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The Outcasts of Time

Written by Ian Mortimer

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IAN MORTIMER

THE OUTCASTS OF TIME



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This book is dedicated to my son,
Alexander Mortimer

Home is not a place but a time

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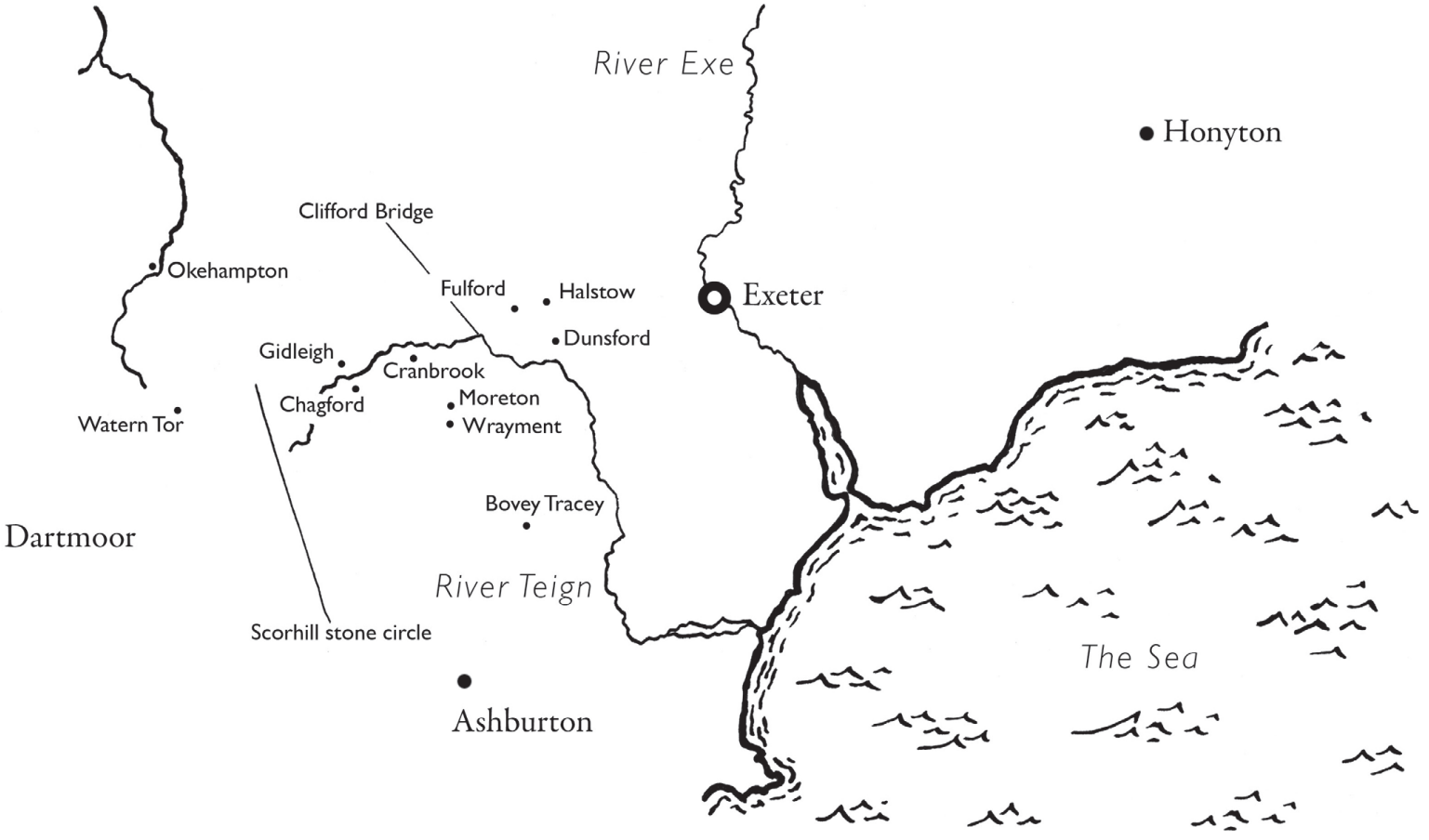
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story has got the better of me. But just as the whole process has been one of passion, so too it has been one of gratitude to the people around me, and I am deeply grateful for your support.

