

The Beggars' Bible

Louise A. Vernon

Illustrated by Jeanie McCoy

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Books by Louise A. Vernon

<i>Title</i>	<i>Subject</i>
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<i>Doctor in Rags</i>	Paracelsus and Hutterites
<i>A Heart Strangely Warmed</i>	John Wesley
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<i>The King's Book</i>	King James Version, Bible
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HERALD
P R E S S

Harrisonburg, Virginia

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Unwelcome Choice 1

Thirteen-year-old Arnold Hutton hurried to church ahead of his parents. If only he could talk to the preacher, John Wycliffe, before the service began!

"He could tell me what to do," Arnold told himself. "I have to make a choice. I just *have* to."

But he was too late to talk to John Wycliffe before church. Already townspeople and fieldworkers crowded the tiny churchyard, eager to hear the famous Oxford teacher-preacher.

"He's preaching from the gospel," people told each other.

"And a bold, brave man he is for doing so." An old peasant woman thumped her cane on the cobblestones in excitement. "He says a sermon on the gospel should be preached every week in every church in England. God's grace is free."

"Free?" a young man echoed in disbelief. "Then why, after we pay the tithe we owe God, does the church ask for more and more money and goods to buy God's protection? You never hear about God's free grace when those church beggars come around."

"You mustn't talk that way about the friars," an old man said in a shocked voice.

"If a friar isn't a beggar, what is he?" the young man demanded.

"He's a — well, he's a —" Puzzled, the old man scratched his head.

“The word *friar* means *brother*,” Arnold volunteered. “He’s a brother of the church.”

Everyone stared at him, and Arnold bit his lip. Why had he tried to show off his knowledge? He knew everyone expected him to become a friar. *But that’s not my choice*, Arnold thought. If he could only talk to John Wycliffe about his dream of going to Oxford University!

When the churchgoers jostled their way toward the church door, Arnold stepped back and let those of higher rank go ahead. As always, he bristled with resentment at the familiar humiliation. If God’s grace was free, as John Wycliffe always said, why weren’t people free? Why did God allow some men to own whole families, as if they were cows or pigs? Serfs were the lowest, like slaves. Bound men had to stay on their owner’s land, but at least bound men — or bondmen, as they were called — could earn money.

Arnold heard someone mention his name. He winced. People had never ceased talking about his being educated with fourteen-year-old Timothy Coombe, son of Sir Malcolm, the owner of the estate where the Huttons and other bondmen lived in thatched-roof cottages.

“Is that the boy you mean? The sturdy one with brown hair?” he heard a visitor ask. “But he looks like a serf.”

Arnold tried to move out of earshot and almost ran into the overseer of Sir Malcolm’s estate, a clean-shaven man with surly face and hair plastered in peaks over his forehead. The overseer elbowed his way to the visitor.

“I am Sir Malcolm’s reeve,” he said, “and I can

tell you something about this boy you're talking about. He's a serf, all right."

Arnold gritted his teeth in sudden fury. Everyone in Lutterworth knew by this time that Father was a bondman, not a serf any longer. The reeve's dislike of the Hutton family worried Arnold, but he dared not complain. The reeve might ask Father for more tax money.

"Only gentlemen's sons should go to Oxford University," the visitor said. "What kind of future does Sir Malcolm want for this boy?"

Arnold stared at the ground. That was the very question he wanted to discuss with John Wycliffe. If only he could go to college, like Timothy! But college cost money. How could a bondman's son earn enough money to go? Of course, there were two other choices for his future, but Arnold did not want to think about them.

He heard the reeve's malicious chuckle. "Educating the son of a serf is the biggest mistake Sir Malcolm ever made. That boy came from the fields and he'll return to the fields."

Never, Arnold vowed, more than ever distrusting the reeve with his one-sided smile, forever collecting taxes and recording them in his big account book. As overseer for Sir Malcolm, the reeve was hardly better than a bondman himself. How had he managed to buy the fine, fat horse he rode weekdays?

"Why doesn't the boy become a friar?" the visitor suggested.

Arnold shivered in distaste. Could he go around the countryside as a begging brother of the church, coaxing food and hard-earned money from poor people,

all the time rolling his eyes heavenward and saying it was all for God? *Never.*

As if in answer to his thoughts, two friars in long, full robes, entered the churchyard, their plump faces wreathed in smiles. When they bobbed their heads in greeting, each showed a round, shaven spot that glistened in the sunshine. One held out a pouch at the end of a long stick. The other cajoled the crowd and gestured toward the pouch. "Put your pennies in here."

