

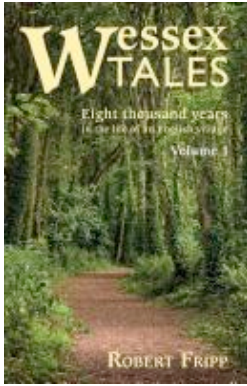


# Wessex TALES

Eight thousand years  
in the life of an English village

Volume 1

ROBERT FRIPP



*Wessex Tales, Volume 1: Twenty short stories transport readers into "eight thousand years in the life of an English village" deep in the Dorset countryside. Features stone age hunters, Viking raiders, a troubadour lost in dark woods, a medieval wedding, and an oak tree's life. Then, a smuggler travels by night, men hoist the last stone on Stonehenge, and the Battle of the Somme. Wessex Tales tells these stories and a dozen more.*

# **Wessex Tales**

## **Volume 1**

**Order the complete book from**

**[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)**

**<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/7971.html?s=pdf>**

**or from your favorite neighborhood  
or online bookstore.**

**Your free excerpt appears below. Enjoy!**

# **Wessex Tales**

*Eight thousand years in the life of an English village*

VOLUME 1 of 2

**Robert Fripp**

Shillingstone Press

***Wessex Tales:***

*Eight thousand years in the life of an English village*  
Forty short stories set in the County of Dorset  
by Robert Fripp  
Published in two volumes

Shillingstone Press  
125 Southvale Drive, Toronto ON, M4G 1G6, Canada

Copyright Robert Fripp 2014  
[www.RobertFripp.ca/](http://www.RobertFripp.ca/)  
[www.linkedin.com/in/robertfripp](http://www.linkedin.com/in/robertfripp)  
[www.amazon.com/Robert-Fripp/e/B001K8AXNA](http://www.amazon.com/Robert-Fripp/e/B001K8AXNA)

Cover design: The Design Unit Ltd., Wimborne, Dorset  
Cover photo: Forest Trail Trees © Karen Arnold  
Maps by David Atkinson, Hand Made Maps Ltd., London

Notice of rights:

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, uploaded or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise without the prior written consent of the author. Short excerpts may be used in reviews; but no person, company or organisation may offer this book, or any part of this book, for sale or reuse without the author's written permission.

Volume 1 first edition 2014: ISBN 978-0-9918575-8-6

This book combines British punctuation and U.S. spelling.  
Canadian compromise moderates both.

## The Face in the Floor

*Among the cherished objects in the British Museum is a mosaic floor portraying one of the earliest likenesses of Christ to be found in the British Isles. Indeed, this is the only portrayal of Christ to be found anywhere in a mosaic floor in the former Roman Empire. Why such a treasure came to light under the grass of a Dorset meadow remains a mystery. Only one thing about this floor from Hinton St. Mary is certain. It was laid around 325 A.D., twelve years after Constantine became the first emperor to convert to Christianity. Such a magnificent floor demands a history. Why was it laid in a remote farming villa, one or more days of travel from any important Roman town? This is the tale our floor deserves ...*

‘YOU MUST BE AWFULLY CLEVER, BELETUS.’

‘All in the mind’s eye, Afrixa.’ The master mosaicist rocked back on his knees to look up at the housemaid’s dumpy frame. She stood over him for the umpteenth time, shameless adoration lighting every feature in her moon-like face.

‘From now on I’m calling you *Genius tesserae*,’ she announced. The animating spirit in mosaic tiles. Well, why not? As apprentice, journeyman or master, Beletus had laid more floors and slipped more tiny *tesserae* through his fingers than any craftsman within a three-day ride of Dorchester.

‘If you don’t let me get on with it, there won’t be a tessellated floor,’ the master chided Afrixa gently.

‘That’ll make the mistress cross.’ Her tone implied that Afrixa had bigger things to worry about than her mistress or her moods. But she took the hint and walked away, casting a sly glance back.

A spotty youth behind the master said, ‘She fancies you, Beletus.’

Without looking up, the master shot back, 'Keep your eyes on that floor, boy!' He was not about to let his apprentice see him blush. 'You'd think you were crafting a face over there! Fill in that background, Otiacus, and be quick about it, or I'll have you mixing mortar for the rest of time!'