I would particularly like to thank my wife Sophie, without whom this book would still be a pub conversation. Just by being here, she gives me the companionship I need to venture away from my own time and imagine being in that most inhospitable place, the distant past.

Ian Mortimer

Moretonhampstead, 25 November 2016


River Exe
Honyton
Clifford Bridge
Okehampton
Fulford
Halstow
Exeter
Dunsford
Gidleigh
Cranbrook
Chagford
Moreton
Wrayment
Watern Tor
Bovey Tracey
Dartmoor
River Teign
Scorhill stone circle
The Sea
Ashburton

Chapter One

Tuesday, 16 December 1348

The first thing you need to understand is what it means to sell your soul. It is not a matter of shaking hands with a shadowy figure, or bartering promises with a burning bush. What do you have to sell? You don't know. To whom are you going to sell it? Again, you don't know. All you know is that your very desire to offer it up is accompanied by the most overwhelming urge to scream. You want to scream so much that you will empty your bones of time.

This is what I feel now – and have felt every day since I first saw the deadly work of the plague. When I look along the road into the distance and see no one, the desire to yell burns within me. When I look up towards the hills where once there was peace and tranquillity, I think of a horrific silence: abandoned farms and cottages, the carcasses of animals and the bodies of children and their parents. The absence of kindness. An eye without life. Now, as we approach the

leafless oak on the edge of Honyton, and the inn beside it, the urge to cry out is overwhelming.

There were musicians playing when I was last here, three days before Michaelmas. That was just eleven weeks ago. I stop and let my travelling sack fall to the ground, and put my face in the hollow of my cupped hands; I whisper the names of my dead mother and father. My brother William turns and tells me to hurry, and makes a joke about me being slower than the dead. I take my hands away from my face, and stare at him, then pick up my sack and start walking again. But inside I am still yelling. I can do nothing to tell the world how I feel because everything is dying around us. And dying inside us.

I glance back at the leafless oak and remember the scene that day: the music and the gaiety. We were travellers passing through the town, watching the women and girls dance with the men, their hair let down, naturally flowing. They all had their favourites: you could see their loves in their eyes as they skipped past them. They were smiling at us too, as if they understood that we strangers, by watching their smiles, knew the secrets of their hearts. I remember slopping my ale cup and singing lustily, even though William and I had been intending to leave earlier, on our journey to Salisbury. Now, looking at that tree, I wonder how many of those women are dead. It seems that winter has twice fallen. Firstly, it has come upon us with the chill of December: in the bare branches stark against the sky, and the short days and the frozen puddles in the ruts of the roads. And secondly it is here in the crow-cry of cold despair, and the feeling that, unlike any previous year, there

never will be another spring. Winter is a point of reckoning now, not a pause.

Time there was when the marketplace in Honyton was all colour and movement. On market days you'd see the russets, browns, greys and reds of tunics, and a whole gamut of hoods and hats. If you blurred your eyes for a moment, you'd see it like the movement of a hive, as if all the little twitches of the crowd were bees. There'd always be a still point in the human storm: a crier calling the news or a black-cassocked friar haranguing a group of youths about their souls' struggle to reach Heaven. Today there are no criers, friars or tormented souls. There are no market traders either – no nodding hoods as a butcher or piemaker passes over his wares and holds out a hand for the silver pennies, turning immediately to greet the next customer. Dead leaves blow across the mud and gravel of the square. A broken trestle from a stall lies on its side, commemorating the last market to be held here. It looks like an old tilted grave marker where someone who has already been forgotten lies buried.

William and I continue along the street through the town. It's still early, the third hour after prime, but both of us are tired after a restless night under the dripping trees. House after house has its shutters closed, as if the townspeople are still in bed.

'How many corpses do you think we'll see today?' asks William, adjusting the travelling sack on his shoulder. 'I'll hold you, it'll be more than yesterday. What do you say, John, more than six? A kiss of Elizabeth Tapper's honeyed lips and a jug of her best ale, for he who counts the most this side of Whymple.'

I look at my brother but I do not reply. I see the gold ring with the garnet that he always wears, his most prized possession. He seems to think that, apart from the unfortunate victims, life is the same as ever.

'Oh, come now, brother,' he says, 'I pray, speak! You're not dead yet. The heaviness of your mood is such that anyone might mistake you for Noah on his Ark, in the moment of realising that he's forgotten the cows.'

