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The Butcher Bird

Written by S. D. Sykes

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The Butcher Bird

S D Sykes



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The Black Death of 1348–50 killed an estimated half of the English population. With so many dead, the poorest people could suddenly demand higher pay rates for their labour. The response of the king was a law to suppress wages:

> 'The King to the Sheriff of Kent, greeting. Since a great part of the population, and especially workers and servants, has now died in this pestilence, many people, seeing the needs of their masters and the shortage of employees, are refusing to work unless they are paid an excessive salary. Others prefer to beg in idleness rather than work for their living. Mindful of the serious inconvenience likely to arise from this shortage, especially of agricultural labourers, we have discussed and considered the matter with our prelates and nobles and the other learned men, and with their unanimous advice, we have ordained that every man or woman in our realm of England, whether free or unfree, who is physically fit and below the age of sixty .... should be paid only the fees, liveries, payments or salaries which were usually paid in the part of the country where they are working in the twentieth year of our reign (1346).'
>
> 'The Ordinance of Labourers' (letter from King Edward III to the Sheriff of Kent. June 1349)

This ruling was endorsed and strengthened by Parliament in 1351 to form 'The Statute of Labourers'.

THE RED-BACKED SHRIKE

Lanius collurio

Once a common migratory visitor to the British shores, this bird butchers rodents, insects and the nestlings of other small birds, and then impales their corpses on thorns, as a larder. This behaviour has earned the shrike the name 'The Butcher Bird.'

Chapter One

Versey Castle is never colder than in March, when the winter winds have frozen its walls since All Hallows and the milky sun is still too weak to disperse the vapours from the river.

It was not an auspicious month in which to give birth, but my older sister Clemence was heavy with child and supposedly in her confinement. Lying in bed, however, did not suit my sister. Instead she wandered the orchards, or even groomed her unpleasant horse in its stable – always in the face of firm opposition from Mother and her physician. Eventually, to provide some relief from this badgering, Clemence had written to me at Somershill and begged for my company at Versey until the child was born. This was a request I had found difficult to refuse, since Clemence's husband was dead and she had nobody to turn to but myself. It was not even that the man had died, which would have been poor fortune enough for a woman expecting a child. Instead he had been murdered only days after their wedding – surviving long enough to assault my sister and conceive the child that she now carried. The wheel of fortune had not turned in Clemence's favour for many months, so I could no longer allow her to face its cruel momenta alone.

And Clemence was glad of my company.

At least I think she was.

* * *

Soon after my arrival, I persuaded my sister to walk with me one morning in the hours before Mother usually rose from bed. I needed to speak with her on a delicate subject – on a topic I had been avoiding for months. As we walked through the meadow, Clemence gripped my hand and stepped with care through the grass, the weight of her belly threatening to unbalance her at any moment. 'My ankles have swollen to the size of old Eleanor's,' she told me as we made our way towards a favourite seat beneath the oaks.

'Perhaps you would be better to rest, Clemence? Raise your feet above your head.'

She grimaced. 'Not you as well, Oswald? Mother has done nothing but pester me about resting with my feet in the air.'

'She gave birth to nine children. That must qualify her to have an opinion?'

'She doesn't know everything.' Clemence then held her side and groaned. 'He's kicking his foot into my ribs. Such an energetic boy.'

'He?'

She turned to me sharply. 'Yes. It's a boy. And before you say another word, there's nothing wrong with him. Despite what Mother's been saying.'

I took her small hand again. 'Of course there isn't.' But I wished I had felt more confidence in this statement, for Clemence was carrying a large child that was already two weeks overdue, according to the midwife's calculation. My knowledge of childbirth was poor, but it was sufficient to know that a late birth was more likely to end badly. We sat on the stone bench that looked down the valley towards the castle. Before us the silver catkins perched on the willow like a host of tiny rabbit tails, and the first of the Lent lilies peeked their yellow heads through the grass and nodded in the wind. In the distance, the two young de Caburn sisters, now Clemence's stepdaughters, ran into the woods, pursuing some of their usual mischief. We watched their blonde heads bob through the meadow and then disappear into the trees.