'Yes, Master.' The lad stuck out his tongue at his master's rump. Then, wisely, he continued to bed little tiles in a waiting matrix of wet mortar surrounding a mosaic likeness of Bellerophon. It was the master who had animated the beautiful likeness of Bellerophon slaying his Chimera. He, Otiacus, filled in the grout.

The fact was that Beletus fancied Afrixa, too. She looked like a woman with whom he could be comfortable. What with his dear wife dead these past two years ...

The master mosaicist knelt motionless, like a man at prayer, staring into the roughcast foundation before him. Piercing grey eyes offset his wild fringe of dark, greying hair, as if a palisade of stumps defended a great, bald head. Even on his knees Beletus suggested a man of bulk and strength. He was built like a wrestler or an animal-trainer, not an artisan who crafted eternal beauty with sleight of hand and tiny tiles.

The master sighed, adjusted his sheepskin kneeling cloth and studied the array of tiles in the flat, partitioned box beside him on the floor. Here were fine-textured *tesserae* fired from baked clays in every brown and reddish hue; worked stones from Purbeck in blacks, greys, yellows, and from the Lias beds in whites and blues. Portland limestone added more whites and greys. Rapidly, like a paymaster pulling together coins to pay off a line of labourers, Beletus took up *tesserae* of several colours. Turning his attention to the floor he began to fashion the head of an antlered stag with such speed as to make it appear that the pieces came thrusting into places that Fates had pre-ordained.

Beletus sometimes felt that higher forces guided his hand. He always prepared his floor plans carefully: client approval depended on it. But limning preliminary drawings and coaxing tiles into subtleties of feature and tone were hard-practised years apart.

Beletus was good, but not proud; he valued guidance from whatever source it came. He was certain that gods sometimes guided his hand, breathing into him—in/spiring—an eye for design much greater than his alone. Faces, features, even panels took shape spontaneously beneath his hands, as if they were faces forming in clouds. He had once set out to create a fish, only to find that his hands delivered a stork. What the gods give, take! The artist's *genius* stood apart, observing, driven to animate stone, clay, metal, wood; but it was often the gods who spoke through the mortal agency of the master's hands. He expressed spirit voices in pictures, making their *anima* live. Beletus never fought the instinct in the tiles. He would toy with *tesserae* until they took shape as the pre-ordained creature they must become: a conch shell, a dolphin, Hercules.

Sea creatures were popular with Dorset people, but not in this commission. Afrixa had told him, 'Master nearly drowned himself. He was ever so sick. For two, three months we thought he'd die.' So, no water beasts!

For the first time since his wife's death, Beletus felt a deftness, a new creative power, perhaps even a level of skill he had not attained before. *Tesserae* flew from his hands to take up their natural places in glorious patterns across the great sweep of the floor—twenty-eight feet by nearly twenty. Images materialised as if they already lived, with tiles falling into place beside neighbours to form a destiny conceived long since by a *genius* the master could not explain. More than ever, Beletus imagined himself the spirits' instrument.

He had laid many floors. If the gods so willed, he would lay many more. But none would be so whole, so balanced in the integration of its parts as this one. Barely a third of it was laid—the Christus-room was still to come—but the master could tell.

He shifted his seat to rest his back on the arch between the two parts of the room. The apprentice, who had been taking his time behind his master's back, found new enthusiasm for fitting a background around Bellerophon's head. But Beletus had no eyes for Otiacus. He was scanning the section of *peltae* pattern under the arch between the rooms. The key to *peltae* was a six-armed star shape,

four of whose rays curved off to link diagonally with similar shapes in adjoining rows. *Peltae* was intricate beyond geometry, intuitive past reason, and beautiful. Beletus had done fine *peltae* before—another commission not far away came to mind—but not like this. The colours, the weave, the spacing; it was as close to perfect as he had ever seen, with its curviform lines linking elements in different rows. Here were stars of heaven, all linked; fish of the sea, united in their element. The native art of Britain had long since been debased by Roman conventions, but artisans knew that Nature and life still hid in the lines of a Celtic curve. A stylised stem, a leaf, a beast lurked among the tiny tiles.

The master traced the curving union of a *peltae* line across the newly finished piece of floor, leaned back against the plastered arch and closed his eyes.

‘Are you all right, Master?’

‘Just tired, boy.’ Inspiration had deserted him, but it would come again. For the moment he must fall back on mere expertise. He must not fail this floor. Nor must the floor fail him.

DAYS PASSED, THE FLOOR PROGRESSED, and summer warmth ensured that the ragged dust-curtain across the door at the western end came down.