"But my penny is for the church collection," someone objected.

"It's all the same. Everything is for the glory of God," the priest intoned.

The people held back, and the friars became more insistent. "God does not bless a grudging giver."

Reluctantly, the churchgoers put their collection pennies into the pouch. The friars beamed, blessed the children, and told them an exciting story about a miser who was carried off by the devil.

Above the murmur and bustle an indignant voice rang out. "What! Begging again?" A frail, stoop-shouldered man in a long black gown with a cord at his waist thrust his way to the friars. His eyes sparked anger above his prominent nose and full, flowing beard.

"Who is this man?" one of the friars asked.

"Sssh! That is John Wycliffe," people responded from all sides.

The friars glanced at each other under lowered eyelids. "But, Sir John," one protested, emphasizing the courtesy title of *Sir*, by which all preachers were addressed, "Christ Himself was a beggar."

John Wycliffe's lips tightened in scorn. "What a notion you friars have gotten — that Christ was a common beggar and His disciples also. Christ was poor and needy and lived a life of poverty, but He never begged from town to town and from house to house with open crying. You friars would rather beg for a poor man's penny than bring a soul from hell."

"Sir John, you should not reprove us like that," one of the friars growled.

"Christ did not let His love for Peter prevent Him from reproving Peter sharply. Why may not men do so to friars, if they trespass more openly and to more harm of Christ's church?"

The church bell rang, and the friars hurried away. Everyone filed into church. Arnold found his parents and sat with them in the back. Perhaps he could talk to John Wycliffe afterward.

As usual, a few people twisted in their seats to stare at Arnold, the one chosen above their own children to be educated. Arnold clenched his fists in silent rebellion. He did not belong to either group, high or low.

Lost in gloomy thought, he watched Sir Malcolm's wife, Lady Edith, flutter in with a servant bringing five-year-old Chad, a spoiled child, who twisted and turned at every step. Then Timothy, Sir Malcolm's fourteen-year-old son, hobbled down the church aisle. Every face turned toward him. Timothy had hurt his leg rescuing his willful young brother from a charging bull. The villagers had talked about the incident for days.

Arnold glanced at Timothy's calm face with its crown of blond hair and felt relieved. The unspoken

friendship between them always made everything brighter, even the future.

“Where is Sir Malcolm?” someone whispered.

“Still in London. You know the king is very ill.”

A latecomer squeezed in at the back of the church. The fat abbot from the nearby monastery sat down with a grunt and folded his arms across his ample chest. Arnold knew he should feel respect for this man of the church, but he could not. The abbot was a round man with a round haircut. A girdle encircled his round middle. Even his fingers were blunted at the ends. What had fattened a man who had taken vows to serve only God?

Arnold stifled a sigh. After church the abbot would try as usual to coax him to enter the monastery by saying God wanted him to. *Why would God tell the abbot and not me?* he asked himself.

John Wycliffe began his sermon with an apology for his display of temper. “Christian men should beware in their speech against friars,” he said, “for some are good. But if they are evil, men should point out this evil. Christian men should know pseudo-friars and what is good in their order and what is evil. Much of their order is good, as is said in God’s law, but much is evil and is in discord with God’s law. The church teaches one thing and friars do another.”

As he talked, Wycliffe’s voice became more vehement. “Begging friars are like turtles. They find their way, one after the other, through the whole country. They penetrate every house, like lap dogs of ladies of rank. What sums of money are spent on them and how little on the education of children.”

At these words, Arnold jerked his head straight up. Here was a clue to the mystery of his education. John Wycliffe had taught Sir Malcolm at Oxford years before. Was there a connection between Sir Malcolm's decision to educate a poor boy and Wycliffe's views?

After the sermon, the abbot cornered John Wycliffe in the churchyard. "Why are you stirring up the people against friars?"

"Since friars sin often, why shouldn't men reprove them in their beard, but ever by meekness and love? Woe be unto us if we keep still and speak not against their sins, when we know they sin openly and many souls after them just as Satan does," Wycliffe retorted.

The thunder this frail man put into his words astonished Arnold. Where did he get such power?

"When a person is ordered to give of his goods more than God Himself demands through His law, then that person should not give these goods," Wycliffe continued. "It is as much of a sin to rob a widow or a poor, fatherless child of a penny or a halfpenny as it is to rob a rich man of a hundred marks' worth of goods."

The abbot flushed with anger. "Sir John, you are going too far. Your influential friends at court are not going to bear with your views forever, and the church will not let itself be dishonored."

"Does God listen to prelates and friars more than others on account of their red cheeks and fat lips?"

