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**Opening Extract from...**

# **The Buried Giant**

Written by Kazuo Ishiguro

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KAZUO  
ISHIGURO

THE  
BURIED  
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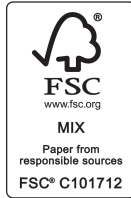
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DEBORAH ROGERS

1938-2014

# PART I

## Chapter One

You would have searched a long time for the sort of winding lane or tranquil meadow for which England later became celebrated. There were instead miles of desolate, uncultivated land; here and there rough-hewn paths over craggy hills or bleak moorland. Most of the roads left by the Romans would by then have become broken or overgrown, often fading into wilderness. Icy fogs hung over rivers and marshes, serving all too well the ogres that were then still native to this land. The people who lived nearby – one wonders what desperation led them to settle in such gloomy spots – might well have feared these creatures, whose panting breaths could be heard long before their deformed figures emerged from the mist. But such monsters were not cause for astonishment. People then would have regarded them as everyday hazards, and in those days there was so much else to worry about. How to get food out of the hard ground; how not to run out of firewood; how to stop the sickness that could kill a dozen pigs in a single day and produce green rashes on the cheeks of children.

In any case, ogres were not so bad provided one did not provoke them. One had to accept that every so often, perhaps following some obscure dispute in their ranks, a creature would come blundering into a village in a terrible rage, and despite shouts and brandishings of weapons, rampage about injuring anyone slow to move out of its path. Or that every so often, an ogre might carry

off a child into the mist. The people of the day had to be philosophical about such outrages.

In one such area on the edge of a vast bog, in the shadow of some jagged hills, lived an elderly couple, Axl and Beatrice. Perhaps these were not their exact or full names, but for ease, this is how we will refer to them. I would say this couple lived an isolated life, but in those days few were 'isolated' in any sense we would understand. For warmth and protection, the villagers lived in shelters, many of them dug deep into the hillside, connecting one to the other by underground passages and covered corridors. Our elderly couple lived within one such sprawling warren – 'building' would be too grand a word – with roughly sixty other villagers. If you came out of their warren and walked for twenty minutes around the hill, you would have reached the next settlement, and to your eyes, this one would have seemed identical to the first. But to the inhabitants themselves, there would have been many distinguishing details of which they would have been proud or ashamed.

I have no wish to give the impression that this was all there was to the Britain of those days; that at a time when magnificent civilisations flourished elsewhere in the world, we were here not much beyond the Iron Age. Had you been able to roam the countryside at will, you might well have discovered castles containing music, fine food, athletic excellence; or monasteries with inhabitants steeped in learning. But there is no getting around it. Even on a strong horse, in good weather, you could have ridden for days without spotting any castle or monastery looming out of the greenery. Mostly you would have found communities like the one I have just described, and unless you had with you gifts of food or clothing, or were ferociously armed, you would not have

been sure of a welcome. I am sorry to paint such a picture of our country at that time, but there you are.

To return to Axl and Beatrice. As I said, this elderly couple lived on the outer fringes of the warren, where their shelter was less protected from the elements and hardly benefited from the fire in the Great Chamber where everyone congregated at night. Perhaps there had been a time when they had lived closer to the fire; a time when they had lived with their children. In fact, it was just such an idea that would drift into Axl's mind as he lay in his bed during the empty hours before dawn, his wife soundly asleep beside him, and then a sense of some unnamed loss would gnaw at his heart, preventing him from returning to sleep.

Perhaps that was why, on this particular morning, Axl had abandoned his bed altogether and slipped quietly outside to sit on the old warped bench beside the entrance to the warren in wait for the first signs of daylight. It was spring, but the air still felt bitter, even with Beatrice's cloak, which he had taken on his way out and wrapped around himself. Yet he had become so absorbed in his thoughts that by the time he realised how cold he was, the stars had all but gone, a glow was spreading on the horizon, and the first notes of birdsong were emerging from the dimness.

He rose slowly to his feet, regretting having stayed out so long. He was in good health, but it had taken a while to shake off his last fever and he did not wish it to return. Now he could feel the damp in his legs, but as he turned to go back inside, he was well satisfied: for he had this morning succeeded in remembering a number of things that had eluded him for some time. Moreover, he now sensed he was about to come to some momentous decision – one that had been put off far too long – and felt an excitement within him which he was eager to share with his wife.