Beletus and his team had a more or less constant audience as members of the villa’s *familia* paused in the corridor to stare and admire. All ranks passed by, from the humble to the high. Among the *coloni*, young women and field workers trod on the new tiles gingerly, confining themselves to the floral scroll around Bellerophon and the corners of his panel, where Beletus had limned two-handled chalices.

The theme of Bellerophon riding Pegasus and slaying his Chimera spoke to the motif of courage, of light over darkness. That theme was as divine in the old, comfortable world of the spirits as in the new, unfolding, pagan world of Christ. And the chalices: were they amphorae or holy grails? This work was a compromise among many religions and spirit worlds.



The long summer days between sheep shearing and harvest often drew the mistress of the villa to her tessellated floor. Helena bore herself like a natural aristocrat—helped by the fact that she shared her given name with the emperor’s mother. She was tall for a woman, her face too drawn to be a true beauty, with greying-blond hair in a ribbon-tied tress at the back of her head. She it was who had commissioned the majestic, tessellated floor. The lady favoured blue silk, Beletus noticed, in keeping with the cool, aristocratic manner of her bearing. It was as much as the mosaicist could do to lift his eyes from her skirts. People said silk was woven from long hairs that grew on the leaves of a tree in a land a full year’s travel beyond the eastern edge of the known world. Silk was a rare commodity.

‘It’s coming along nicely, Beletus.’

‘Thank you, Ma’am.’

‘This outer room is a delight. Those floral scrolls around Bellerophon look so complicated.’

‘Practice, Ma’am,’ the master mosaicist said modestly. ‘And, as you see, we make a good team.’

The boy, Otiacus, was tiling background beneath the belly of the stag to the right of the door. Watched by his master and the client the apprentice rose to heights of diligence as never before, sweating every detail with his tongue between his lips.

Beletus gave silent thanks for the fact that he had assigned Otiacus to work on the stag just before Helena stopped by. The boy’s body, bent over the panel, hid a major imperfection. The workshop had delivered a panel in which a leaping hound chases a stag. Above the stag’s back, the head and neck of a hind turn to face the pursuer. So far so good. But the hind has no feet. It was all very well for the mythical Chimera to have a goat’s head in its back and a serpent for a tail. But there was nothing mythical about the hind and the stag. Back at the workshop that fool Genorex must have been drunk again.

Feeling perhaps that the apprentice needed encouragement, the mistress moved to watch Otiacus at work.

In a flash Beletus signalled his journeyman, Coxucratis, who was tiling a similar scene near the northern wall. ‘I hope, Ma’am,’ said the journeyman, ‘that you approve the lines of this panel.’ Coxucratis wiped dusty hands on his leather apron-front and scratched his unconventional full beard. Pushing away hammer and trowel he smiled at the lady.

The ruse shifted Helena’s attention to the northern wall. Lifting her hem, she crossed the tiles on an incomplete section of rope-weave border beneath the Chimera. ‘Indeed,’ she told the journeyman, ‘it’s very leafy.’

Coxucratis looked pleased. A hound with a studded collar was chasing a stag through the green intensity of a mosaic Eden. The scene was beautifully rendered and quite primeval, except for the collar on the hound, which denoted human intrusion on the Garden’s perfection.

‘Very well executed,’ the mistress went on. ‘Thank you.’

‘It moves the eye, Ma’am, this one and the one opposite,’ the journeyman said, indicating the line of the chase. ‘We’re leading the eye to the inner chamber.’

‘We look forward to seeing that.’ Helena turned to the master. ‘How long do you think it might take?’

‘Inside of two months.’ To escape the mistress’s cool, appraising gaze, Beletus turned away, appearing to study the base of the future Christus-floor in the inner chamber. The outlines of the geometry—quarter-roundels, semi-roundels, diagonals, the central roundel—were marked in charcoal on a plaster coating spread over the foundation. ‘Inside of two months,’ Beletus repeated, stung with an apprehension he hadn’t felt since his first commission as a master. This floor would be his crowning work, the sum of his life’s skill. Since designing it he had known it would be so. The geometry spoke a wholeness that no floor he had ever seen could match. Only one obstacle lay between his knowledge and his goal. He had to do the work, and perfectly.

‘Good.’ Helena’s tone implied the audience was at an end. She plucked up her hem, trod delicately around Bellerophon and, in a

flurry of blue silk, dust and an air of grace befitting one whose fortune might lay several such floors, Helena left the room.