For a moment spring was in the air and I felt all the hope and promise of the turning season, but then I saw Gilbert riding over the drawbridge into the castle. He was my valet from Somershill and there was something unlikely and even ominous in his presence here. I should have returned then to greet him, but as Clemence launched into the next conversation the thought soon slipped from my mind.

She coughed. 'When my son is born, will you keep your promise to me?'

I was tired after a succession of poor nights' sleep, so it took me a few moments to fathom what she was talking about. Unfortunately Clemence read this hesitation as evasion. 'I knew I couldn't trust you,' she said, clapping her hands upon her thighs. 'You mean to keep Versey as well as Somershill.'

'No, I don't,' I said, now understanding her original question. I had once made a rash promise to my sister, just after her husband's murder. Unfortunately I could not be certain that it was now in my power to keep it. 'It's not entirely my decision. Remember? The earl instructed me to take over this estate.' She shrugged, seeming to have forgotten that I had not asked for the wooded hills and poor land of Versey. This castle was cold and grey with only the sky and a wide river for company. She could keep the dreary place as far as I was concerned.

'But what about my son?' she said. 'He's a true de Caburn. Why should he be cheated out of his birthright?'

'I'm not trying to cheat him.'

'Then speak to the earl on his behalf.'

'I promise to try. When the opportunity arises.'

She snorted and pulled a strand of black hair from her face. 'You promise?'

'Yes, Clemence. I do. Even if your child turns out to be a girl.'

She stroked her expansive belly and looked at me with a drop of the malevolence of old. 'It will be a son.'

I touched her shoulder. Feeling the soft fur of her miniver cloak. 'I hope so, Clemence. If that's what matters to you.'

She sighed. 'You think me cruel? That I don't care for my own sex?'

'No. It's just that all of your dead husband's children have been girls. Maybe you should prepare yourself for a daughter?'

She shrugged me away. 'What use is there in being a woman in this world, Oswald? Look how I've fared, compared to you.'

I took her meaning well enough. 'I didn't want any of this, Clemence.'

'But it came to you anyway.'

In the distance we could hear Mother calling for us and suddenly I remembered the reason for persuading my sister to walk with me so far from the castle. 'Listen, Clemence. There's something I want to tell you,' I said. 'Before Mother finds us.'

She turned to look at my face, her eyes suddenly wary. 'Oh yes?'

I took a deep breath, for this was not the easiest of confessions. 'I went to the graveyard to look for Thomas Starvecrow's grave.'

'Who?'

I puffed my lips in frustration. Was she being deliberately dull-witted? 'You know who I'm talking about. *Thomas Starvecrow*.' At the repeat of this singular name, a shadow crossed her face. She knew the name. We both did.

They say that truth can sometimes be stranger than invention, and in this case the adage held true – for the previous summer I had discovered that I was not really Oswald de Lacy at all. That boy had been buried in a grave marked Thomas Starvecrow, after his death in infancy.

So who was I then? If not Oswald de Lacy? Lord Somershill.

Thomas Starvecrow, of course. No grander than the son of a poor girl who had been employed as a wet nurse to the latest de Lacy infant. Her name was Adeline Starvecrow, and though she had managed to feed two infants, there had been a divergence in our

fortunes. Whereas I had thrived, this boy had faded – and when he had died at eight weeks, Adeline had substituted me, her own son, for him. I don't believe there was evil or ambition in her act; she had simply feared being blamed for the death of a noble child.

So why, you might ask, when this secret was revealed, had I not been thrown into the streets? My mother (or the woman I had grown up to believe was my mother – Lady Margaret of Somershill) had always known of the deceit. After giving birth to nine children, with only three surviving to adulthood, she had not wanted to risk another confinement – so she had chosen to ignore the slipping of this cuckoo into her nest. In any case, I was the last son. The third spare. Nobody more important than that.

There were only three people now alive who knew this secret. Myself, Clemence, and Mother. It was obvious why I kept quiet – but for Clemence and Mother it was a practical decision. With my older brothers dead, there was no other male heir, and at least I bore the de Lacy name, even if their blood did not flow in my veins. In any case, any revelation about my true beginnings would bring great shame and notoriety to the family. It was expedient for all three of us to say nothing.

Clemence shifted from one buttock to another – the weight of her unborn child causing her some pain. 'Why would you bother looking for Thomas Starvecrow's grave?' she asked.