Inside, the passageways of the warren were still in complete darkness, and he was obliged to feel his way the short distance back to the door of his chamber. Many of the 'doorways' within the warren were simple archways to mark the threshold to a chamber. The open nature of this arrangement would not have struck the villagers as compromising their privacy, but allowed rooms to benefit from any warmth coming down the corridors from the great fire or the smaller fires permitted within the warren. Axl and Beatrice's room, however, being too far from any fire had something we might recognise as an actual door; a large wooden frame criss-crossed with small branches, vines and thistles which someone going in and out would each time have to lift to one side, but which shut out the chilly draughts. Axl would happily have done without this door, but it had over time become an object of considerable pride to Beatrice. He had often returned to find his wife pulling off withered pieces from the construct and replacing them with fresh cuttings she had gathered during the day.

This morning, Axl moved the barrier just enough to let himself in, taking care to make as little noise as possible. Here, the early dawn light was leaking into the room through the small chinks of their outer wall. He could see his hand dimly before him, and on the turf bed, Beatrice's form still sound asleep under the thick blankets.

He was tempted to wake his wife. For a part of him felt sure that if, at this moment, she were awake and talking to him, whatever last barriers remained between him and his decision would finally crumble. But it was some time yet until the community roused itself and the day's work began, so he settled himself on the low stool in the corner of the chamber, his wife's cloak still tight around him.

He wondered how thick the mist would be that morning, and if, as the dark faded, he would see it had seeped through the cracks right into their chamber. But then his thoughts drifted away from such matters, back to what had been preoccupying him. Had they always lived like this, just the two of them, at the periphery of the community? Or had things once been quite different? Earlier, outside, some fragments of a remembrance had come back to him: a small moment when he was walking down the long central corridor of the warren, his arm around one of his own children, his gait a little crouched not on account of age as it might be now, but simply because he wished to avoid hitting his head on the beams in the murky light. Possibly the child had just been speaking to him, saying something amusing, and they were both of them laughing. But now, as earlier outside, nothing would quite settle in his mind, and the more he concentrated, the fainter the fragments seemed to grow. Perhaps these were just an elderly fool's imaginings. Perhaps it was that God had never given them children.

You may wonder why Axl did not turn to his fellow villagers for assistance in recalling the past, but this was not as easy as you might suppose. For in this community the past was rarely discussed. I do not mean that it was taboo. I mean that it had somehow faded into a mist as dense as that which hung over the marshes. It simply did not occur to these villagers to think about the past – even the recent one.

To take an instance, one that had bothered Axl for some time: He was sure that not so long ago, there had been in their midst a woman with long red hair – a woman regarded as crucial to their village. Whenever anyone injured themselves or fell sick, it had been this red-haired woman, so skilled at healing, who was

immediately sent for. Yet now this same woman was no longer to be found anywhere, and no one seemed to wonder what had occurred, or even to express regret at her absence. When one morning Axl had mentioned the matter to three neighbours while working with them to break up the frosted field, their response told him that they genuinely had no idea what he was talking about. One of them had even paused in his work in an effort to remember, but had ended by shaking his head. 'Must have been a long time ago,' he had said.

'Neither have I any memory of such a woman,' Beatrice had said to him when he had brought up the matter with her one night. 'Perhaps you dreamt her up for your own needs, Axl, even though you've a wife here beside you and with a back straighter than yours.'

This had been some time the previous autumn, and they had been lying side by side on their bed in the pitch black, listening to the rain beating against their shelter.

'It's true you've hardly aged at all down the years, princess,' Axl had said. 'But the woman was no dream, and you'd remember her yourself if you spared a moment to think about it. There she was at our door only a month ago, a kindly soul asking if there was anything she might bring us. Surely you remember.'

'But why was she wishing to bring us anything at all? Was she a kin to us?'

'I don't believe she was, princess. She was just being kind. Surely you remember. She was often at the door asking if we weren't cold or hungry.'

'What I'm asking, Axl, is what business was it of hers to single us out for her kindness?'

'I wondered myself at the time, princess. I remember thinking

here's a woman given to tending the sick, and yet here's the two of us both as healthy as any in the village. Is there perhaps talk of a plague on the way and she's here to look us over? But it turns out there's no plague and she's just being kind. Now we're talking about her there's even more comes back to me. She was standing there telling us not to mind the children calling us names. That was it. Then we never saw her again.'

'Not only is this red-haired woman a dream from your mind, Axl, she's a fool to be worrying herself about a few children and their games.'

'Just what I thought at the time, princess. What harm can children do us and they just passing the time of day when the weather's too dreary outside. I told her how we hadn't given it a second thought, but she meant kindly all the same. And then I remember her saying it was a pity we had to spend our nights without a candle.'