Arnold listened in amazement and delight. He longed to be as daring and outspoken as John Wycliffe, to fight evil and wrongdoing with such courage.

Wycliffe's voice rose. "No word of Christ's justifies

the mendicant orders except one: 'I know you not' " (Matthew 25:12).

Arnold remembered those words months later in connection with Sir Malcolm's five-year-old son. Arnold was waiting as usual at the private chapel near the manor house for the priest, and as usual he braced himself for the daily taunts of little Chad. The boy pranced back and forth on a red stick horse, his blond hair bobbing under a blue cap.

"You're nothing but — you're nothing but — you're nothing but a *serf*," Chad sang out.

Arnold flinched. The humiliating word *serf* hurt. Would there always be someone like Chad to remind him of his low rank? Arnold wanted to strike out, hit back, hurt someone to relieve his pain, but of course he could not hit a nobleman's son.

He forced himself to stand rigid and to gaze with seeming indifference over Chad's head past the open double gates to the fields beyond, where Sir Malcolm's serfs and bondmen harvested grain. The reeve came through the gate hugging his big account book to his chest. He crossed the courtyard to the house in his usual way, close to the wall, to avoid his shadow.

"Why have you come to the chapel?" he asked Arnold in mock surprise. "You belong out in the fields. Once a serf, always a serf."

Anger blazed up in Arnold, but he held his temper. Was he to end up in the fields, as the reeve said? Or would he have to enter the monastery across from the thatched-roof cottages at the far end of the field, become fat like the abbot in his billowing robes, and wheedle people out of their money, claiming it was for the glory of God?

Chad galloped closer. "Serf! Serf!" he called in malicious glee.

The hated word bounced around the courtyard walls. *But Father was a bondman, now.* Ever since he had broken his leg and Mother had taught him to sew, Father had amazed Sir Malcolm's household with his deftness in using a needle. As a bondman tailor, Father earned more than fieldworkers. If only he could buy his freedom! Never again would Arnold be forced to listen to insults like Chad's.

On a reckless impulse, Chad rushed up and flicked Arnold with a toy whip. "On your knees! You're a beggar. I'll give you alms."

A *beggar*, Arnold raged to himself. That was the worst insult yet. On market days at Lutterworth, he had stared with loathing at the whining, miserable creatures in their rags, hardly worse than the begging friars who coaxed people to give up hoarded coins or precious food. "For the love of God," the beggars and friars always said. What a strange phrase! Did God love people in return?

These thoughts reminded Arnold of the two choices for his future — the monastery or the fields.

Chad was stamping his foot in fury. "Get down on your knees. You're a beggar."

"I won't be a beggar. My father is a bondman."

"Just another name for serf," Chad retorted.

Arnold clenched his fists. Chad retreated on his stick horse to a safe distance. "All right. You're not a serf," he called. "You're a slave, and when you grow up, all your children will be slaves, forever and ever."

Goaded beyond endurance, Arnold seized a clod of dirt and flung it at the small boy's mocking face. The

dirt crumbled in Chad's open mouth. He clawed at it, howled in terror, and headed for the manor house.

"Timothy! Timothy!" he screamed.

Arnold slumped against the chapel door. Now he was in trouble. A bondman's son hitting a nobleman's child! Why hadn't he controlled his temper? Then he remembered how John Wycliffe had lost his temper with the friars and the abbot. But Wycliffe had a good reason.

Chad's brother Timothy limped out of the house. The sight of Timothy melted Arnold's anger. He would not have spoiled the secret friendship between them for anything.

"Don't be so noisy, Chad. What's the matter?"

Timothy's calm voice soothed Arnold. Timothy deserved to be a nobleman's son. Thoughtful, fair-minded, and polite, Timothy had never mentioned Arnold's low rank in all the years they had studied together.

"He hit me! He hit me!" Chad blubbered. "He has no right to. He's nothing but a —"

Timothy steered Chad toward the house. "Go inside and have someone clean you up."

Chad scampered away. Arnold hung his head and waited for Timothy to scold him.

"Chad hasn't learned any better," Timothy said in his usual measured tones. "He's got big ears. The reeve has been complaining about the poor crops because there aren't enough men to work in the fields. Every time he sees your father sewing for my mother, he takes it as a personal insult, and then, of course, it doesn't help when he sees you come here every day for school."

"Your own father ordered me to," Arnold reminded Timothy in a muffled voice.

"I know. I know. Did I ever tell you how it all started? John Wycliffe wanted to prove to my father that a serf could learn as much as anyone."

