
Opening Extract from...

The Ill-Made Knight

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Prologue
Calais, June, 1381

The sound of iron-shod hooves rang on the cobbles of the gatehouse road like the sound of weapons hitting armour. As the cavalcade passed into the gatehouse with the arms of England in painted and gilded stone, the soldiers on the gate stood still, and the gate captain bowed deeply as the lord passed at the head of his retinue. He was dressed entirely in red and black; his badge, a spur rowel, repeated endlessly on his velvet gown, his swordbelt, his cloak and his horse's magnificent red, black and gold barding, all of which was cloth covered, though it could not conceal the small fortune in plate armour he wore. By his side rode his squire, equally resplendent in red, black and gold, carrying his knight's helmet and lance. Behind them rode a dozen professional men-at-arms, in full harness, their new Italian steel armour gleaming despite a cold, rainy day on the outskirts of Bruges. Behind the men-at-arms rode another dozen English archers who wore almost as much armour as the men-at-arms, and behind them rode another dozen pages. Then came four wagons, and behind the wagons rode servants, also armed. Every man in the column wore the red and black; every man had a gold spur rowel badge on his cloak.

The knight of the spur rowels returned the salute of the gate captain, raising a small wooden baton to his forehead and bowing slightly in the saddle. He smiled, which in return coaxed a smile from the scarred face of the gate captain.

He reined in. 'John,' he said. 'The captain will want to see our letters of passage and our passes.'

His squire handed the helmet and lance to a page and reached into his belt pouch.

The gate captain bowed. 'My lord. All of us know the arms of

Sir William Gold.' He accepted the papers. 'The Duke of Burgundy informed us you were en route.'

Sir William Gold made an odd facial movement – half a smile, with only the left side of his mouth moving. 'How kind of him,' he said. 'I'd be wary of forty armed men on my roads, too.' He leaned down from the saddle. 'You're English.'

'Yes, my lord,' the man said.

'I know you. Giles something. Something Giles.' Sir William took the hood hat from his head and shook the rain off it.

The man's smile became broader. 'Anselm Saint-Gilles, my lord.'

'You were with – damn it, I'm an old man, Saint-Gilles – Brignais. You were at Brignais, with—'

'Nay, my lord, but I wish I had been. I was Sir Robert Knolly's man.' He was obviously pleased to have been recognized. 'I was an archer, then.'

'And now a man-at-arms – well done, Saint-Gilles.' Sir William reached down and offered his hand to clasp, and the gate captain took it.

'Tell an old war-horse where the best wine is? I don't know Calais, and I've a four-day wait for a ship to England.' Sir William's eyes seemed to twinkle.

'My lord, the White Swan is not the largest inn, but it has the most courteous keeper, the best wine, and it is' – the man raised his eyebrows expressively – 'convenient to the baths.' He bowed again and handed up the leather roll that contained their passports and letters from a dozen kings and independent lords and *communes*. The Count of Savoy, the Duke of Milan, the Republic of Florence and the Duke of Burgundy were all represented. 'Please enjoy Calais, my lord,' he ventured.

'White Swan – that's a badge I'll know. Come and drink a cup of wine with me, Master Saint-Gilles.' Sir William saluted again with his baton and, without any outward sign, his horse stepped off into the great city.

Behind him, the disciplined men who'd waited silently in the rain while he chatted wiped the rain from their helmets and pressed their mounts into motion.

When they were clear of the gate, the squire leaned forward. 'My lord?'

'Speak, John.'

'We have a letter from the Duke of Lancaster sending us to the

White Swan, my lord.' His tone said, *you already knew where we were going*. John de Blake was a well-born Englishman of seventeen – an age at which he tried to know everything but understood all too little.

'It never hurts to ask,' Sir William said with his odd half-smile. 'Sometimes, you learn something, John.'

'Yes, my lord,' John said.

Forty men do not just dismount and hand over their horses at an inn. Even an inn that is six tall buildings of whitewashed stone surrounding a courtyard that wouldn't disgrace a great lord's palace. The courtyard featured a horse fountain and a small garden behind a low wall, with a wrought-iron gate that was gilded and painted. The inn's doors – twelve of them – were painted a beautiful heraldic blue, and the windows on the courtyard had their frames whitewashed so carefully they seemed to sparkle in the rain, while their glass – very expensive glass too – gave the impression of well-set jewels.

The master of the inn came out into the yard as soon as his gate opened. He bowed, and a swarm of servants fell on his troop like an ambush of friendship.

'My lord,' he said in Flemish-English.

Sir William bowed courteously in his saddle. 'You are the master of the White Swan?'

'I have that honour. Henri, my lord, at your service. We had word of your coming.'

Sir William's retinue filled the courtyard. Horses moved and grunted, but the men on their backs were silent and no one made a move to dismount. The servants had moved to take the horses, but hesitated at the armed silence.

'I pray you, be welcome here,' the innkeeper said.