DAY AFTER DAY THE DESIGN in the larger, eastern chamber took shape, more than fulfilling the promise of the charcoal pattern sketched on the foundation. Beletus discovered what it was that made this composition special when he tackled the complicated borders and floral scrollwork made necessary by the nearly hemispherical scenes along each edge. In its mass of visual weighting the sizes of panels, borders and fill were roughly equal. Even the central Christ-figure, when it was done, would not overwhelm the supporting design.

The plan called for human heads in the four corners. Altars to Mithras were done that way, with wind spirits at cardinal points. But, in the icons of a new religion alien to Beletus, the four figures would be graced with the dignity of word-bringers, evangelists.

It was here that Otiacus, who had grouted the background since the project began, was at last assigned to depict a human face. Beletus set him working on the evangelist in the northwest corner. Coxucratis took the southwest corner, while the master worked on the spatial geometry, which was to integrate the patterns as a whole.

Visitors got bolder as the floor filled in. They stood in the arch to watch while the work progressed. A frequent admirer was the mistress's little girl. Ten years old, Beletus reckoned. She came tugging her nanny behind her, sat down across from him, and watched. She avoided Coxucratis. When the others teased him, he blamed it on his beard.

All things considered, little Julia was no trouble. One day Beletus was fashioning the floral scrollwork leading from the southwest corner to the centre of the room. The nanny, dark, rustic and ever watchful, sat on the *peltæ* strip between the rooms. Her charge, a tall, precocious child with Venus tresses to her waist, sat fidgeting until the master pushed across a box of tiles. 'Make a flower,' he told her, 'make a leaf.' In due time he admired her

handiwork and put away the tiles. Sometimes she wanted nothing but to talk.

‘My daddy almost drownéd,’ she confided.

‘Oh?’ Beletus bedded a green tile in a leaf and studied a handful more.

‘That’s why you’re putting in this floor.’

The housemaid, Afrixa, had told the men how the master of the house had tried to breach a beaver dam in a flood season, almost drowned, and caught pneumonia into the bargain. Lucky to be alive, they said. The way Afrixa told it, the *paterfamilias* had lain half through Death’s door for months till a Christian hermit laid on his hands and drew out the spirits of sickness in the name of a Hebrew god. From that day forth the family adopted the Christus as *primus inter pares*, the first among deities in their pantheon of family gods.

‘What will he look like?’ the little girl asked.

‘Who?’

‘The Christus, of course.’

‘Ah,’ said Beletus. He rattled a fistful of *tesseræ* and pondered the question. He had no idea. Like a man, he supposed. Less heroic than a Greek, less magisterial than a Roman deity. The Christ’s Chi-Rho symbol was all the rage nowadays. Having been adopted by the victorious emperor some thirteen years before, the Chi-Rho was the height of fashion as a good luck charm. Beletus himself had laid at least two. But what face should he give a new god?

From its frame of hair as pale as summer grass, the earnest face of the girl repeated her question. ‘Well, what will he look like?’

The apprentice broke off from his work on the face in the corner. ‘Like me,’ he told her flippantly.

The girl threw her hair over her shoulder, followed it with a turn of her head, and considered Otiacus’ suggestion with the earnest honesty of a child. ‘You’re much too young,’ she said. Turning back, she caught Coxucratis chuckling in his corner. ‘Christus didn’t have a beard, either,’ she told him. It was the apprentice’s turn to laugh.

‘Brown eyes or grey eyes,’ Beletus speculated.

‘Brown, please,’ she implored. ‘My friend has brown eyes.’

‘Who’s your friend?’

‘He lives in the villa across the river.’

‘I know the one.’

‘They’ve got a lovely floor. With lines of leaves and lovely curvy borders. Just like this.’ Her hand traced the plaited edging of a hunting scene. ‘I bet you can’t do our floor nearly as well as that.’

Julia’s nanny hushed her, but Beletus just laughed and waved her off. ‘My dear, I know it well. I laid it. This one will be better. Just you watch!’

Good work pays twice, folk say. True enough. When Helena began shopping for a tessellated floor in honour of the god who saved her husband’s life, the mistress of the villa four miles away gave her Beletus’s name.<sup>6</sup>

What would the god look like? The question had nagged him for weeks. Every detail in the floor led to that face. The unity of design was perfection. The weight and balance of its elements were perfection. The size of the roundel waiting to accept the face was perfect with respect to its size, its lights, its darks. Even with the wretched Otiacus making heavy weather of the word-bringer in the northwest corner, every other element in the great floor would more than compensate.