Arnold breathed easily again. So that was why he was being educated! Somehow, the word *serf* lost its sting. He was glad he had studied hard.

"And I must say," Timothy added, "you've really proved yourself. You're as ready for Oxford as I am, even if you are only thirteen. The priest told me so himself." Timothy looked around. "He's late today. He must be with Mother. I'll go find him." He limped off.

Arnold wanted to run after him, to tell Timothy how much he longed to go to Oxford, but how could he without seeming to beg for help? Begging was something he would never do.

Chad galloped out of the house, his face clean and shining with impudence. "You're just a slave," he told Arnold. "The reeve says so. I'm a nobleman's son, and you have to do what I say. We're going to play beggars, so get down on your knees."

"No, I won't."

Chad sulked. "My father's home from London. I'm going to tell him you hit me, and do you know what'll happen then?"

Arnold seethed with fresh resentment. He knew well enough. He would be sent to the fields, yet if he knelt like a beggar, even in play, he would betray something in himself. He groaned inwardly. No matter what he chose, he would be the loser. What possible choice could he make?

A Difficult Lesson

2

Chad's expression of haughty triumph was too much for Arnold.

"No, I won't play beggars."

Chad started off at a run and met Timothy coming out of the manor house. "I'm going to tell Father," he said loud enough for Arnold to overhear.

"Tell Father what?" Timothy asked.

"He won't play beggars with me, and I'm going to tell Father he hit me, and Father'll send him out to the fields. The reeve said so."

The reeve again, Arnold thought. Was that where Chad received his ideas of superiority?

Timothy flushed in annoyance. "Don't be so willful, Chad. It will get you into trouble one day. Remember the bull."

Backed by Timothy's unspoken support, Arnold choked down his pride and knelt. "I'm kneeling, Chad." Perhaps this act of humiliation would be sufficient punishment for losing his temper. He hoped so. After all, people had been put in the stocks for less offense.

Chad, uncertain, cupped his fingers over Arnold's head. "Now beg," he said in a small voice.

Arnold knew the little boy was remembering how his adored older brother had been hurt rescuing him from the bull.

Men's voices sounded nearby. Sir Malcolm, pale from Parliament sessions in London, was showing a visitor around the estate. With a start, Arnold recognized the slight, stoop-shouldered John Wycliffe. The rector glanced at the boys; his lips turned down in disapproval.

"Sir Malcolm, I do not like to see human subjection, even in play."

"Chad, stop that," Sir Malcolm ordered and waited until Arnold rose.

"It reminds me, however, that we must never rest until England is rid of slavery," Wycliffe continued.

Sir Malcolm's shaggy eyebrows rose in astonishment. "There hasn't been a slave in England since 1324. That's fifty-two years."

The two men walked on, their voices rising in a heated discussion.

Chad watched, his blue eyes round in fascination. "What makes Sir John holler like that?"

"Not so loud, Chad," Timothy cautioned. "He might hear you. Sir John is always fighting for a cause."

"But why is he so angry with Father?"

"It isn't anger. He just gets excited about ideas."

The boys watched Sir Malcolm face the rector. "You and your quick temper have just about ruined me, Sir John."

Wycliffe looked surprised and penitent. "I confess I too readily impart a sinister, vindictive zeal into a line of argument. Some have called it hypocrisy, hatred, and rancor under a pretense of holiness. I fear — and I admit it with sorrow — that this has happened to me too frequently. I confess my sin sor-

rowing, but I ask God for grace. But how have these personal faults hurt you?"

"You and your continual criticism of the friars! The good abbot was so insulted he may not buy my land, and if he doesn't, I can't pay my taxes this year."

"The abbot and others like him probably would not pay the value of the land, anyway," Wycliffe said. "These little antichrists rob men of their goods, claim it is for spiritual things, and then keep much of this muck for themselves. They eat up what would keep many families, and four or five needy men might be clothed in one cape and hood of your worthy neighbor, the abbot. As for monks and friars, many love the cloth of their habit more than the cloth of charity."

Arnold could see that John Wycliffe was ready to talk on and on, but Sir Malcolm interrupted.

"All this may be very true, but I have my taxes to pay. The abbot has made me a good offer."

"Have you no faith in God?" Wycliffe asked.

"What is faith?" Sir Malcolm snorted.

"Faith is to believe what you do not see," Wycliffe answered.

"Faith won't pay my debts. I tell you, the land must go."

"What about your bondmen?" Wycliffe asked.

"They'll belong to the monastery. They go with the land. You know that."

"That is slavery," Wycliffe responded with spirit. "Selling into slavery is not God's law."