'Jest not, William. This *is* a second Flood. God is clearing the land. Not with water but with pestilence. Can you not see it?'

'Don't be a cut farthing, John. What I see is what you see. No more, no less. But your mind is closed. This pestilence is no work of God's. We've seen young children, babes even, lying by the road with black blotches on their necks, arms and thighs. Why would God be punishing them? They cannot have sinned. This is no divine clearance of iniquity. This is the work of the Devil, and I'll not be awestruck by it.'

I take a deep breath. 'William, the Devil is God's vassal, and the Devil shall do what the Lord Almighty commands him to do. If God wills the land be cleared of sinners, then the Devil shall do the clearing. Those who fail to attend church are . . .'

But William, looking ahead, raises his hand.

The body is that of a grey-bearded man in his fifties, lying face down on the hard earth and stones of the highway, with his head turned to one side. There is a sagging black swelling on the lower side of his neck, the size of two fists clasped together, clutching at his throat. His mouth is open slightly;

the whiteness of his teeth only draws attention to the fact that at least two are missing. William presses his foot against the man's cloak: it is frozen stiff. One knee is dirty where he fell. His purse has already been cut from his belt and the moistness of his eyes has frozen, glazing his expression into an opaque whiteness.

Normally, on finding a dead man, we would go to the constable. But today we remain quiet.

'He's nothing of beauty, that's for sure,' says William, turning away.

'He was one of the lucky ones,' I reply as we walk on. I scratch an itch under my arm.

'Lucky? Listen, brother, if that man's fate be fair good fortune, my horse speaks Latin. By what token was he lucky?'

'He fell face down. He did not spend days suffering, sweating and frenzied. He was able to walk until finally he collapsed. He used a cuttlefish to whiten his teeth; therefore he must have been a man of some prosperity. As for his cloak, even you would be proud of such a garment. Last, look at where his purse was. Clearly, the man who cut it from his belt opened it and saw not one or two coins but many – enough that he decided to take the risk and cut the whole purse, even though it might be carrying the infection. So, brother of mine, I say to you that this wealthy man, suddenly taken ill with the disease, choking on his pain and stumbling to a quick death, was most fortunate.'

William shakes his head. 'You should not attend so closely to the death throes of every stranger, John. Let some of the dead suffer on their own account.'

What can I say to that? This dead man was one of the few for whom I have *not* felt sorry. It is the living who tear the scream out of me, for whom I weep. I thought that the last mass grave that I would ever see would be on the battlefields of France – so many rigid arms and legs covered in dried blood and flies in the pit. But death is all around us here too. I see it in the windows whose shutters remain open when dusk comes, and in the shutters that remain closed of a morning. I see it also in the unguided progress of a boat that floats down a river with its occupant slumped over the side, bumping into banks and quays. Passing a church in Somerset, where a father and a mother were burying their child, I even heard the sound of death. It rang out in the silence of the bells that did not acknowledge the dead boy. Even the tolling of a funeral bell is an act of life. Today, our private thoughts are the only chimes that send the dead on their way. And then we move on, and leave them – and even the silent bells of our thoughts cease to toll.

Six miles on from Honyton we stop to have a dinner of hard bread and cheese. We eat in silence. I notice a second dead man, about fifty yards from the road. He is wearing a russet tunic and lying crumpled in a fallow field. His figure blends in with the earth so that at first neither of us notices him. It is only when a crow lands on his torso that I pay attention to the lump on the soil, and glimpse the flesh of his lower leg and the shape of his shoulder.

William wipes his face and lifts his bag. 'Coming?'

I watch the crow fly away. The landscape of cold red earth, grey sky and corpse make me wonder whether this man's fate

will be ours too. After all, who will eventually bury that man when the plague comes to an end? His corpse will lie there, slowly soaking back into the soil as the rains fall and the wild pigs and other beasts find the bones and gnaw on them. If a fox carries away the skull, the next farmer to till the ground might look at the scattered remains and be uncertain whether they belonged to a man or a beast.

I pick up my sack and join William.

Who *was* that man in the field? Nothing but a nameless object. I feel as if my head is in my hands – except that it is not my hands on which my cheeks are resting but two weeks of constant fear. Maybe I am not in my right mind. But how could anyone these days be in their *right* mind? The only way I can control myself is by thinking that I must not let my wife, Catherine, see me like this. I tell myself that I must walk faster, and breathe in the air that God has given me, and return to her.

