his worldly possessions to him.

What was to become of her now? Could she trust Warin with her future? Would he match her with a man she could love and have a good life with? Someone who would not mistreat her and would be faithful? She rather suspected those things were not even a part of his thought process.

Mazy had given no thought to what would happen to her if her father died. He'd always been hearty and strong, despite his age, and she could not imagine him dying. Until he did.

If she could not remain here—and indeed, she could not imagine living with Warin and Edith—perhaps she could go to

Bedfordshire, where John was training squires with the Duke of Strachleigh. Would it be possible to stay with him there?

A messenger had been sent to John to tell him of their father's death, but she had heard no word from him. When he came, he would no doubt force Warin to show her some respect and care. She was not some stray dog to be handed off to a new owner, unwanted and soon to be forgotten.

John would make everything right.

John had still not arrived three days later, and so they determined to hold the funeral. The priest said they could not wait any longer or the body would start to stink. Just before the service was to start, a missive came from John.

I regret that I cannot come to my father's funeral. My duties prevent me from traveling at this time, and I am sure that his life and good name will be honored by the priest and he will be buried in the crypt in the churchyard, as was his wish.

Sir John of Wexcombe,  
Knight in King Richard's  
service

Mazy felt a sting in her chest that her brother did not even mention her, and even more hurt that he was not coming. Why

would his benefactor, the Duke of Strachleigh, not release him from his duties for a few days to attend his father's funeral?

She stood in the cold rain outside the family crypt, and in spite of the rain making everyone miserable, the priest seemed determined to say everything he'd intended to say as her father's body was laid to rest inside.

Warin and his wife stood together with their child's nurse, who did her best to comfort and amuse young Percy. Mazy's little nephew cried and screamed and fought to get down out of her arms.

Mazy let her tears flow, for how could anyone decipher her tears from the rain?

Every day Warin had spoken to her about the need for her to marry. Did he think of anything else? For someone who had never said more than a few words to her before, he seemed quite concerned about her future. But he was not concerned for her welfare, only for how to get rid of her at the best price.

The day after the funeral, he began listing potential husbands. He was sure to settle upon one soon, and though she didn't feel ready to get married, she had always known it was inevitable. But what kind of man would he be?

"The Earl of Brimley's wife died a few months ago," Warin said to her one morning, a week after her father's death. "If he is looking for another, you could hardly do better. He is very wealthy and might be willing to marry you with no money at all. If he wishes for more children, he might even pay a bride price."

"How old is the Earl of Brimley?"

"I don't know, perhaps fifty or sixty, but all the better for

you. He will die and might leave you an inheritance, and then you can marry again.”

Mazy let her mouth fall open, then choked out, “I would rather not marry someone quite so old.”

Warin waved his hand as if swatting at a gnat. “You are not so squeamish, are you? You are an orphan now and must put away childish notions of true love and all that. I shall write to him directly.”

Her father had been dead only seven days. She was still trying to accustom herself to the idea that he was gone. How could she endure her half brother’s incessant, callous way of throwing up men to her? And now he was writing to the Earl of Brimley, a man as old as her father, perhaps older.

But what choice did she have? She had to endure it, would have to marry, for Warin obviously did not wish to let her live in her own home—his home now—even long enough for her to get used to being without her father.

She’d imagined that one day she would marry a baron, like her father. She’d live in a castle with her children around her and would not send her sons off to be knights. Instead, she’d have tutors at home to teach them the skills to become a knight. Her daughters would learn to read and whatever else they desired to know. Her husband would be so wealthy that her children would never have to worry about making their own way in the world, and she’d be very happy.

Now that Father was gone, she began to wonder if any of her hopes and plans would come true. Would she end up the wife of a cruel husband, someone who would not care what she thought or

desired? Someone who disregarded her feelings? Or, even worse, would she end up alone and in poverty, barely able to survive, with no one to protect her or help her when she was in need?

She mustn't think the worst. Father always encouraged her to think hopeful thoughts, confident that all would turn out well.

John could help her. He'd told her that if someone tried to harm her, to send him word. He would make sure she was not alone and unprotected. John would help her find a good husband, someone who would treat her well and make sure she was well provided for.

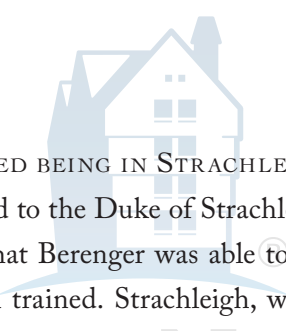
If John would not come to her, then she would go to him.