"The bondmen will stay in their cottages and till the same soil. What difference does it make to them whether they work for me or for the abbot?"

“It means the abbot’s belly gets fatter and his cheeks redder.”

“Now, Sir John, I know you don’t like prelates, monks, and friars, but don’t start in on that again. As for preaching sermons on the gospel to lay people — ” Sir Malcolm shuddered. “How can they be expected to understand a theologian trained at Oxford University? They have their country priests, their penny for the church collection. Let that do.”

“It is not enough,” Wycliffe said. “They need Scripture.”

Sir Malcolm’s mouth dropped open. “I hope the Pope never finds out what you’ve been saying lately. He’d send a fleet of Rome runners to Bishop Courtenay forbidding you to speak or write.”

John Wycliffe smiled. “Sharp words bite often where soft speech does not move. Scripture is God’s law, and I shall never stop saying so. All Christians ought to know Holy Writ and to defend it.”

Sir Malcolm gestured in impatience. “You know, Sir John, your ideas are becoming more radical every year. You must watch your words. We don’t want you labeled as a heretic, you know, especially since you’re my friend. Now, no more of this. My private priest said he wanted to talk to me today, probably about the boys. He should be here by now to teach them. I must admit that little serf you insisted on educating has done very well.”

Arnold grinned at Timothy and watched the manor house priest approach with his head lowered and his hands hidden under the folds of his long robe. The priest glanced up, saw John Wycliffe, and with an expression of horror, turned as if to run.

“What is the matter with you?” Sir Malcolm demanded. “Why did you want to speak to me?”

The priest gulped. “Sir Malcolm, I have come to tell you I must leave.”

“Leave? For what reason? Don’t I pay you your stipend?”

“Yes, truly, sir.”

“Don’t I feed you well?”

“Yes, truly, sir.”

“Then what is your complaint?”

The priest jerked his head toward John Wycliffe. “My superiors have ordered me not to live so near a man who works for Satan.”

At these words, John Wycliffe’s lips curled upward in a smile. Then he frowned, but said nothing.

“What nonsense is this?” Sir Malcolm demanded. “Who will return grace at table? Who will pray for our souls? Who will teach the boys?”

“I am sure you will find someone,” the priest said, “but if you have any regard for the welfare of their souls, you will remove them from Satan’s disciple.” He bowed and left.

Sir Malcolm paced in front of John Wycliffe. “Now, Sir John, you must have been saying some pretty sharp things down there at Oxford to bring on such an accusation. Why can’t you keep your ideas to yourself, preach and teach according to church tradition, and stay friendly with the friars the way you used to? Do you want all four groups to fight you?” He did not wait for an answer. “What am I to do about Timothy entering Oxford this fall?”

“I’ll prepare him myself,” John Wycliffe said. “Let him come to me tomorrow.”

Arnold tried not to show his dismay. Was he to choose between field and monastery so soon?

“Send both boys,” Wycliffe added.

The next day at Lutterworth Church, William Newbold, the parish priest, asked the boys to wait outside Wycliffe’s study until the rector was through speaking to a group of Oxford students. In a little while, a few of the students came out talking with high-pitched enthusiasm.

“You don’t do it with words,” one said. “Sir John says we would never do any open begging from house to house.”

“How would we live, then?” another asked.

Arnold puzzled over the strange conversation. Why would rich Oxford students be interested in begging? He listened to other students.

“What did Sir John say about the Pope?” a student asked.

Another laughed. “He said the Pope was antichrist enclosed in a castle.”

“And that he was poison under the color of holiness,” a third student chimed in.

“Don’t forget he called the Pope Christ’s enemy,” still another student added.

Others chuckled over Wycliffe’s calling friars foul worms’ meat.

One student was critical. “I’ve heard all Wycliffe’s doings are to one end — to spread his words, his fame, and opinion among men.”

Later, when the last student had left, and Arnold and Timothy were in John Wycliffe’s study, Arnold repeated the student’s remark. Wycliffe leaned back in his carved chair and put his fingertips together.

“The Lord, by His power and grace opened my mind to understand the Scriptures, but often for vain-glory I departed from the teaching of them. My double aim was to acquire dazzling fame among the people and lay bare the pride of the sophists.”

Why would Wycliffe make such a confession? Arnold asked himself. The answer came after a few weeks of Wycliffe’s tutoring. The rector announced both boys were ready to matriculate at Oxford.

“What good will that do me?” Arnold burst out. “I can never go to college. I’m only a — ”

Wycliffe checked the rush of words with a wave of his hand. “Flee pride and you will conquer Satan.”