Sir William looked back over his troop, his left fist on the rump of his horse. 'Gentlemen!' he called out. 'It seems we've fallen soft. Eat and drink your fill. This is a good house, and we'll do nothing to change its name, eh? Am I understood, gentles?'

There was a chorus of grunts and steel-clad nods. A horse farted, and men smiled.

Sir William sighed and threw an armoured leg over his horse's broad back. He pressed his breastplate against the red leather of his war saddle and slid neatly to the ground, his golden spurs chiming

like the bell for Communion. He handed his war horse's reins to his page and turned to his squire.

'There are few places more like heaven on earth for a soldier,' he said, 'than a good inn.'

John de Blake allowed himself a nod of agreement.

'By nightfall, one of our archers will be in Ghent, and another will be so drunk he'll sell his bow and a third will try and force some girl and get a knife in his gizzard.' Sir William gave his half-smile.

From the expression on his face, de Blake didn't think he was supposed to answer that.

'Other guests?' Sir William asked of the master of the inn.

'My lord? I have two gentlemen en route to the convocation in Paris. Monsieur Jean Froissart, and Monsieur Geoffrey Chaucer. On the young King's business.'

At the name Chaucer, the half-smile appeared.

Innkeepers do not rise in their profession without the ability to read faces. 'You know Master Chaucer, my lord?'

Sir William Gold's dark-green eyes looked off into the middle distance. 'Since we were boys,' he said. 'Does he know I am here?'

The innkeeper bowed.

'Well, then.' Sir William nodded. 'Let's get these men out of the rain, shall we, good master?'

Great lords do not, generally, sit in the common room of inns – even inns that cater to princes. Good inns have rooms and rooms and yet more rooms – they are, in effect, palaces for rent, where lords can hold court, order food and have the use of servants without bringing their own.

Vespers rang, and men went to hear Mass. There was a fine new church across the tiny square from the White Swan, and every man in Gold's retinue attended. They stood in four disciplined rows and heard the service in English Latin, which made some of his Italians squirm.

After the service, they filled the common room and wine flowed like blood on a stricken battlefield. The near roar of their conversation rose around them to fill the place. Sir William broke with convention and took a small table with his squire and raised a cup to his retinue.

Before the lights were lit, there were dice and cards on most tables.

A voice – pitched a little too harshly, a little too loud, like the

voice of a hectoring wife in a farce – came from the stairs: 'That will be Gold's little army. If you want to hear the latest from Italy, stop preening and come down!'

Half a smile from Sir William.

He had time to finish his wine. A pretty woman – the only serving woman in the room – appeared with a flagon.

Sir William brushed the greying red hair from his forehead and smiled at her.

Her effort to return his smile was marred by obvious fear. She curtsied. 'This wine, my lord?' she asked.

He put a hand on her arm. 'Ma petite – no one here will touch you. Breathe easy. We're not fiends from hell, only thirsty Englishmen and a handful of Italians. How many years have you?'

She curtsied again. 'Sixteen, my lord.' Despite the hand on her arm, or perhaps because of it, she was as tense as a hunting dog with a scent.

'And your father asked you to wait on me?' Sir William asked.

She curtsied a third time.

'By St John! That is hospitable,' Sir William said, and his eyes sparkled in a way that made the young woman blush. 'Listen, ma petite. Serve the wine and don't linger at table, and no one can reproach you – or grab you. Yes? I served a table or two. A hand reaches for you, you move through it and pretend nothing happened, yes?'

She nodded. 'This is what my father says.'

'Wise man. Just so. On your way, ma petite.' Sir William's odd green eyes met hers before she could look down.

Later, she told a friend it was like looking into the eyes of a wolf.

The knight got to his feet as she moved away and bowed. 'Ah, Master Chaucer, the sele of the day to you.' He offered a hand. 'You are a long way from London.'

Chaucer had a narrow face and a curling beard that made him look like the statues of Arabs in the cathedrals, or like a sprite or elf, to the old wives. He took the knight's hand and they exchanged a kiss of peace – carefully.

'The king's business,' Chaucer said. His answering smile could have meant anything.

Sir William nodded. 'Of course. As always, eh?' He turned to the other man – a tall, blond man, almost gangly in his height, with golden hair. 'You are a Hainaulter, unless I miss my guess, monsieur.'

Chaucer indicated his companion. 'Monsieur de Froissart.'

Sir William offered his hand and Froissart bowed deeply. 'One is . . . deeply moved to meet so famous a knight.'

Sir William shrugged. 'Oh, as to that,' he said.

'You *must* know he's writing a book of all the great deeds of arms of our time,' Chaucer said.

Froissart bowed again. 'Master Chaucer is too kind. One makes every attempt to chronicle the valour, the prowess. The . . . chivalry.'

Sir William's green eyes strayed to Chaucer's. 'Not your sort of book at all,' he said.