'If this creature pitied us our lack of a candle,' Beatrice had said, 'she had one thing right at least. It's an insult, forbidding us a candle through nights like these and our hands as steady as any of them. While there's others with candles in their chamber, senseless each night from cider, or else with children running wild. Yet it's our candle they've taken, and now I can hardly see your outline, Axl, though you're right beside me.'

'There's no insult intended, princess. It's just the way things have always been done and that's all there is to it.'

'Well it's not just your dream woman thinks it strange we should have our candle taken from us. Yesterday or was it the day before, I was at the river and walking past the women and I'm sure I heard them saying, when they supposed I'd gone out of hearing, how it was a disgrace an upright couple like us having

to sit in the dark each night. So your dream woman's not alone in thinking what she does.'

'She's no dream woman I keep telling you, princess. Everyone here knew her a month ago and had a good word for her. What can it be makes everyone, yourself included, forget she ever lived?'

Recalling the conversation now on this spring's morning, Axl felt almost ready to admit he had been mistaken about the red-haired woman. He was after all an ageing man and prone to occasional confusion. And yet, this instance of the red-haired woman had been merely one of a steady run of such puzzling episodes. Frustratingly, he could not at this moment think of so many examples, but they had been numerous, of that there was no doubt. There had been, for instance, the incident concerning Marta.

This was a little girl of nine or ten who had always had a reputation for fearlessness. All the hair-raising tales of what could happen to wandering children seemed not to dampen her sense of adventure. So the evening when, with less than an hour of daylight remaining, the mist coming in and the wolves audible on the hillside, the word went around that Marta was missing, everyone had stopped what they were doing in alarm. For the next little while, voices called her name all around the warren and footsteps rushed up and down its corridors as villagers searched every sleeping chamber, the storage burrows, the cavities beneath the rafters, any hiding place a child might go to amuse herself.

Then in the midst of this panic, two shepherds returning from their shift on the hills came into the Great Chamber and began warming themselves by the fire. As they did so, one of them announced how the day before they had watched a wren-eagle circle above their heads, once, twice, then a third time. There was no mistake, he said, it had been a wren-eagle. Word quickly went

around the warren and soon a crowd had gathered around the fire to listen to the shepherds. Even Axl had hurried to join them, for the appearance of a wren-eagle in their country was news indeed. Among the many powers attributed to the wren-eagle was the ability to frighten away wolves, and elsewhere in the land, it was said, wolves had vanished altogether on account of these birds.

At first the shepherds were questioned eagerly and made to repeat their story over and over. Then steadily a scepticism began to spread among the listeners. There had been many similar claims, someone pointed out, and each time they had proved unfounded. Someone else stated that these same two shepherds had only the previous spring brought back an identical story, and yet no further sightings had followed. The shepherds angrily denied bringing any such previous report, and soon the crowd was dividing between those taking the shepherds' side and those claiming some memory of the alleged episode the previous year.

As the quarrel grew heated, Axl found coming over him that familiar nagging sense that something was not right, and removing himself from the shouting and jostling, went outside to stare at the darkening sky and the mist rolling over the ground. And after a while, fragments began to piece themselves together in his mind, of the missing Marta, of the danger, of how not long ago everyone had been searching for her. But already these recollections were growing confused, in much the way a dream does in the seconds after waking, and it was only with a supreme act of concentration that Axl held onto the thought of little Marta at all while voices behind him continued to argue about the wren-eagle. Then, as he was standing there like that, he heard the sound of a girl singing to herself and saw Marta emerge before him out of the mist.

‘You’re a strange one, child,’ Axl said as she came skipping up to him. ‘Aren’t you afraid of the dark? Of the wolves or the ogres?’

‘Oh, I’m afraid of them, sir,’ she said with a smile. ‘But I know how to hide from them. I hope my parents haven’t been asking for me. I got such a hiding last week.’

‘Asking for you? Of course they’ve been asking for you. Isn’t the whole village searching for you? Listen to that uproar inside. That’s all for you, child.’

Marta laughed and said: ‘Oh stop it, sir! I know they’ve not missed me. And I can hear, that’s not me they’re shouting about.’

When she said this, it occurred to Axl that sure enough the girl was right: the voices inside were not arguing about her at all, but about some other matter altogether. He leaned towards the doorway to hear better, and as he caught the odd phrase amidst the raised voices, it began to come back to him, about the shepherds and the wren-eagle. He was wondering if he should explain something of this to Marta when she suddenly skipped past him and went inside.