‘Here,’ the master told the girl, pushing his heavy flat box of *tesserae* across to her. ‘You make a face and show me how he ought to look. I’m going to check on my mortar crew.’ Beletus stood up stiffly, pressed his back against the arch to straighten his spine, and carried his years across Bellerophon and out along the corridor to the afternoon light in the courtyard beyond.

IN TIME THE WHOLE EXPANSE WAS TILED with glorious designs of plaited borders, floral scrolls, evangelists (three by Coxucratis; one, less accomplished, by Otiacus), hunting hounds, fleeing deer and the Tree of Life, which presided near the eastern wall. The central roundel stood ready with three concentric plaited borders—but no Christ. Try as he might, Beletus could not envision the Christus,

even though he had a model painted on a drinking cup. In sheer frustration he gave the roundel a fourth border, a wave design that took up space inside the rest, shrinking the gap where the face would stare from the floor. The job should have been done days since, the team packed and gone. But still they lingered, costing time and money while the master's mood grew as black as thunder. What should he look like, this face in the floor? The genius had deserted the master of the tiny *tesserae*.

One night, feeling drained and tired, Beletus threw his cover off, groped for his sandals and took himself out to the courtyard. The moon, not far from full, stood high in the west, as bright as Diana's shield in a clear night sky. To his right, two little lamps served as night-lights in the corridor fronting the villa, their pinpricks of flame as pale as glow-worms set against the beacon of the moon.

Though imposing, the villa was a conventional corridor-house with a wing at either end. The main long block, housing the principal rooms, ran north to south and faced due west. It overlooked the valley of the River Stour, half a mile away. Symmetrical wings about a third as long as the house jutted forward from the ends of the main block. In this standard arrangement each room let onto a corridor that started in one wing, ran the length of the front, and ended in the wing opposite. The roof of the house swept down in a single line extending over the corridor, protecting the passage from sun and rain. The corridor had no outer wall, excepting sturdy timber columns supporting the roof.

Beletus shared a room with Coxucratis at the end of the south wing. Thus the master was well placed to step into the courtyard, where he walked a few paces and turned to look back at the house. The long, low bulk shone bright in the light of the moon. Only the corridor loomed dark, like a scowl in the moon-washed front.

The master turned away. Between the house and the river the forest had been cut long since and, where humans left off, beavers had seen to the rest. Half a mile away, moonlight glinted from the surface of the Stour.

Drawn to the slash of light on water, Beletus followed the trail to the river through a confusion of huts, cart hovels, and the litter of a hundred working souls. For almost an hour by the moon he sat on the dew-wet bank in search of inspiration. He would have tarried longer, but a line of encroaching black cloud threatened to cover the moon. The master retraced the track up the hill, weary and none the wiser.

When he reached the villa the moon was still shining free of the cloud. Beletus stopped in the courtyard to catch his breath, taking in the bright bulk of the house and the dark line of the corridor, shaded beneath the overhang of roof.

That was when the night-light blinked. There could be no doubt. The light had blinked. The small oil lamp burned on a shoulder-high shelf twenty feet to the right of the main portico, near the chamber of the tessellated floor. For a heartbeat or two the flame disappeared. Then it winked on again. Hair was rising on his neck even before Beletus hit upon the explanation: a figure had walked between him and the light. For the moment he saw nothing; whatever had passed was lost in the darkened corridor. Then a bright pale glow appeared in the portico, where a man stood still in the spotlight of the moon.

Every follicle in the master's flesh was now a-creep. He could have turned right and retreated to his room at the end of the southern wing, but the thought never entered his head. Beletus stood rigid with fear while the moonlit being hitched up its hem, walked slowly down the central steps and came directly towards him.

A rabbit in fear of a snake regains its senses, just too late. The moonlit being was two arm-lengths off when Beletus took charge of his wits. By then the other was staring him in the face.

The stranger was half a head shorter than the artisan, formally clad in a full-length pallium, with his hair brushed forward and cut on the forehead in conventional style. Even though his eyes were held by the stranger's moonlit face, Beletus took those details in. The man's features were pale and puffy, like those of a body several

days drowned. But the eyes, though ringed with tiredness, were dark, deep set, and firm. The nose, too long for a Briton's, pointed the way to a tight-drawn, narrow mouth. And though the face was fleshy, moonlight picked out cheekbones such as traders from the Northland have, or men from southern Gaul.

