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hugely ambitious building with merciless attention to the smallest detail opened Tom's eyes to the wonder of his craft. He learned from the Exeter master about the importance of proportion, the symbolism of various numbers, and the almost magical formulas for working out the correct width of a wall or the angle of a step in a spiral staircase. Such things captivated him. He was surprised to learn that many masons found them incomprehensible.

After a while Tom had become the master builder's right-hand-man, and that was when he began to see the master's shortcomings. The man was a great craftsman and an incompetent organiser. He was completely baffled by the problems of obtaining the right quantity of stone to keep pace with the masons, ^{of} making sure that the blacksmith made enough of the right tools, ^{of} burning lime and carting ^{sufficient} sand for the mortar makers, ^{of} felling ^{the right} trees for the carpenters, and ^{of} getting enough money from the cathedral chapter to pay for everything.

If Tom had stayed at Exeter until the master builder died, he might have become master himself; but the chapter ran out of money - partly because of the master's mismanagement - and the craftsmen had to move on, looking for work elsewhere. Tom had been offered the post of builder to the Exeter castellan, repairing and improving the city's fortifications. It would have been a lifetime job, barring accidents. But Tom had turned it down, for he wanted to build another cathedral.

His wife Agnes had never understood that decision. They might have had a good stone house, and servants, and their own stables, and meat on the table every dinnertime; and she had never forgiven Tom for turning down the opportunity. She could not

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drawing, and she added Latin to the French and English she had spoken in her father's household.

Life in the convent was not so bad, in the end. It was a ~~single-sex~~ ^{of all women} community with its own peculiar rules and rituals, and that was exactly what she was used to. All the nuns had to do some physical labour, and Ellen soon got assigned to work with the horses. Before long she was in charge of the stables.

Poverty never worried her. Obedience did not come easily, but it did come, eventually. The third rule, chastity, never troubled her much, although now and again, just to spite the abbess, she would introduce one of the other novice nuns to the pleasures of -

Agnes interrupted Ellen's tale at this point, and, taking Martha with her, went off to find a stream in which to wash the child's face and clean up her tunic. She took Alfred too, for protection, although she said she would not go out of earshot. Jack got up to follow them, but Agnes told him firmly to stay behind, and he appeared to understand, for he sat down again. Tom noted that Agnes had succeeded in taking her children where they could not hear any more of this impious and indecent story, while leaving Tom chaperoned.

One day, Ellen went on, the abbess' palfrey went lame when she was several days away from the convent. Kingsbridge Priory happened to be nearby, so the abbess borrowed another horse from the prior there. After she got home, she told Ellen to return the borrowed horse to the priory and bring the lame palfrey back.

There, in the monastery stable within sight of the crumbling old cathedral of Kingsbridge, Ellen met a young man who looked like

anyone else in the world -

Tom did not believe that the boy Jack could read and write. Tom could write his name, and a handful of words such as pence and yards and bushels; and Agnes, being the daughter of a priest, could do more, although she wrote slowly and laboriously with her tongue poking out of the corner of her mouth; but Alfred could not write a word, and could barely recognise his own name; and Martha could not even do that. Was it possible that this halfwitted child was more literate than Tom's whole family?

Ellen told Jack to write something, and he smoothed a patch of earth and scratched letters in it. Tom recognised the first word, Alfred, but not the others, and he felt a fool; then Ellen saved his embarrassment by reading the whole thing aloud: 'Alfred is bigger than Jack.' The boy quickly drew two figures, one bigger than the other, and although they were crude, one had broad shoulders and a rather bovine expression and the other was small and grinning. Tom, who himself had a talent for sketching, was astonished at the simplicity and strength of the picture scratched in the dust.

But the child seemed an idiot.

Ellen had lately begun to realise this, she confessed, guessing Tom's thoughts. Jack had never had the company of other children, or indeed of other human beings except for his mother, and the result was that he was growing up like a wild animal. For all his ^{learning} ~~education~~ he did not know how to behave with people. That was why he was silent, and stared, and snatched.