He followed her in, anticipating the relief and joy her appearance would cause. And to be frank, it had occurred to him that by coming in with her, he would get a little of the credit for her safe return. But as they entered the Great Chamber the villagers were still so engrossed in their quarrel over the shepherds only a few of them even bothered to look their way. Marta’s mother did come away from the crowd long enough to say to the child: ‘So here you are! Don’t you be wandering off that way! How often must I tell you?’ before turning her attention back to the arguments raging around the fire. At this, Marta gave Axl a grin as though to say: ‘See what I told you?’ and vanished into the shadows in search of her companions.

The room had grown significantly lighter. Their chamber, being on the outer fringe, had a small window to the outside, though it was too high to gaze out of without standing on a stool. It was at this moment covered with a cloth, but now an early ray of sun was penetrating from one corner, casting a beam over where Beatrice was sleeping. Axl could see, caught in this ray, what looked like an insect hovering in the air just above his wife's head. He then realised it was a spider, suspended by its invisible vertical thread, and even as he watched, it started on its smooth descent. Rising noiselessly, Axl crossed the small room and swept his hand through the space above his sleeping wife, catching the spider within his palm. Then he stood there a moment looking down at her. There was a peacefulness on her sleeping face he rarely saw now when she was awake, and the sudden rush of happiness the sight brought him took him by surprise. He knew then he had made up his mind, and he wanted again to awaken her, just so he might break to her his news. But he saw the selfishness of such an action – and besides, how could he be so sure of her response? In the end he went back quietly to his stool, and as he seated himself again, remembered the spider and opened his hand gently.

When earlier he had been sitting on the bench outside waiting for the first light, he had tried to recall how he and Beatrice had first come to discuss the idea of their journey. He had thought then he had located a particular conversation they had had one night in this same chamber, but now, as he watched the spider run round the edge of his hand and onto the earthen floor, it struck him with certainty that the first mention of the subject had come that day the stranger in dark rags had passed through the village.

It had been a grey morning – was it as long ago now as last November? – and Axl had been striding beside the river along a



footpath overhung with willows. He was hurrying back to the warren from the fields, perhaps to fetch a tool or receive new instructions from a foreman. In any case, he was stopped by a burst of raised voices from beyond the bushes to his right. His first thought was of ogres, and he searched quickly around for a rock or stick. Then he realised the voices – all of women – though angry and excited, lacked the panic that accompanied ogre attacks. He nevertheless pushed his way determinedly through a hedge of juniper shrubs and stumbled into a clearing, where he saw five women – not in their first youth, but still of child-bearing age – standing closely together. Their backs were turned to him and they went on shouting at something in the distance. He was almost up to them before one of the women noticed him with a start, but then the others turned and regarded him almost with insolence.

‘Well, well,’ said one. ‘Perhaps it’s chance or something more. But here’s the husband and hopefully he’ll drive sense into her.’

The woman who had seen him first said: ‘We told your wife not to go but she wouldn’t listen. She’s insisting she’ll take food to the stranger though she’s most likely a demon or else some elf disguised.’

‘Is my wife in danger? Ladies, please explain yourselves.’

‘There’s a strange woman been wandering around us all morning,’ another said. ‘Hair down her back and a cloak of black rags. She claimed to be a Saxon but she’s not dressed like any Saxon we ever met. She tried to creep up behind us on the riverbank when we were attending to the laundry, but we saw her in good time and chased her away. But she kept returning, acting like she was heart-broken for something, other times asking us for food. We reckon she was all the while aiming her spell straight towards your wife, sir, for twice this morning already we had to

hold Beatrice back by the arms, so intent was she on going to the demon. And now she's fought us all off and gone up to the old thorn where even now the demon's sitting waiting for her. We held her all we could, sir, but it must be the demon's powers already moving through her because her strength was unnatural for a woman so thin-boned and aged as your wife.'

'The old thorn . . .'

'She set off only a moment ago, sir. But that's a demon to be sure, and if you're off after her you'll watch you're not stumbling or cutting yourself on a poisoned thistle the way it will never heal.'

Axl did his best to hide his irritation with these women, saying politely: 'I'm grateful, ladies. I'll go and see what my wife is up to. Excuse me.'