For an instant, fear kept Beletus rooted to the spot, then something akin to awe. It was as if the stranger knew when the fear passed off, for he chose that moment to ask, in Latin:

‘Where are you going?’

Unaccountably, Beletus replied, ‘To work, Master.’

The stranger managed a thin, brief smile. Then, like a giant, nocturnal eyelid, the dark line of cloud closed off the moon, dropping the night into black. Beletus felt a chill as the stranger walked past, leaving him in the darkened courtyard, alone.

What guided his feet, then his hands, in the following hours, he would never know. He steered for a point between the night-lights, fumbled his way up the steps, collected both lamps off their shelves and took them to the chamber of the tessellated floor. The work looked impressive even in that faint light: the designs, the borders, the scrolling, the unity of the thing. But it mocked its maker. Every element led the eye to the hollow roundel where the Christ face should have been long since—the Coming that so far had failed to come.

THE MASTER LOOKED AROUND, found four lamps on wall shelves and managed to light three. Setting the little lights in a tight circle around the Christ-space, Beletus dragged heavy flat boxes of tiles to him—his, and his workers’ besides—and started slipping *tesserae* around. Never had he worked so fast, nor been so absorbed, as he was now. Sub-assemblies grew, were rejected and scattered as others flew into their place. An eye here, the line of a chin. A curve of dark tiles, rejected as being too thick for a mouth, became instead a worried crease below the lower lip. A sweep of hair with gaps too broad changed into the subtle shoulder-folding of a pallium. But the colour was wrong. Work the same lines again, in darker tiles! An eye



stared up; another came together at top speed with the click of *tesserae* and the tapping of the master's hammer on his tile-anvil. The second eye squinted, the size was wrong. Beletus dashed it aside: the staring thing had spirit-life no more. He formed a line, a straight, too perfect line. Why, in a world of curves and facial arcs, a line? It bent a little at one end, and the curve ... Of course! Sliding the assembly on his trowel he joined it to another group of tiles. Hammering some, snapping others on his anvil with a blacksmith's strength of hand, the master felt the force of inspiration surging back. A left eye acquired a thick, arched brow and the line of a long, straight nose. It was coming. The face was coming. One hour or five, he must not stop. Rejected patterns suggested others. He tried them. Merged them. Rejected them again. His hands flew around like a shill playing shell games on fools.

A lamp flickered and died. No matter. Dawn was breaking through the long, high window in the eastern wall.

Full daybreak. Four lamps burned. Useless pinpricks now. The new day's sun threw its favour full upon Bellerophon at the west end of the room.

Two pairs of feet presented themselves for duty. Otiacus opened his mouth to give the master Good Morning, but Coxucratis silenced the lad before he could speak.

'Go!' said the master. 'Put up the curtain. Let nobody in. Just guard the door!'

The pair retreated to stations in the corridor.

A lamp burned out. Three lights remained to stab their feeble competition at the sun. Beneath the master's hands an arc took shape. It failed as an eyebrow. He turned it this way and that, prepared to scramble it. His hand dashed down to instant execution, and stopped short. The master slid the element onto his trowel, turned it just so, and preserved it for ever as a crease in the neck.

Commotion at the door. The little girl. His men denied her entry, whispered anxious explanations to the nanny.

'Let her in!' the master roared.

Julia approached, half afraid of the new persona in a man she thought she knew, the gentle giant of the tiny tiles.

‘Sit down, be still, say nothing and you stay,’ Beletus told her without looking up. ‘Open your mouth and out you go. That clear?’

‘Yes sir,’ said she who would one day be the mistress of this house.

It was the longest sentence the master had spoken this day. It would be the longest for many an hour to come.

The girl sat opposite the master, watching as the Christ-face came together, upside-down from where she sat. The sun skipped two hours. *Tesserae* clashed and threw apart, like features formed, dissolving, and reforming in a cloud. Here was a chin, dark with worry and strength in roughly equal parts. A right eye, still elusive. Time after time the master started, only to dash it apart.

From time to time the girl could hear the men behind the dust curtain hushing servants, silencing her nanny, at one point tactfully banning Helena herself.