Chaucer's eyes were locked on Sir William's. 'No,' he said. 'If I wrote such a chronicle, it would not be about valour. Or prowess.'

The two men looked at each other for too long. Long enough for John de Blake to move, worried there might be violence; for Aemilie, the innkeeper's daughter, dressed in her very best clothes, to flatten herself against the plastered wall, and for Monsieur de Froissart to worry that he had said something out of place. He looked back and forth between the two men.

'We could sit,' Sir William said. The room had fallen quiet, but with these words, games of cards and dice sprang back into action and conversations resumed.

'How have you kept, Geoffrey? When did we last meet? Milan?' Sir William asked.

'The wedding of Prince Lionel,' Chaucer said. 'No thanks to you.'

Sir William laughed. 'You have me all wrong, Master Chaucer. I was not against you. The French were against us both.'

Chaucer frowned. 'Perhaps.' He collected himself. 'What takes you to England?' he asked.

Sir William smiled, eyes lidded. 'The King's business,' he said.

Chaucer threw back his head and laughed. 'Damn me, I had that coming. Very well, William. I promised Monsieur Froissart that you were the man to tell him about Italy.'

Froissart leaned forward like an eager dog. 'My lord will understand that one collects tales of arms. Deeds of arms – battles, wars, tournaments. At the court of the young King, one hears many tales of Crecy and Poitiers and the wars in France, but one hears little of Italy. That is,' – he hurried on – 'that is, one hears a great deal of rumour, but one has never had the chance to bespeak a famous knight who has served—' he paused. 'My lord.'

Sir William was laughing softly. 'Well, I love to talk as I love a pretty face,' he said.

'By our lord, that's the truth,' Chaucer observed.

'What is your name, ma petite?' the knight asked the serving maid.

'Aemilie, my lord,' she said, with another stiff-backed curtsey.

Sir William had begun to turn away, but he froze and his eyes went back to hers, and she trembled.

'That is a name of great value to me, ma petite. I have loved a lady *par amours*, and that is her name.' He nodded. 'Fetch us two more of the same, if you will be so kind.'

She curtseyed and walked away, trying to glide in her heavy skirts.

'If you want Italy, then you will not want France,' he said. 'How do I begin?'

Froissart shook his head. 'When talk turns to feats of arms, one is all attention,' he said. 'One is as interested in Poitiers as any other passage of arms. It was, perhaps, the greatest feat of arms of our time.'

Sir William glared at him. 'So kind of you to say so,' he snapped.

Froissart paled.

'Don't come it the tyrant, William!' Chaucer said. 'He means no harm. It is merely his way. He's a connesieur of arms, as other men are of art or letters.' He put a hand out. 'I saw your sister a week or more ago.'

Gold smiled. 'In truth, I cannot wait to see her. Is she well?'

Chaucer nodded. 'I cannot say she's plump, but she had her sisters well in hand. She was en route to Clerkenwell to deliver her accounts, I think.'

Sir William turned to Froissart. 'My sister is a prioress of the Order of St John, monsieur.' He said it with sufficient goodwill that Froissart relaxed.

'I would be most pleased if you would share with me your experiences at Poitiers,' Froissart continued. 'Another knight's account would only help—'

Chaucer and Gold laughed together.

Aemilie appeared at the table with her father and two men, and they began to place small pewter dishes on the table – a dish of sweet meats, a dish of saffroned cakes, and a beautiful glazed dish of dates, as well as two big-bellied flagons of wine.

Sir William rose and bowed to the master of the house. 'Master, your hospitality exceeds anything in Italy; it is like a welcome home to England.'

The innkeeper flushed at the praise. 'Calais is England, my lord,' he acknowledged.

Sir William indicted his companions. 'I'm going to bore these two poor men with a long story,' he said. 'Please keep the wine coming.'

Chaucer rose. 'William, I'm for my bed. I know your stories.'

'I'll tell him all your secrets,' Gold said.

Chaucer smiled his thin, elven smile. 'We're in the same business,' he said. 'He *knows* all my secrets.'

Again, the silence.

This time, Chaucer broke it. 'Will I see you in London?'

Sir William nodded. 'I shall look forward to it. Will your business be long?'

Chaucer shook his head. 'I hope not, *par dieu*. I'm too old to be a courier.' He gave a sketchy bow and headed for the stairs.

Froissart, left almost alone with the knight, had a little of Aemilie's look. John de Blake watched his master. 'Shall I withdraw?' he asked.

Gold gave a half-smile to his squire. 'Only if you want to go, John.'

De Blake settled himself in his seat and poured himself more wine.

Aemilie crossed from her counter to the wall and stood against it, ready to serve.

Sir William drank some wine and glanced at the young woman. Then he turned back to Froissart. 'Do you really want to hear about Poitiers, monsieur?' he asked.

Froissart sat up. 'Yes!' he replied.

Gold nodded. 'I wasn't a knight then,' he said.