Arnold marveled at Wycliffe’s humility in confessing his own shortcomings.

“Should I enter a monastery?” Arnold asked.

“Perpetual vows are unlawful,” Wycliffe replied. “Many have made men religious against their will. Christ Himself cannot compel anyone to enter religion. You can be what God intends, but you must make His will your choice. Study His Son’s patience.”

Make His will your choice. The words echoed in Arnold’s ears all the way home. How could a person know he was choosing what God willed?

At the cottage he could see his father talking to the plump abbot near the gate of the walled-in monastery. Mother came to the doorway. “I hope this is the last day Sir Malcolm permits your father to sew for the abbot. Lady Edith wants him to finish Timothy’s clothes before he goes to Oxford.”

There it was again. Timothy would soon go on to college. What was left for Arnold? The fields or the monastery? Which was God’s will?

“Sir John says I am ready for Oxford, Mother, but what is the use thinking about it?”

Mother was silent for a moment. “You can enter the monastery and continue your studies there. The abbot has promised us you could.”

“But I don’t want to live like that,” Arnold burst out. “To be a monk and never leave the monastery, or become a friar and go around begging for money — oh, Mother, why are some people rich and some poor? Why did God make them that way?”

“God works His will in strange ways sometimes,” Mother admitted. “Your father was once a serf, and because he broke his leg he is now a bondman.”

“But that was because he learned how to be a tailor. That doesn’t help me. How can I go to Oxford University?”

“I’ve heard that many students beg their way from one day to the next.”

“Mother!” All of Arnold’s pent-up indignation exploded. “Do you want me to become a common beggar?”

Begging again. Could he ever escape being reminded of his low rank? Should he go to Oxford and beg on the streets for crumbs of learning? Arnold shrank from the idea. That surely was not God’s will. But what had John Wycliffe said? It was every person’s obligation to find out what God intended for him, and then choose to do it. A natural curiosity and hope awakened in Arnold. He waited for Father to finish talking to the abbot to tell him about Wycliffe’s ideas, but Father and the abbot kept on with their discussion too far away for Arnold to hear a word.

Jock, the manor estate clown, trudged past the

cottage with another bondman, their gleanings from the early fall harvest in sacks across their shoulders. Jock jerked his head in the direction of Father and the abbot.

“I hope for your sake the abbot isn’t coming to eat supper with you,” he told Mother. “With his appetite he could eat half a winter’s food. Besides, you’d have to feed his dogs a loaf and find a hen for his hawk.” Jock chuckled wryly. “I understand at the monastery the hunting dogs outnumber the monks two to one.”

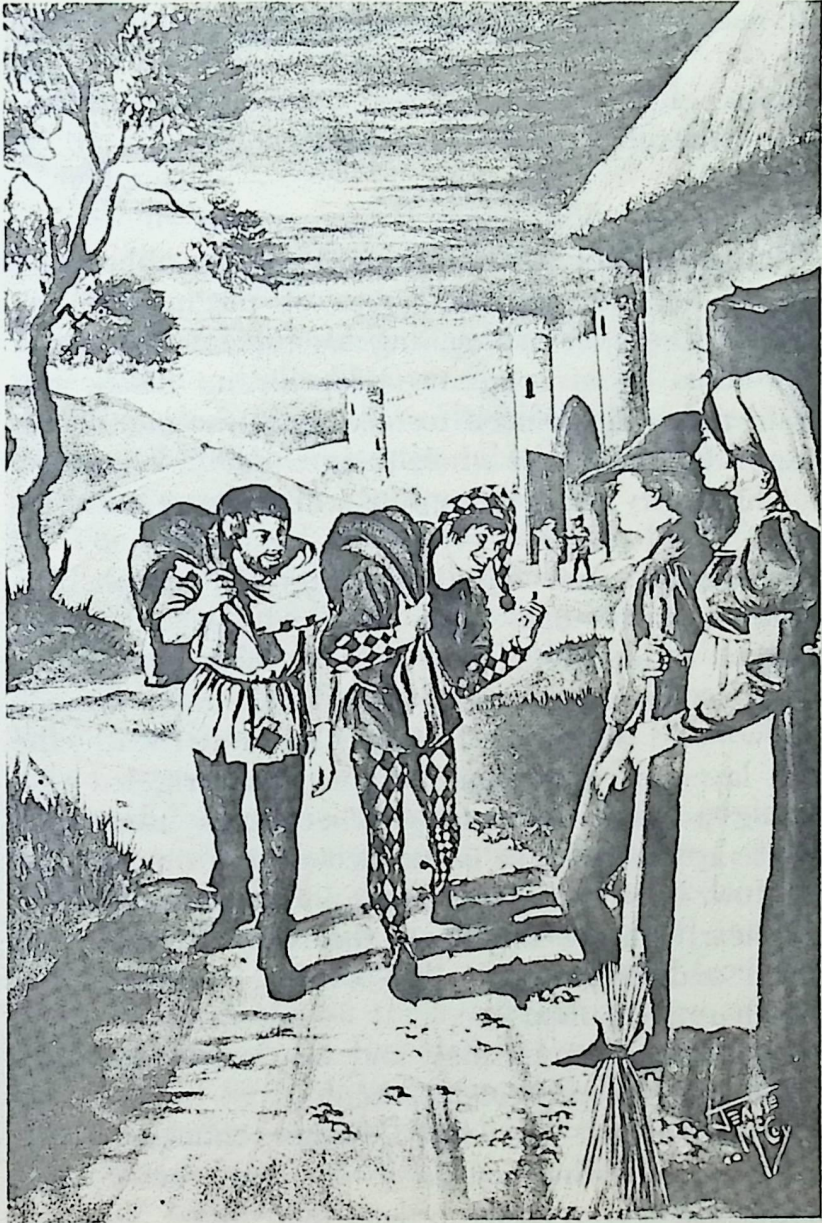
“You mustn’t say such disrespectful things,” Mother chided, but she hid a smile.