In Salisbury there was another stone carver called John – John of Combe. He was one of the first in the city to catch the plague. He was very talkative before he fell ill, always spinning his chisel in his hand and catching it. But a week or so before they called a halt to the repairs, he failed to show up for work. When he did come back, two days later, he was sombre and distracted. He would strike his chisel three or four times, and then stare at the stone. One day, working on the same pinnacle as him, I saw him gazing into nothingness. I asked him what was bothering him. After a while he told me that, several days earlier, he had felt a painful swelling beneath his right arm, which he knew was the pestilence.

Straight away he had left the cathedral and walked north to the Giant's Circle. When he arrived it was almost dark. He walked around the stones and prayed to God or the Devil or anyone who was listening to save him. And as he stood there he suddenly felt a powerful figure seize him from behind and put his hand over his mouth to stop him crying out, and he heard a deep voice whisper in his ear, asking him would he offer his eternal soul in return for his mortal recovery, and live many years yet? Or would he prefer to die on the roadside on his return that night to Salisbury? John said he would offer his soul. And he felt the figure release its grip. Two days after our conversation, he slipped on the wet wooden scaffolding and fell eighty feet. I myself saw the accident from the ground. His flailing body hit the poles twice on the way down and he struck the ground heavily. I was sure that the impact had killed him but he only broke his right arm and a rib. The bonesetter said he could do nothing about John's rib but that it would not threaten his life. As for his arm, that would recover quickly, for it was a clean break. Everyone said it was a miracle that he was alive.

William, who is still ahead of me, turns and calls back. 'Let's call on Elizabeth Tapper anyway. A taste of her posset will be most welcome.'

My eyes follow the movement of his shoulders, his beard and his purposeful I'll-do-what-I-want gait. I'm not keen to see the woman. She has two children yet has never had a husband, and they say that sinners are more likely to be infected with the pestilence. I am sure William is as kind to her as he is to every woman. To be fair to him, he is generous

to everyone, not only women. But I don't understand why he gives in to his wickedness, and invites damnation into our lives.

Oh, I know, I know. William will say that *that* is the difference between us: he believes men choose the laws, not God, and that it is no sin in the eyes of God to break the law of mankind, for the law is an earthly, earthy thing. He says even the Bible was written by men and is interpreted by men, and that to break the law laid down therein is no crime against God. And in the Old Testament it is written that many great and holy men had many wives. He says that the sinner who knows he has done wrong believes he will go to Hell, and the hell is in the believing; the man who accidentally sins but whose intentions are pure will have no stain on his soul.

I cannot agree. I believe that God created the world to be as He wanted it, and if a man pollutes God's world through sin, then it stands polluted, whether or not the sinner meant to deviate from the path of righteousness. I can see that Elizabeth Tapper is still an attractive woman, even though she must be more than thirty years old now. But if God preserves her thus, it is for the husband that He intends her to embrace, not the travellers who pass this way with a few coins in their purses. An honest man should be caring for her and her children, not a string of ragrowsterers.

But I say nothing. I am not innocent myself. A few years ago, when I was working on the cathedral parapet, William came into Exeter and took me to the Bear Inn near the South Gate. What followed that night was much ale drinking and, afterwards, in the hall by candlelight, an act of shallow

physical love that I have always regretted. For me, that night was like a flower of time. It grew from green innocence to a bud of desire and fulfilment in a few hours, and then quickly withered into a decrepit past that stank and disgusted me.

The truth is that I want nothing more than to be at home with my Catherine, by our hearth, talking together in the firelight. I want to tell her of what I feel when I see the world in the grip of the plague, and share it with her. I want to hear her tell me what she feels. I want our wounded hearts to comfort one another, to embrace. I want to face our greatest challenge together, not apart.

Elizabeth Tapper's cottage is a furlong off the highway and built in the old style: two crucks leaning together at either end. As you approach you can see the rot at the base of the walls, where the timbers go into the soil. The whitewash needs renewing too. In places the thatch has sunk inwards; in others, moss has grown across it. I am sure that the building leaks. Most people in this part of Devon would have pulled it down by now and started again, with a square timber framework and cob infill set on a stone plinth. But Elizabeth has no money and the bailiff no kindness. The very reason why she is here, on the extreme edge of the manor, is that she is not wanted in the village.