She went into her room and wrote a note for Warin saying that she was going to Strachleigh to visit John. She would find someone to accompany her on her journey, then pack her bags with clothes and essentials.

If her father could not take her to see new and interesting places, she would take herself.

THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

## T W O



BERENGER RELISHED BEING IN STRACHLEIGH WITH HIS SISTER, who was married to the Duke of Strachleigh. And it was in the duke's service that Berenger was able to train other young men as he had been trained. Strachleigh, whom Berenger had called Sir Geoffrey before he gained the title of duke, and who himself was an excellent swordsman, kept too busy with his duties and his large estate to help with the young men who had come to be trained to fight and serve with courage, integrity, and chivalry.

Berenger only wished his assistant was not Sir John of Wexcombe.

Just when Berenger was certain the man was not so bad and actually had some good qualities, he would do something such as what he had done that morning.

They were sitting down to eat their morning meal, breaking their fast with some of the servants in the room next to the

kitchen, when John suddenly stood up and threw his porridge. The wooden bowl hit the wall and broke in pieces, splattering mush on the wall and floor.

The women servants gasped or cried out, while Berenger's hand instinctively went to his dagger handle in his belt. Ready to spring from the bench, he watched Sir John as he looked around the small room that was crowded with people, a tense expression on his face.

Finally, while everyone stared at him in dumbfounded silence, he spoke in a much louder voice than was necessary. "This porridge tastes like dog dung." He glared at anyone who dared to look at him. His voice increased in volume with every word. "You can eat it if you want, but I'm not eating an animal's excrement."

He stalked toward the door, grabbing two handfuls of bread rolls as he went. "Having to survive off bread and water. A fine way to treat a knight."

As he left, he slammed the door behind him.

The servants glanced around with wide eyes and went back to eating.

Truly, the porridge was nearly the same as every day. Sir John must have been angry about something else. But Berenger never knew what kind of attitude he was going to wake up with. Sir John was unpredictable and volatile, but he had noticed it was always someone under him, someone with less power and authority, on whom John took out his ill temper.

Berenger ate most of his porridge, dumping the last bit in the slop bucket, then put his bowl on the table. He nodded to

the cook's helper, who was collecting the bowls. The young man looked surprised at even that small gesture of politeness and acknowledgment, and he nodded back. Berenger took some bread and smeared butter on it, then took a bite as he went on his way, ready to begin the day's training exercises.

Perhaps Sir John was upset about his father's death. Berenger still couldn't understand why he had not gone to the funeral.

Berenger had been standing nearby when the messenger came with the news that Sir John's father had died suddenly of an illness. He expressed his sorrow for Sir John at losing his father. Then Berenger explained that he understood because his own father had died only two years before.

Sir John had looked upset at first, even breathing hard and looking as if he would cry. But then his expression changed, as a muscle twitched in his cheek.

*"I suppose you got wronged, just as I did. We were sent away from home while our oldest brothers enjoyed an easy life and inherited everything. We have to slave and fight and work and hope that a war or a battle breaks out so we can distinguish ourselves enough to garner the king's favor, or we will never have our own property or enough wealth to do anything with our lives. We will never be anything more than soldiers and guards without some great luck or good fortune."*

It was true, more or less, although Berenger believed he could distinguish himself, regardless of whether war broke out.

*"When do you need to leave so you can be present for the funeral?"*

*"I'm not going."*

*"Where is your home?"*

*"Not far from Lode."*

*"You can get there in one day, if you ride hard."*

*"Why should I? My father is the only reason to go home, and now he's dead. There's nothing else for me there. My half brother will be the lord of the manor now."*

*"Don't you have younger siblings?"*

*"A sister."*

*"How old is she?"*

*"I don't know. Fifteen or sixteen."*

*"I'm sure she would like to see you, especially now."*

*"Why don't you go to the funeral?"*

*"He's not my father."* Berenger felt his face growing warm, but he reminded himself that Sir John had just found out he lost his father. *"Listen, Sir John, I know this is a hard time. You can take the rest of the day if you want. I can take care of whatever needs to be done."*

Sir John nodded and walked away.

Berenger might have excused him by saying he was one of those men who hated to show emotion, who held everything inside, but he knew that was not true from the way he behaved sometimes, like today when he threw his porridge bowl across the room.

John had returned to his duties the next morning, but Berenger wasn't sure he wanted him training knights today, with his volatile temper. And yet, with or without his help, it was time to begin the squires' training for the day.

He finished his buttered bread as he walked across the castle bailey to the stables, where the half dozen young pages and squires were supposed to be waiting. It was a cool spring

morning, cool enough for three layers of clothing, with a cold rain beginning to fall. A few of the knights in training were beginning to shiver.