Jock grinned at Arnold. “I hear your teacher is our good rector himself. I remember years ago when Sir John was visiting here, long before he became rector at Lutterworth, he was arguing with Sir Malcolm; said he could take any boy, even the son of a serf, and educate him. Sir Malcolm said it was impossible. And then you toddled out into the road, a mere slip of a lad with your big brown eyes and laughed up at him. That started it all.”

Arnold stifled a sigh. He couldn’t laugh now — not when he would soon have to choose his future.

The bondmen shifted their sacks and headed toward their thatched-roof cottages. Father left the abbot and came home, his face cheerful.

It must be about me, Arnold decided. Had Father and the abbot arranged for him to enter the monastery? Was that what God intended?



Jock, the estate clown, chuckled wryly. "I understand at the monastery the hunting dogs outnumber the monks two to one."

Court Decision

3

Father did not mention his talk with the abbot, and Arnold did not ask, in hopes of putting off the dreaded moment of deciding his future. He longed to confess to his parents about hitting Chad, but could not bring himself to talk about the painful incident. He hoped the whole thing would be forgotten, but his guilty secret hung like a millstone around his neck.

At dawn a few days later, the dull scrape of a knife against stone woke him. Astonished at the unusual sound so early in the day, he pushed aside the coverlet on his sack of straw, leaned on one elbow, and listened. The ground underneath the thin layer of rushes hurt his arm. He wriggled to a sitting position, hugged his knees, and listened to the scraping. As light came through the tiny latticed window, he saw his father lift up a square stone from the hearth in the middle of the room. Mother bent down and tugged at a dirt-covered, brown leather pouch until it pulled free.

She clucked in dismay and brushed at the dirt. "'Tis a pity to spoil good leather."

"Never mind the dirt," Father chuckled. "It's what is inside that counts, as our good rector keeps telling us."

Arnold heard the clink of metal. "It's money," he thought in amazement. Where would Father get so

much money? There must be more than the begging friars gathered on their rounds.

Father opened the pouch, poured a pile of coins on the roughhewn table, and counted the money into neat piles.

"Twenty-six pounds, thirteen shillings, and eight pence," he announced.

"Is it enough?"

Arnold's hopes soared. Had they saved the money to send him to Oxford University?

Father brought out a handful of white tally sticks and laid them on the table. "It is now."

"What are those?" Mother asked.

"The abbot paid me for the tailoring I did."

"Paid you? Why, those sticks aren't money."

"The abbot said they are as good as money."

Mother seemed satisfied. "So this is the working of God's law that Sir John is always talking about. Who would have thought a broken leg would have led to your buying your freedom?"

Arnold listened in embarrassment. How could he have been so selfish as to think this money would send him to Oxford University? Father's freedom was far better. Then a sudden suspicion darted into his mind. What if Father had stolen money from the manor house? Maybe the reeve left money around to tempt Father, or even left the white tally sticks out. None of Sir Malcolm's bondmen liked the reeve, whose secretive airs and fat horse roused suspicion about his honesty.

Arnold could hold back no longer. "Father, where did you get all that money?"

