

HOME FARM, 1575

by Cola Conneely

I stepped out from the drum, crossed the dirt track and onto the lane opposite. I stopped, hesitating. I had never come this far before. I was very apprehensive, but I knew I had to do this to feed my family. Taking a gulp of air, I forced myself to move up the lane.

Away from the general hubbub of life in the village, it seemed really quiet here. I could hear sheep in the field to my left, the noises of their ruminating being interspersed by gentle bleating. Slightly further away I could hear the sounds of a pair of oxen lowing impatiently in their barn, longing to be out in the fields of lush green grass. On the right hand side of the lane was the high stone walls of the orchard. It seemed very peaceful on that side of the path. A tranquil rustle of leaves moving in the gentle summer breeze and the occasional soft thud of an apple or a pear falling into the grass.

The serenity of the scene almost made me forget my apprehensiveness. Almost. The relative hush compared to the shemozzle of daily life in the village was overwhelming and a bit unnerving. I tried not to think about the huge change I was facing and plodded on up the lane.

Just past the orchard, the lane opened out into a yard. Here the noises got more numerous, yet they were still gentle. The quiet clucking and scratching as chickens and ducks pecked at the yard floor, the snuffling and grunting of pigs in their sty.

As I approached the gate I started to hear more familiar, human noises. Children chattering as they went about their daily chores of fetching and carrying. The quiet murmur of ladies gossiping over the low swooshing of their spinning wheel. The clatter of hob-nailed boots on the cobbled grounds of the yard. A distant but regular thud of a butter churn out in the dairy. A swoosh and kathunk told me that someone nearby was chopping wood.

The juxtaposition of these familiar, homely noises compared to the near-silence of the lane I had just walked up was not lost on me. A wave of homesickness washed over me, even though I'd only left no more than half an hour ago. I wanted nothing more than to be safe at home with mother and my siblings. I knew my family were depending on me, and that I had to do this so they wouldn't starve. Steeling my nerves, I timidly opened the gate.

Suddenly a huge cacophony arose and I found myself surrounded by a most aggressive sounding gaggle of geese. I panicked for a minute, but then I remembered what Granny Lent had taught us.

"Good morning Mr Gander," I said politely but firmly.

"Good morning Misses Geese."

With a nod of my head, I moved carefully past them and carried on up the path. I didn't pause to look back, but I couldn't hear them hissing or honking at me anymore. I silently thanked the Lord that Granny Lent had been right.

The building at the end of the path was solid and sturdy, but of two different styles. The lower storey had recently been rebuilt in local Dundry stone. It was very square and symmetrical, with the door in the middle and two mullioned windows topped with hood-moulded lintels on either side. The upper storey, however, was of the old timber-framed style with wattle and daub infill.

The front door loomed up in front of me. It was a huge solid old thing, made of dark wood with long, tarnished iron hinges and a large knocker set in the middle. Suddenly I was terrified. Why had I insisted that I would go alone? I wasn't ready for this. But I knew I had to be a man and provide for my family after father's untimely demise in that dreadful accident half a year ago. I gulped back my fears and bravely knocked on the door as firmly as I could.

I could hear hob-nailed boots or possibly clogs tapping on the flag-stoned floor and braced myself. They knew I was coming, mother had spoken to them just last sennight to confirm everything. The longer they took to answer the door, the more nervous I felt...they seemed to be taking forever. I wiped my sweaty hands in my smock and hoped that I looked at least somewhat presentable. I was just thinking that perhaps I should knock again when the heavy door creaked open a fraction and a timid looking girl in a pristine cap and apron peeped round to look at me.

"Oh," she said blinking at me. She withdrew her head and opened the door a bit wider.

"Tis but a wee lad," I heard her call over her shoulder.

A cheerful jolly-looking woman poked her head out of a doorway and peered down the passageway towards the door.

“Ah, tis the new farmhand. Well, let him in then Jeanette, don’t leave him standing on the doorstep.”

“Yes mistress,” the young girl bobbed a curtsey to her mistress and turned back to me.

She stepped back, opening the door fully and allowing me to enter into the dull entry passageway.

“In there,” she said nodding her head in the direction that the woman’s head had come from. I removed my cap, attempted to flatten my hair, took a deep breath, and stepped in the direction the girl had indicated.

I stepped from the cool dark stone hallway into a light, airy and warm room. The floor was still flag-stoned, but the walls had been white-washed. The furnishings were fairly sparce. There was a large wooden chest placed near the door, it was clearly old and a bit battered, but still functionable. A cluttered dresser, filled with various pots, pans, and other cooking accoutrements, stood opposite the enormous inglenook fireplace. The fireplace was honestly the largest I had ever seen. Warmth was radiating from a roaring fire in the middle of it.

In the centre of the room stood a large wooden table. The legs were straight and strong in a polished dark oak. There were numerous scuff marks and dents at the bottom of each leg where people had kicked and bashed into it, and stubbed their toes on it over the years. The roughly hewn planks that formed the top were visible from underneath, but the upper-side of the table looked completely different. The years of wear, elbow-grease, and polish had worn the surface down to a buttery soft pale wood. But there were patches, particularly at the edges, where it hadn't faded evenly. The surface was littered with scratches, some of them filled in with beeswax polish, others more raw and fresh. There was a particularly deep gouge at one end, the result of a mishap with a cleaver. But the surface was quite smooth, the regular polishing of it had ensured that the wood hadn't splintered.

When I first saw it, the table was covered with barely an inch left bare, bowls of varying sizes, cloths, flour, and clumps of dough in various stages of being made into bread. Stood at the table, kneading one of the clumps of dough, was the jolly-looking woman from before. I hesitated in the doorway, unsure of what to do.

"Hello my dear, come in, come in, welcome to Home Farm," said the lady smilingly. She stepped out from behind the table, wiping her floury hands on her apron and coming towards me. I bowed awkwardly to her.

“Good morning Mistress Wyatt,” my voice came out in almost a squeak. “My name is...”

But before I could finish introducing myself, she had swept me up into her arms in a tight embrace.

“Oh my dear lad, I know very well who you are, your dear mother is well known in this house. How is she doing?”

She set me down and took a good long look at me. I flushed under her scrutiny, and stuttered out a reply that mother was well. She turned away with a humph sort of noise and I was left wondering if I had said something wrong. But she soon turned back to me, and shoved a plate of bread and honey into my hands.

“Eat,” she commanded, “You’ll need your strength working on this farm, but not to worry, we’ll soon have you fatted up.”

I obediently started nibbling on the bread and honey. It was delicious. Before I knew it I had devoured the lot, and returned the plate sheepishly to Mistress Wyatt, to which I was rewarded with a broad smile.

She told me of my duties and what was expected of me, and that she hoped I would be happy here, and that if there were any problems at all that I should go straight to her or to Farmer Wyatt. She then called in a young lad, Willie she called him, to show me to my lodgings.

I thanked her profusely and followed Willie out to my new home.