'I wanted to put the boy's coffin in our family crypt,' I admitted. 'He was a true de Lacy, after all.'

Her face hardened into a scowl. 'You should leave such matters alone,' she said. 'My brother died as a baby and you took his place. You shouldn't be messing around with his coffin.'

Suddenly we saw Mother beating her way through the grass towards us, with all the vigour of a child with an urgent tale to tell. Our time alone was limited.

'But there is more to my story, Clemence,' I said. 'Please listen to me.'

Instead she held out her hand so I might help her from the seat.

When I refused, she heaved a wearied sigh. 'What is it, Oswald? Please be quick. I want to get away from Mother as soon as I can. She's trying to feed me one of de Waart's purgatives to induce labour.'

I felt my stomach roll. 'Don't take anything that man prescribes.'

Clemence waved her hand. 'Just get on with your story.'

I hesitated. The words rested on my tongue, but what an admission they held, and Mother was now within yards of us.

'Be quick, Oswald,' she urged.

'I opened the lid of the coffin.'

My sister screwed up her face in disgust. 'God's nails, Oswald. Why did you do such a thing?'

'I don't know exactly.' Now she rolled her eyes. My sister always thought me so foolish. Lacking the pedigree to be lord. 'I was curious,' I told her boldly.

'Why?'

My tongue felt tied. 'I just was.' She smiled at my discomfort. 'I was right to look.' I insisted, dropping my voice to a whisper. 'There was no body inside the coffin.'

Now Clemence reddened. 'Are you sure?'

'There was nothing inside but a wooden effigy. The small Christ child that had been stolen from St Giles.'

She put her hand to her mouth. 'So where is the body then?'

'I don't know.'

It was too late. Mother fell beside me on the bench, panting and wheezing like a wool dyer beside a tub of steaming mordant. When she recovered her breath, she turned to my sister and scowled. 'What are you doing out here, Clemence? Your humours will be assaulted by this cold air.'

'I'm perfectly well,' said Clemence.

Mother shook her head in despair. 'With this constant insistence on wandering around outside, I shouldn't be surprised if you don't give birth to a little snowball. A child made of ice.'

'Don't be so absurd. I'm wearing a cape. My son is quite warm enough inside me.'

Mother smirked. 'Too warm if you ask me. That child is overcooked. It should have been born weeks ago.'

My sister's face was beginning to sour. Her small hands tightening into fists. 'Make up your mind Mother,' she said. 'Is my child too hot or too cold?

I quickly intervened. 'There's no hurry for the child to be born. It's still healthy and moving.'

Mother scoffed. 'What on earth do you know about such matters, Oswald? You were educated in a monastery. Did a monk ever give birth?' I shrugged by way of reply. 'No. Exactly. You are quite unacquainted with the workings of a woman's body.'

'I know more than that fool who claims to be your physician,' I said. 'I hear he's still in the castle.'

'Hush, Oswald. I am a great admirer of Master de Waart. Would you have me suffer without his care?'

'It's his care that's causing your suffering.' I said. 'I don't know why you employ him.'

'To calm my nerves, of course. Versey is a very disquieting place. It doesn't suit my temperament at all.'

Clemence coughed pointedly. 'What is it that you wanted, Mother?'

'You must return to the house. It's time for your purgative.'

Clemence groaned, but Mother ignored this response and turned to me, prodding a finger into my arm. 'And you need to attend to this murder, Oswald.'

'What murder?'

'The murder I've just told you about.'

'You haven't said a word about a murder.'

She wrinkled her nose. 'Are you sure? Gilbert brought the news from Somershill.'

I stood up. 'Where's Gilbert now?'

'In the kitchen, I suppose,' said Mother with a note of

irritation in her voice. 'That's where servants are normally to be found.'

The kitchen at Versey is perhaps the only pleasant room in the castle. The scent from the bread ovens drifts through the air and warms the nostrils. The heat is dry and comforting – a reminder of happier times.

I found Gilbert sitting next to Clemence's servant John Slow in a smoky corner. Gilbert was resting on a wooden stool, whereas Slow, a man who mistrusted furniture, had taken up his usual position on the stone floor. The two servants spoke in a low mumble, on a topic that must have been fascinating, as they failed to look up when I sped into the room.