To our villagers, 'the old thorn' denoted a local beauty spot as much as the actual hawthorn tree that grew seemingly right out of the rock at the edge of the promontory a short walk from the warren. On a sunny day, provided the wind was not strong, it was a pleasant place to pass the time. You had a good view of the land down to the water, of the river's curve and the marshes beyond. On Sundays children often played around the gnarled roots, sometimes daring to jump off the end of the promontory, which in fact had only a gentle drop that would cause a child no injury, but simply to roll like a barrel down the grassy slope. But on a morning like this one, when adults and children alike were busy with tasks, the spot would have been deserted, and Axl, coming through the mist up the incline, was not surprised to see the two women were alone, their figures almost silhouettes against the white sky. Sure enough, the stranger, seated with her back against the rock, was dressed curiously. From a distance, at least, her cloak appeared to be made of many separate pieces of

cloth stitched together, and it was now flapping in the wind, giving its owner the appearance of a great bird about to take flight. Beside her, Beatrice – still on her feet, though with head lowered towards her companion – appeared slight and vulnerable. They were in earnest conversation, but spotting Axl's approach below, stopped and watched him. Then Beatrice came to the edge of the promontory and called down:

‘Just stop there, husband, no further! I'll come to you. But don't climb up here and be disturbing this poor lady's peace now she's at last able to rest her feet and eat a little of yesterday's bread.’

Axl waited as instructed and before long saw his wife coming down the long field-path to where he was standing. She came right up to him, and concerned no doubt that the wind would carry their words up to the stranger, said in a low voice:

‘Have those foolish women sent you after me, husband? When I was their age, I'm sure it was the old ones were full of fear and foolish beliefs, reckoning every stone cursed and each stray cat an evil spirit. But now I'm grown old myself, what do I find but it's the young are riddled with beliefs like they never heard the Lord's promise to walk beside us at all times. Look at that poor stranger, see her yourself, exhausted and solitary, and she's wandered the forest and fields for four days, village after village commanding her to travel on. And it's Christian country she's walked across, but taken for a demon or maybe a leper though her skin bears no mark of it. Now, husband, I hope you're not here to tell me I'm not to give this poor woman comfort and what sorry food I have with me.’

‘I wouldn't tell you any such thing, princess, for I see for myself what you're saying is true. I was thinking before I even came here how it's a shameful thing we can't receive a stranger with kindness any more.’

‘Then go on with your business, husband, for I’m sure they’ll be complaining again how slow you are at your work, and before you know they’ll have the children chanting at us again.’

‘No one’s ever said I’m slow in my work, princess. Where did you hear such a thing? I’ve never heard a word of such complaint and I’m able to take the same burden as any man twenty years younger.’

‘I’m only teasing, husband. Right enough, there’s no one complaining about your work.’

‘If there’s children calling us names, it’s not to do with my work being fast or slow but parents too foolish or more likely drunk to teach them manners or respect.’

‘Calm yourself, husband. I told you I was just teasing and I won’t do so again. The stranger was telling me something that greatly interests me and may some time interest you too. But she needs to finish the telling of it, so let me ask you again to hurry on with whatever task you have to do and leave me to listen to her and give what comfort I can.’

‘I’m sorry, princess, if I spoke harshly to you just then.’

But Beatrice had already turned and was climbing the path back to the thorn tree and the figure in the flapping cloak.

A little later, having completed his errand, Axl was returning to the fields, and at the risk of testing the patience of his colleagues, deviated from his route to go past the old thorn again. For the truth was that while he had fully shared his wife’s scorn for the suspicious instincts of the women, he had not been able to free himself from the thought that the stranger did pose some sort of threat, and he had been uneasy since leaving Beatrice with her. He was relieved then to see his wife’s figure, alone on the promontory in front of the rock, looking out at the sky. She seemed lost

in thought, and failed to notice him until he called up to her. As he watched her descending the path, more slowly than before, it occurred to him not for the first time that there was something different lately in her gait. She was not limping exactly, but it was as though she were nursing some secret pain somewhere. When he asked her, as she approached, what had become of her odd companion, Beatrice said simply: 'She went on her way.'

'She would have been grateful for your kindness, princess. Did you speak long with her?'

'I did and she had a deal to say.'

'I can see she said something to trouble you, princess. Perhaps those women were right and she was one best avoided.'

'She's not upset me, Axl. She has me thinking though.'

'You're in a strange mood. Are you sure she hasn't put some spell on you before vanishing into the air?'

'Walk up there to the thorn, husband, and you'll see her on the path and only recently departed. She's hoping for better charity from those around the hill.'

'Well then I'll leave you, princess, since I see you've come to no harm. God will be pleased for the kindness you've shown as is always your way.'

But this time his wife seemed reluctant to let him go. She grasped his arm, as though momentarily to steady herself, then let her head rest on his chest. As though by its own instinct, his hand rose to caress her hair, grown tangled in the wind, and when he glanced down at her he was surprised to see her eyes still wide open.