I will say this for her, though: she has a neatly tended garden, with many cabbages, leeks and the dead stalks of onions and beans. It is a safeguard we all must undertake in these times, when harvests might dwindle rapidly at the end of summer and winters can be so hard. Gardens can be the saving of a family.

William enters the house ahead of me. I pause to look at the garden, and hear him cry out.

It has been many months since I have heard him utter a sound like that – not since he found the corpse of a friend after our victory at Crécy. He is the sort of man who does not want anyone – least of all his younger brother – to know he is in pain.

I cross myself and go into the cottage. Inside, it is dark and smells of smoke, old ale, onions and bacon – and dried lavender, which has been used to scent the floor rushes. When my eyes adjust I see the wicker partition at one end of the hall, with a doorway leading to the inner chamber. William is standing there, quite still. There is a woman beside him, almost the same height. I do not recall Elizabeth being so tall. But then I see that she is not moving. She is utterly motionless, with her hands by her sides and her head at an angle to her shoulders.

Her feet are four inches off the ground. Four inches. The width of a hand is the gulf between life and death.

My first thought is that she has been set upon, raped or robbed, and killed by being strung up over the beam of her own home. But she had precious little to steal and was a common woman, and so no one would have needed to kill her. And then I ask myself: where are her children?

I walk closer. Her eyes are open, staring at eternity, which is here in the house with her. I cross myself again and say a prayer for her soul, and then one more for the safety of my own wife and children.

A gust of wind catches the door: it creaks and partially

closes, and a broom leaning against the wall falls over. I turn and go to the door, prop up the broom and place a block of wood to hold the door open, allowing in the light.

William is almost as still as the corpse. As I go back to him, I pass the hearth in the middle of the hall floor and bend down to feel the ashes: they are still vaguely warm. I hear him say, *'Benedicat vos omnipotens Deus Pater et Filius et Spiritus Sanctus.'* Those are the words that we were taught by the priest in our parish. William crosses himself. I do likewise, and join with him in saying, 'Amen.'

For the first time in days, I feel we are together. We might be on the edge of a cliff at night, staring at the same eternal darkness that Elizabeth Tapper now sees, but we are together.

He moves away from the doorway to the inner chamber. There I see her two children, who are about five and seven, lying side by side on an old straw mattress. The chinks in the shutter allow in enough light to reveal that their faces are blotched, their eyes closed. Their limbs have been straightened by the mother, who obviously stayed with them until the end and then took her own life. There is a pot of oaten broth, half-eaten, still beside the mattress.

I withdraw to the fresher air of the hall. My thoughts run to my own family, still more than a day's walk away. What will I find when I open the door to my own house? Will Catherine be hanging from a beam, like poor Elizabeth here? Her white neck pulled long by the rope, her hands, eyes and heart utterly empty? In my mind's eye, I see her body hanging in mid-air, like a sack of flesh. Will I find my sons, William, John and James, lying with blotched faces, dead in their beds? I imagine

their hair, their eyes, and recall their voices, one by one. If they are dead will I too not take a rope and end my own life?

My attention is only snatched away from this thought by the sight of William moving a bench. He stands on it and unhooks a hefty flitch of bacon hanging from a beam. He steps back down and puts it into his travelling sack.

'In God's name, William, have you no respect?'

'Someone else'll have it if I don't,' he says. 'Good food is for the living, not thieves or worms.' He fastens his travelling sack again and places it beside the door. 'Besides, if you think me disrespectful, what about the pestilence? What respect did God show Elizabeth and her children? Is not God more disrespectful?'

'That's blasphemy.'

'Cease your pious moaning, John. I'm sick of it. Help me lift her down.'

From the way he looks at her, I realise that he did not care for her because she was a whore. He cared for her *despite* that fact.

I go over and place my arms around her corpse and lift it while William unhitches the noose. It is a sad weight. Her limbs are stiff and her skin unyielding, like cold wax. As William steps down from the bench I lower her to the floor; then we carry her through to the inner chamber, her hair cascading over my arms. We place her on the floor beside her children, and stand side by side at the foot of the mattress, saying our quiet prayers.

After a while he says, 'It'll be dark in less than three hours. There's another six miles to Exeter.'