It was Slow who noticed my presence first. He nudged Gilbert's leg in a panic and struggled to his feet. 'I'm sorry, sire. We didn't see you there.' Then he flinched – crouching and holding his head in his hands, as if I were about to strike him. This was Slow's usual reaction to me, though I had never assaulted the man.

'Please leave us,' I said. 'I need to speak with Gilbert.' Slow backed away from me, bowing as obsequiously as a penitent leaving the presence of the Holy Father, but when the man considered himself out of my sight, he bolted away in his strange gait, rocking from foot to foot like a man upon a hobby horse. On reaching the kitchen door he rested against the door frame and took a deep breath, seemingly under the impression that he had avoided the punishment that Gilbert was now certain to receive.

Gilbert's reaction to me could hardly have been more different. Though I was his master, he took time to wipe the crumbs from his mouth before lethargically getting to his feet. 'Sire?'

I should have reprimanded him in some way, but Mother's story was more pressing. 'I hear you have some news from Somershill? There's been a murder. Is that correct?'

He sighed and nodded, but still did not say a word.

'Come on, Gilbert,' I said. 'I'm a busy man.' This was not

entirely true – since I was neither that occupied and not yet considered a man – but his indolence was provoking.

'A child has been found dead, sire. Murdered.' He clasped his hands together as if he were about to pray.

'Who is it?'

'A newborn girl. Only just baptised.' He then held his nose between his thumb and forefinger, and suddenly I realised that he was trying to suppress a sob. Small tears leaked from the rims of his eyes.

'You say she was murdered?' He nodded. 'Can you tell me her name?'

He composed himself and blew his nose. It was strange to see my valet so affected, as the man was usually no more sentimental than a storm cock smacking a snail against a stone. 'She was the daughter of Thomas Tulley, sire. They named her Catherine.'

'Are you sure she was murdered?'

His shoulders shuddered. 'She was—' But he was unable to finish the sentence. Instead he slumped back down upon the stool and hung his head. A couple of the scullions gathered to look upon him, whispering in wonderment at the man who usually scolded them for a dirty pan or poorly plucked bird. I shooed them away with the command to fetch ale.

The ale was warm and frothy and tasted of bread dough with the bitter aftertaste of dandelion leaves.

Gilbert drank his down promptly. 'I'm sorry, sire.' He blew his nose once again upon his sleeve. 'I don't usually become so affected. It's just what happened to her body.'

'What do you mean?'

'She was left in a bush of blackthorn. Her skin pierced by the spurs and thorns.'

I felt a dismal churning in my stomach. 'Do you know who's responsible?'

'It's not a mystery. That's why you are needed back at Somershill. The whole village is in uproar.'

'Then who is it?'

I'm disappointed to say that a smile began to curl at the corner of his mouth. His tears now washed away by the mug of ale. 'Which creature kills other nestlings and stores them upon the thorns of a tree?'

'I'm in no mood for riddles, Gilbert.'

He put the mug upon a nearby table and stood up. He was no taller than me, but his frame was solid and thick, like a seasoned oak. 'It was a bird, sire. A butcher bird.'

I looked him over. Was he being sincere? It was so difficult to read his weathered face. The sun and wind had worn away its nuances. 'The shrike is a small bird, Gilbert. It couldn't lift an infant from its crib. Not even a newborn infant. It only attacks—' And then I stopped myself, realising what Gilbert had really meant. 'John Barrow did not beget a bird,' I said.

My valet raised his eyebrows, and then wiped away a bead of mucus from his nose. 'But he said he did. I heard it myself only four weeks ago. At the last court.'

'The man is ill.'

'Maybe so. But he'll be dead soon.'

'What do you mean by that?' I snapped.

'They'll hang him, when they find him.'

I groaned. 'Go to the stables and prepare Tempest.'

He straightened his tunic and then bowed to me, though I would say this gesture was no better than half-hearted. 'Very well, sire. Are you riding back to Somershill straight away?' he asked me.

'Of course I am.' He trudged out of the chamber, grumbling under his breath like a starved stomach. 'And be quick about it,' I added.

He pretended not to hear.