'You're in a strange mood, right enough,' he said. 'What did that stranger say to you?'

She kept her head on his chest for a moment longer. Then she

straightened and let go of him. ‘Now I think of it, Axl, there may be something in what you’re always saying. It’s queer the way the world’s forgetting people and things from only yesterday and the day before that. Like a sickness come over us all.’

‘Just what I was saying, princess. Take that red-haired woman ...’

‘Never mind the red-haired woman, Axl. It’s what else we’re not remembering.’ She had said this while looking away into the mist-layered distance, but now she looked straight at him and he could see her eyes were filled with sadness and yearning. And it was then – he was sure – that she said to him: ‘You’ve long set your heart against it, Axl, I know. But it’s time now to think on it anew. There’s a journey we must go on, and no more delay.’

‘A journey, princess? What sort of journey?’

‘A journey to our son’s village. It’s not far, husband, we know that. Even with our slow steps, it’s a few days’ walk at most, a little way east beyond the Great Plain. And the spring will soon be upon us.’

‘We might go on such a trip, certainly, princess. Was there something that stranger said just now got you thinking of it?’

‘It’s been a thing in my thoughts a long time, Axl, though it’s what that poor woman said just now makes me wish to delay no further. Our son awaits us in his village. How much longer must we keep him waiting?’

‘When the spring’s here, princess, we’ll certainly think about just such a journey. But why do you say it’s my wishes always stood in the way of it?’

‘I don’t remember now all that’s passed between us on it, Axl. Only that you always set your heart against it, even as I longed for it.’

‘Well, princess, let’s talk about it more when there’s no work waiting and neighbours ready to call us slow. Let me go on my way just now. We’ll talk more on it soon.’

But in the days that followed, even if they alluded to the idea of this journey, they never talked properly about it. For they found they became oddly uncomfortable whenever the topic was broached, and before long an understanding had grown between them, in the silent way understandings do between a husband and wife of many years, to avoid the subject as much as possible. I say ‘as much as possible’, for there appeared at times to be a need – a compulsion, you might say – to which one or the other would have to yield. But whatever discussions they had in such circumstances inevitably ended quickly in evasiveness or bad temper. And on the one occasion Axl had asked his wife straight out what the strange woman had said to her that day up at the old thorn, Beatrice’s expression had clouded, and she had seemed for a moment on the verge of tears. After this, Axl had taken care to avoid any reference to the stranger.

After a while Axl could no longer remember how talk of this journey had started, or what it had ever meant to them. But then this morning, sitting outside in the cold hour before dawn, his memory seemed partially at least to clear, and many things had come back to him: the red-haired woman; Marta; the stranger in dark rags; other memories with which we need not concern ourselves here. And he had remembered, quite vividly, what had happened only a few Sundays ago, when they had taken Beatrice’s candle from her.

Sundays were a day of rest for these villagers, at least to the extent that they did not work in the fields. But the livestock had still to be cared for, and with so many other tasks waiting

to be done, the pastor had accepted the impracticality of forbidding everything that might be construed as labour. So it was that when Axl emerged into the spring sunshine that particular Sunday after a morning of mending boots, the sight that greeted him was of his neighbours spread all around the terrain in front of the warren, some sitting in the patchy grass, others on small stools or logs, talking, laughing and working. Children were playing everywhere, and one group had gathered around two men constructing on the grass the wheel for a wagon. It was the first Sunday of the year the weather had permitted such outdoor activity, and there was an almost festive atmosphere. Nevertheless, as he stood there at the warren entrance and gazed beyond the villagers to where the land sloped down towards the marshes, Axl could see the mist rising again, and supposed that by the afternoon they would be submerged once more in grey drizzle.

He had been standing there a while when he became aware of a commotion going on over down by the fencing to the grazing fields. It did not greatly interest him at first, but then something in the breeze caught his ear and made him straighten. For though his eyesight had grown annoyingly blurred with the years, Axl's hearing had remained reliable, and he had discerned, in the muddle of shouting emerging from the crowd by the fence, Beatrice's voice raised in distress.

Others too were stopping what they were doing to turn and stare. But now Axl hurried through their midst, narrowly avoiding wandering children and objects left on the grass. Before he could reach the small jostling knot of people, however, it suddenly dispersed, and Beatrice emerged from its centre, clutching something with both hands to her breast. The faces around



her mostly showed amusement, but the woman who quickly appeared at his wife's shoulder – the widow of a blacksmith who had died of fever the previous year – had features twisted with fury. Beatrice shook off her tormentor, her own face all the time a stern, near-blank mask, but when she saw Axl coming towards her, it broke into emotion.