As she said this she looked vulnerable for the first time. Her air of impregnable self-sufficiency vanished, and Tom saw her

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The day they lost the pig was also the last day of mild weather. They spent that night in a barn, and when they came out in the morning the sky was the colour of a lead roof, and there was a cold wind with gusts of driving rain. They unbundled their cloaks of thick, felted cloth and put them on, fastening them tight under their chins and pulling the hoods well forward to keep the rain off their faces. They set off in a grim mood, four gloomy ghosts in a rainstorm, their wooden clogs splashing along the puddled, muddy road.

Tom wondered what Salisbury cathedral would be like. A cathedral was a church like any other, in principle: it was simply the church where the bishop had his throne. But in practice cathedral churches were the biggest, richest, grandest and most elaborate. A cathedral was rarely a tunnel with windows. Most ~~were~~ ^{had} three tunnels, a tall one flanked by two smaller ones in a head-and-shoulders shape, forming a nave with side aisles. The side walls of the central tunnel were reduced to two lines of pillars linked by arches, forming an arcade. The aisles were used for processions - which could be spectacular in cathedral churches - and might also provide space for small side chapels dedicated to particular saints, which attracted important extra donations. Cathedrals were the most costly buildings in the world, far more so than palaces or castles, and they had to earn their keep.

Salisbury was closer than Tom had thought. Around mid-morning they crested a rise, and found the road falling away gently before them in a long curve; and across the rainswept fields,

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sills, pinnacles and parapets. In the middle of the close, well away from other buildings, stood the smithy, the glow of its fire visible through the open doorway; and the clang of hammer on anvil carried across the close as the smith made new tools to replace the ones the masons were wearing down. To most people it was a scene of chaos, but Tom saw a large and complex mechanism which he itched to control.

He knew what each man was doing and he could see instantly how far the work had progressed. They were building the east facade. There was a run of scaffolding across the east end at a height of twenty-five or thirty feet, and he could see no fewer than six masons on it, cloaked and hooded against the driving rain. Their labourers were running up and down the ladders with stones on their shoulders or mortar in baskets. Higher up, on the timber framework of the roof, were the plumbers, like spiders creeping across a giant wooden web, nailing sheets of lead to the struts and installing the drainpipes and gutters.

Tom realised regretfully that the building was almost finished. If he did get hired here the work would not last more than a couple of years - hardly enough time for him to rise to the position of master mason, let alone master builder. Nevertheless he would take the job, if he were offered it, for winter was coming. He and his family could ~~have~~ survive a winter without work if they had still had the pig, but without it Tom had to get a job.

They followed the cart across the close to where the stones were stacked. The oxen gratefully dipped their heads to the water-trough. The carter called to a passing mason: 'Where's the master

thief had gone in the opposite direction, ~~to sell the pig in~~ Salisbury. But the outlaw woman, Ellen, had told Tom that Salisbury cathedral was being rebuilt, and he had changed his plans, and inadvertently caught up with the thief. However, the man thought he would never see Tom again, which gave Tom a chance ~~to catch him unawares.~~ X

Tom walked slowly along the muddy street, trying to seem casual as he glanced in at open doorways. He wanted to remain ~~as~~ unobtrusive, ~~as possible,~~ for this episode could end in violence, and he did not want ^{anyone} ~~everyone~~ to remember a tall mason searching the town. Most of the houses were ordinary hovels of wood, mud and thatch, with straw on the floor, a fireplace in the middle, and a few bits of home-made furniture. A barrel and some benches made an alehouse; a bed in the corner with a curtain to screen it meant a whore; a noisy crowd around a single table signified a game of dice. ✓

A woman with red-stained lips bared her breasts to him, and he shook his head and hurried past. He was secretly intrigued by the idea of doing it with a total stranger, in daylight, and paying for it, but in all his life he had never tried it.

He thought again of Ellen, the outlaw woman. There was something intriguing about her, too. She was powerfully attractive, but those deep-set, intense eyes were intimidating. An invitation from a whore made Tom feel discontented for a few moments, but the spell cast by Ellen had not yet worn off, and he had a foolish desire ^{at this very moment} to run back into the forest and find her and fall on her. ✓