Sir John was nowhere in sight.

“Get inside the stable,” Berenger ordered.

The young knights-in-training looked surprised and grateful as they headed into the relatively warm, dry building. Then they spent the next three hours practicing saddling and unsaddling their horses.

“This is a skill you will need no matter where you go,” Berenger said. “And in a battle or siege situation, you may not have a squire to do it for you. You will need to be able to saddle your horse as quickly as possible.”

The squires were very diligent to practice. They were a good lot who obeyed orders and worked hard. But Sir John was constantly complaining about them. For Berenger, it was harder to overlook Sir John’s constant criticisms of the squires than his terrible temper.

“Help me, please!”

A servant boy who looked about eight years old, his voice high and desperate, his eyes wide, was running across the bailey.

Berenger went toward him. “What is the matter?”

The boy ran toward him. “My mother hit her head and she’s bleeding. Please. Come with me.”

“Where is she?”

The boy turned around and ran toward a small servants’ barracks behind the castle.

Berenger never would have thought about going into the

barracks where the female servants lived. He was a knight, after all, and he adhered to the strict code of conduct that all knights were sworn to, but the boy looked so desperate.

Berenger went to the door and peeked inside the gloomy interior.

"Come, come," the boy said, motioning with his hand.

"I'm coming in," Berenger announced, unable to see if anyone was inside.

His eyes adjusted to the dim light and he followed the boy over to a low bed where a woman lay, her eyes closed. Blood matted her hair on one side.

"I tried to wake her," the boy said. "She won't wake up."

Berenger knelt and placed a hand over her lips and nose to see if he could feel any breath. He waited, but there was none that he could tell. Meanwhile, the boy had lifted his mother's hand and was holding it in both of his, his eyes fixed on Berenger.

"We need to find a healer," Berenger stood and hurried from the sad sight.

The boy followed him.

"What happened to her?" Berenger asked the boy as he hurried along. "How did she get the wound to her head?"

"Margaret, one of the other servants, said she fell and hit her head on a rock. She helped her back here to rest, but when Margaret left, Mother fell asleep and now she won't wake up."

"What is your name?"

"Roger, sir."

"Where is your father, Roger, and your brothers and sisters?"

"My father is dead, and I don't have brothers or sisters."

His heart sank. The poor boy. But Berenger's sister, Delia, would make sure the boy was taken care of. She was good and kind to her servants. For that reason the boy was more fortunate than most would be in his situation.

He finally located the woman they called "the healer." She hurried with him back to the woman's side. But after she had listened with her ear against the woman's chest, then against the woman's lips and nose, she shook her head sadly.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but your mother has gone to be with Jesus and the angels."

Little Roger's face was sober as he stared down at his mother.

"I am very sorry," Berenger said, placing a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Where will I go?" The boy's voice sent a pain straight to his heart at the woebegone high pitch and deep pain.

"Do not worry. You will stay here at Strachleigh Castle. Lady Delia will ensure you are taken care of."

The boy sat down and let his head rest on his dead mother's shoulder. He patted her cheek and closed his eyes.

Knights did not cry, but Berenger had to blink fast to clear the wetness from his eyes, remembering his own mother's death when he was hardly older than Roger. The death of any boy's mother was a pain that boy never forgot.

"Can you stay with him a few minutes," Berenger asked the healer, "while I go inform Lady Delia? I'm sure she'll send someone to comfort him." If he knew his sister, she would come herself.

“Of course.” The woman patted the boy’s shoulder with her wrinkled hand, pulling up a stool to sit beside him.

Berenger hurried out.

He climbed up the hill to the castle, thinking of how he might spend some time with the boy in the days to come, take him fishing in the stream or teach him to use a bow and shoot. He did not want the child to feel he was abandoned and forgotten.



Mazy started on her great adventure early in the morning after telling only a few of the older servants that she was going away and leaving the note for Warin. It would probably only take one day of travel to reach John, but she had never been that far from home in her life.

She mounted her horse and whispered, “God, please give us Your favor and protection.”

She rode to the end of the lane that led to her father’s castle, where a young man from the village was waiting for her.

Piers was the son of one of the older servants, whom she’d hired to travel with her. He was one of the few people in the village who owned a donkey that could be spared from the fields, since it was planting time. No one in the village owned a horse. She had not dared to take a horse for Piers, knowing Warin would be angry she took even one horse for herself. After all, everything belonged to Warin now.