Thinking about this now, it seemed to Axl the look on his wife's face then had been, more than anything else, one of overwhelming relief. It was not that Beatrice had believed all would be well once he had arrived; but his presence had made all the difference to her. She had gazed at him not just with relief, but also something like pleading, and held out to him the object she had been jealously guarding.

'This is ours, Axl! We'll not sit in darkness any longer. Take it quickly, husband, it's ours!'

She was holding towards him a squat, somewhat misshapen candle. The blacksmith's widow tried again to snatch it from her, but Beatrice struck away the invading hand.

'Take it, husband! That child there, little Nora, she brought it to me this morning after making it with her own hands, thinking we'd grown tired of spending our nights as we do.'

This set off another round of shouting and also some laughter. But Beatrice went on gazing at Axl, her expression full of trust and entreaty, and it was a picture of her face at that moment which had first come back to him this morning on the bench outside the warren as he had sat waiting for the dawn to break. How was it he had forgotten this episode when it could have occurred no more than three weeks ago? How could it be he had not thought about it again until today?

Although he had stretched out his arm, he had not been able

to take the candle – the crowd had kept him just out of reach – and he had said, loudly and with some conviction: ‘Don’t worry, princess. Don’t you worry.’ He was conscious of the emptiness of what he was saying even as he spoke, so he was surprised when the crowd quietened, and even the blacksmith’s widow took a step back. Only then did he realise the reaction had not been to his words, but to the approach behind him of the pastor.

‘What manners are these for the Lord’s day?’ The pastor strode past Axl and glared at the now silent gathering. ‘Well?’

‘It’s Mistress Beatrice, sir,’ the blacksmith’s widow said. ‘She’s got herself a candle.’

Beatrice’s face was a tight mask again, but she did not avoid the pastor’s gaze when it settled on her.

‘I can see for myself it’s true, Mistress Beatrice,’ the pastor said. ‘Now you’ll not have forgotten the council’s edict that you and your husband will not be permitted candles in your chamber.’

‘We’ve neither of us ever tumbled a candle in our lives, sir. We will not sit night after night in darkness.’

‘The decision has been made and you’re to abide by it until the council decides otherwise.’

Axl saw the anger blaze in her eyes. ‘It’s nothing but unkindness. That’s all it is.’ She said this quietly, almost under her breath, but looking straight at the pastor.

‘Remove the candle from her,’ the pastor said. ‘Do as I say. Take it from her.’

As several hands reached towards her, it seemed to Axl she had not fully understood what the pastor had said. For she stood in the middle of the jostling with a puzzled look, continuing to grip the candle as if only by some forgotten instinct. Then panic seemed to seize her and she held the candle out towards Axl again, even as

she was knocked off balance. She did not fall on account of those pressing in on her, and recovering, held out the candle for him yet again. He tried to take it, but another hand snatched it away, and then the pastor's voice boomed out:

'Enough! Leave Mistress Beatrice in peace and none of you speak unkindly to her. She's an old woman who doesn't understand all she does. Enough I say! This is no fit behaviour for the Lord's day.'

Axl, finally reaching her, took her in his arms, and the crowd melted away. When he recalled this moment, it seemed to him they stayed like that for a long time, standing close together, she with her head resting on his chest, just the way she had done the day of the strange woman's visit, as though she were merely weary and wishing to catch her breath. He continued to hold her as the pastor called again for the people to disperse. When finally they separated and looked around themselves, they found they were alone beside the cow field and its barred wooden gate.

'What does it matter, princess?' he said. 'What do we need with a candle? We're well used to moving around our room without one. And don't we keep ourselves entertained well enough with our talk, candle or no candle?'

He observed her carefully. She appeared dreamy, and not particularly upset.

'I'm sorry, Axl,' she said. 'The candle's gone. I should have kept it a secret for the two of us. But I was overjoyed when the young girl brought it to me and she'd crafted it herself just for us. Now it's gone. No matter.'

'No matter at all, princess.'

'They think us a foolish pair, Axl.'

She took a step forward and placed her head on his chest again.

And it was then that she said, her voice muffled so he at first thought he had misheard:

‘Our son, Axl. Do you remember our son? When they were pushing me just now, it was our son I remembered. A fine, strong, upright man. Why must we stay in this place? Let’s go to our son’s village. He’ll protect us and see no one treats us ill. Will your heart not change on it, Axl, and all these years now passed? Do you still say we can’t go to him?’