Father laughed. "I didn't steal it. This money has

been honestly earned, and it means freedom for us. No more will we Huttons be slaves, serfs, villeins, bondmen. We'll be free men of England. Arnold, your children and their children, forever and ever, will be free."

"Free!" Arnold echoed. Then the whole family could go to the city of Oxford. Somehow, someday, he could go to one of the Oxford colleges. The sudden hope made him dizzy. Surely, this was God's plan for him.

Later, the reeve came to the cottage, opened his account book, and checked off their names. "Sir Malcolm is holding manor court tomorrow. Everyone must be there." The reeve spoke as if he were a long way off. Arnold sensed his annoyance at having to do the work belonging to the beadle.

"But this is such short notice," Father protested.

The reeve made a reluctant explanation. "John Wycliffe has been summoned to appear before the king's council, and Sir Malcolm is going to London with him."

"Then tomorrow I buy my freedom from Sir Malcolm," Father announced.

"What!" The reeve jumped back. His face worked in surprise. "You mean you have enough money?"

"Yes, with the white tally sticks you gave me," Father said with pride.

"The white tally sticks?" Again the reeve's face worked. "Very well, I'll take the money."

"I'd like to give it to Sir Malcolm myself," Father said.

"But you can't buy your freedom directly," the reeve explained. "Actually, in a court of law you

are still a serf, and a serf cannot own anything; therefore he cannot buy anything. You will have to deal with me as a third party."

Father turned over the money with reluctance. As the reeve passed Arnold on his way out, he spoke in an undertone. "I haven't forgotten about you. Tomorrow at court you will get the punishment you deserve."

Anger and concern unsettled Arnold for the rest of the day. What would the punishment be? Would Sir Malcolm order him to be put in the stocks, with his feet and hands dangling? Or would he be whipped in front of everyone?

The next day Sir Malcolm's bondmen and their families gathered under the oak tree talking at fever pitch. Sir Malcolm was going to sell his land to the abbot, and that meant the bondmen would be working for the abbot as their overlord. A chorus of voices sounded the general discontent.

"It's the times," someone explained. "Sir Malcolm can't pay his taxes. England has never been the same since the Black Death."

When the bondmen learned that Father was going to buy his freedom that very day, their complaints turned to congratulations.

"Aye, seemly it is," an old man proclaimed, "that one of us can buy his freedom. If one can, we all can."

"Aye, aye," the others shouted.

"That you can indeed," Father said, "if you work hard and save your money. No more quaffing ale by the tankard."

"Aye, aye."

“Jock here saves his money down his gullet,” someone put in slyly. “He’s saved enough to buy freedom for us all.”

“I have to buy food for three little ones,” Jock spluttered. “You have only one,” he told Father. “What good is freedom for this lad? He’ll be in the monastery anyway.”

Everyone takes it for granted, Arnold thought.

The abbot appeared at the gate on a magnificent horse. He dismounted and motioned to two mendicant friars walking behind him. They immediately mingled with the crowd and hurried to make the rounds selling pardons and pins. They joked and told stories, but today the money did not flow as usual into their pouches.

One of the friars held up a ragged square of cloth. “This is from the robe of the Venerable Bede, one of England’s first Christians,” he said. “How much?”

The friar, almost as plump as the abbot who looked gloomily on, beamed at the onlookers. The people drew back.

“Sir Malcolm has not yet paid us for the grain,” a bondman explained.

“We do not have our share yet of oats,” another added.

“Remember to pay your tithes first,” the friar warned.

“How can anyone tithe one egg?” Jock drawled.

At the laughter, the friars looked annoyed and soon left, their pouches almost as flat as before. Almost on their heels two young barefoot friars joined the group. Unlike other begging friars, these were clad in russet

The Beggars' Bible



John Wycliffe is a famous Oxford professor, but he has radical ideas and a temper that are getting him into trouble. Young Arnold Hutton has troubles of his own. His family is poor and he will have to either go to the fields or work for the abbot who feeds his dogs better than his servants. Arnold wants to be a scholar and decides to run away.

In Oxford, Arnold hears Wycliffe teach and is inspired by Wycliffe's ideas that everyone should be able to read the Bible, even those who can't read Latin. People like Arnold and his family. But Wycliffe's enemies are gathering evidence. They send spies to his lectures and encourage the Oxford students to riot in the streets. Will Arnold and his friends be able to convince Wycliffe that he is in danger? Will they be able to save the Bible that has been translated into English?

Join Arnold, Timothy, and Lucy as they uncover the plot against Wycliffe and help to entrust the holy Bible into the hands of beggars.

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