Piers was young and strong from working in the fields, but he did not have the regal, confident bearing of a knight, or even

one of her father's guards. He walked with a slight stoop in his shoulders, though he was only twenty-three years old, and he had a strange, slow gait. She worried he would not appear able to defend her should robbers attack.

It was only a one-day trip, she told herself. They would be safe enough.

"I have a long knife," Piers assured her. "It's quite sharp. And I can defend you from any man in the realm who is bent on harming you."

Mazy had brought her knives as well. Keeping them close to her gave her comfort.

Her father had told her more than once, "*Men are not to be trusted alone with a fair maiden, especially one as fair as you.*"

"*You only say that because I am your daughter.*" She knew that all the fairest maidens in stories and ballads had either hair of gold or they were raven-haired and pale as milk. But her hair was brown and her skin was rather tan from all the time she spent outdoors in the sun.

"No." He shook his head and looked very grave. "*It is true, and you must be careful because of your beauty. You are young and innocent and do not know what men are capable of. You must promise me never to allow yourself to be alone with any of the guards.*"

He had warned her about the guards, but not the male servants or their tenants. She thought it was because none of them had the confidence to even raise their eyes in her presence. For this reason, and because she knew Piers a little better than the other tenants, she was certain he would never harm her.

She had been careful to take only the small amount of

jewelry her mother had specifically left her, and she brought her own belongings, only what she could fit into two saddlebags. She had also brought some coins that her father had given her over the years.

Leaving the books behind was the hardest. Her heart ached as she gazed at them one last time. But they were too heavy and cumbersome, so she took only her Psalter.

Rain began to fall as soon as they started out. At first, Piers's donkey kept up with the pace Mazy's horse set, but after an hour, he became so sluggish that Mazy had to force her mare to slow down.

Soon the donkey began to bray. Then he stopped.

"Let's get off the road," Piers said, a raindrop sliding down the bridge of his nose, then clinging to the tip, refusing to fall. "He may just need to graze a little."

They huddled under a stand of trees while the animals cropped some green grass at the edge of a field. At this pace, they surely would not reach their destination that day.

But she was on an adventure, she reminded herself. She tried not to focus on the fact that she was here with Piers and not her father, that her father would not be able to show her all the places he had spoken of. No, instead she would think about how she was escaping Warin and the dreadful future he was devising for her.

Around her was only a meadow, some trees, wildflowers, and a road, but she had never seen them before. They were new sights, and she could at least appreciate that.

"Thank goodness it's not very cold today," Piers said, wiping

the rain from his face with his wet hand, succeeding only in removing the larger drops of water.

“Yes.” But the rain dripping from her hair, soaking her clothing, and running down her neck was more unpleasant than she had anticipated. The wet clothing chafed her skin and made her shiver.

Perhaps she should have worn as many layers as Piers seemed to have on. A shirt was peeking above his laced-up tunic, a thin cloak over that, and another thicker cloak over all, with two hoods covering his head, and that was only what she was able to see. Meanwhile, she had only a thin linen underdress, a sleeveless summer bliaud that laced up the sides, and a rather thin cloak, the hood of which was plastered to her head, soaked through.

When Piers was able to coax his donkey back on the road, they continued on their way, struggling to dodge the muddiest parts of the road. They would have to stop and spend the night somewhere. The thought made her stomach sink a little. It would be all right, she told herself. She wanted to travel, and travelers must accept the difficulties of the road.

Whenever they encountered other travelers, Mazy studied them to see how they were dealing with the rain. A couple of men rode past them on large warhorses. They could be knights, as they wore expensive-looking clothing, rode like they were accustomed to being in the saddle, and had swords strapped on their backs. They wore hoods but looked as if the rain did not bother them at all. When she looked closer, she saw that their cloaks appeared to be made of waxed wool, as they were shedding water like a duck's feathers.

That's what she needed. Perhaps she could find someone at Strachleigh who could teach her how to wax her cloak.

They met a few people walking with sticks or staffs, with packs slung over their backs. One old woman was so bent over, the hump in her back was higher than her head. What was so important that she needed to travel in this rain? But the woman did not even glance at them, so focused as she was on the road just in front of her feet.

How many different people there were in the world! People who did things and knew things and worked at things Mazy had never thought of before. Her life had always been so isolated at her father's castle, although she'd learned many things from her father, the servants, and her tutors.

"Thank you, Father," she whispered under her breath.

And now she was going to be with her John. No doubt he would have many more interesting things to teach her that he'd learned in his training. She especially hoped he'd teach her how to wield a sword, which she'd always thought was the noblest way to defend oneself.

*Since 1798*