As she said this, softly into his chest, many fragments of memory tugged at Axl’s mind, so much so that he felt almost faint. He loosened his hold on her and stepped back, fearing he might sway and cause her to lose her own balance.

‘What’s this you’re saying, princess? Was I ever the one to stop us journeying to our son’s village?’

‘But surely you were, Axl. Surely you were.’

‘When did I speak against such a journey, princess?’

‘I always thought you did, husband. But oh, Axl, I don’t remember clearly now you question it. And why do we stand out here, fine day though it is?’

Beatrice appeared confused again. She looked into his face, then all around her, at the pleasant sunshine, their neighbours once more giving attention to their activities.

‘Let’s go and sit in our chamber,’ she said after a while. ‘Let it be just the two of us for a while. A fine day, right enough, but I’m all tired out. Let’s go inside.’

‘That’s right, princess. Sit down and rest a while, out of this sun. You’ll soon feel better.’

There were others awake now all around the warren. The shepherds must have gone out some time ago though he had been so lost in thought he had not even heard them. At the other

end of the room Beatrice made a murmuring sound, as though she were preparing to sing, then turned over under the blankets. Recognising these signals, Axl made his way across to the bed in silence, sat carefully on its edge and waited.

Beatrice shifted onto her back, opened her eyes partially and gazed at Axl.

‘Good morning, husband,’ she said eventually. ‘I’m glad to see the spirits chose not to take you away as I slept.’

‘Princess, there’s something I want to talk about.’

Beatrice went on gazing up at him, her eyes still only half open. Then she brought herself up to a sitting posture, her face crossing the beam of light that earlier had illuminated the spider. Her grey mane, untied and matted, hung stiffly down past her shoulders, but Axl still felt happiness stir within him at this sight of her in the morning light.

‘What is it you have to say, Axl, and before I’ve had time to rub the sleep from my eyes?’

‘We talked before, princess, about a journey we might make. Well, here’s the spring upon us, and perhaps it’s time we set off.’

‘Set off, Axl? Set off when?’

‘As soon as we’re able. We need only be gone a few days. The village can spare us. We’ll talk to the pastor.’

‘And will we go to see our son, Axl?’

‘That’s where we’ll go. To see our son.’

Outside the birds were now in chorus. Beatrice turned her gaze towards the window and the sun leaking past the cloth hung over it.

‘Some days I remember him clear enough,’ she said. ‘Then the next day it’s as if a veil’s fallen over his memory. But our son’s a fine and good man, I know that for sure.’

‘Why is he not with us here now, princess?’

‘I don’t know, Axl. It could be he quarrelled with the elders and had to leave. I’ve asked around and there’s no one here remembers him. But he wouldn’t have done anything to bring shame on himself, I know for sure. Can you remember nothing of it yourself, Axl?’

‘When I was outside just now, doing my best to remember all I could in the stillness, many things came back to me. But I can’t remember our son, neither his face nor his voice, though sometimes I think I can see him when he was a small boy, and I’m leading him by the hand beside the riverbank, or when he was weeping one time and I was reaching out to comfort him. But what he looks like today, where he’s living, if he has a son of his own, I don’t remember at all. I was hoping you’d remember more, princess.’

‘He’s our son,’ Beatrice said. ‘So I can feel things about him, even if I don’t remember clearly. And I know he longs for us to leave this place and be living with him under his protection.’

‘He’s our flesh and blood, so why would he not want us to join him?’

‘Even so, I’ll miss this place, Axl. This small chamber of ours and this village. No light thing to leave a place you’ve known all your life.’

‘No one’s asking us to do it without thought, princess. While I was waiting for the sun to rise just now, I was thinking we’ll need to make this journey to our son’s village and talk with him. For even if we’re his mother and father, it’s not for us to arrive one fine day and demand to live as part of his village.’

‘You’re right, husband.’

‘There’s another thing troubles me, princess. This village may

only be a few days away as you say. But how will we know where to find it?’

Beatrice fell silent, gazing into the space before her, her shoulders swaying gently with her breathing. ‘I believe we’ll know our way well enough, Axl,’ she said eventually. ‘Even if we don’t yet know his exact village, I’ll have travelled to ones nearby often enough with the other women when trading our honey and tin. I’ll know my way blindfolded to the Great Plain, and the Saxon village beyond where we’ve often rested. Our son’s village can only be a little way further, so we’ll find it with little trouble. Axl, are we really to go soon?’

‘Yes, princess. We’ll start preparing today.’