Slowly, very slowly so as not to draw attention, the girl assembled tiles from among those she could reach and brought them together in a childish likeness of the missing eye. She had been working silently for some minutes when she realised that the master was gazing across the Christ-hole at the *tesserae* beneath her hand. She froze, staring back, terrified that he would throw her out. Instead he leaned across, took her assembly on his trowel and stole it away. Silent minutes passed while he shifted her tiles around. ‘That does it!’ the master said softly, and slid a right eye into place beside the left.

The girl forgot herself. ‘We did it, sir, we did it!’

‘Yes, dear, we did it. Hush.’

A lamp expired.

Beletus formed a cheek and joined it to the chin, transforming lines in both to give them life.

The girl stayed as long as she could, squirming with discomfort before slipping away to relieve herself. Returning, she faced an inquisition in the corridor that she escaped by sliding through the

curtain to sit above the Christ's shape-taking brow, as quiet as before. By now, half the *familia* was keeping one eye on the ragged cloth barring the door.

MORNING LIGHT CAME AND WENT. Noon robbed the chamber of the sun. Mid-afternoon restored it, diffused by the curtain at the door. Beletus spent these hours fleshing the face, shifting and toning features relative to each other, building shades of luminance into cheekbones and shadows beneath the chin. Then curls of hair kissed the nape of the neck; folds took shape in a pallium; more toning followed.

Afternoon passed into late evening before the master worked and reworked the finishing details into the Christ-god's cheeks. Not that the passage of time meant much on this long summer day. The light was redder. That was all.

Beletus had not eaten, not slept, not moved from the spot for more than three quarters of a day and a night. At last, fitting a final tile into the face he told the girl—who had been taking progress reports to the others as if expectant kin awaited a birth—'It's done!' Beletus moved away from the Christ and lay down.

The girl had been sitting across from Beletus since morning, on and off, watching the Christus take shape, upside-down. 'He's lovely, Master,' she whispered. 'Just like a god.' Her fingers rubbed the rough, ungrouted tiles of the new-laid image that seemed always to have been. 'Shall I ask them to come in?'

Beletus didn't answer. He lay on the Tree of Life, asleep.

The girl came around the roundel and solemnly studied Christ the right way up. Then, as if stirring a sleeping bear, she shook Beletus awake. 'Master, can I show the Christus-god to Mummy and Daddy now?'

He lay staring at a ceiling made red with evening light. 'Of course you can.'

The child couldn't contain herself any longer. She ran shouting happily into the corridor to fetch her parents in.

Beletus rolled onto his hands and knees, crawled over to the Christ and studied it. Only now did it hit him: the face in the floor was that of the world-weary stranger encountered the night before. The likeness was perfect. No more, no less. Great Hercules, the man must be one of the villa community, a family retainer! Beletus had enshrined a deity with the visage of the patron's bookkeeper or *major domo*. He, the master mosaicist, would be the laughing stock of Dorchester. He had debts to pay against supplies for this commission. He would never work again!

Grabbing his trowel, Beletus prepared to rip the central features from the face just as his client appeared at the end of the room.

Not even her daughter's tug on her arm could ruffle Helena's regal calm. 'You've kept us on edge all day, Master. There isn't a soul in the *familia* who isn't clamouring behind that cloth to see the Christ.'

The master mosaicist bowed, his face a mask, his heart thumping the anxiety of the condemned at the approach of his executioner.

Helena hitched up her skirts to avoid construction dust and circled the central roundel, standing beside Beletus to examine the bust. Seconds stretched into what seemed like hours. Then the mistress was down on her knees before Christ, her silk in the dust, touching the tiles in the tired face. 'He is magnificent, Beletus,' she said, never taking her eyes off the image. 'No one could have given us a better portrait of a god.'

The master acknowledged his client's compliment with a flat 'Ma'am,' which served to cover his confusion. Did she not recognise the face of a man who was one of her own?

'Go let the others in,' the mistress told her daughter. Julia ran to the curtain. The cascade of hair down her back made her look like a moving corn stook.

Soon a crowd filled the room, elbowing for position, staring down, talking in low, respectful voices, some kneeling to touch the tiles. In their eagerness, the master was shouldered aside. Someone

must soon recognise the source of that face. He waited for the inevitable, 'He looks like so-and-so!' But the moment never came.

'My husband has gone to bed,' Helena was telling him. 'He is mending, thank the gods, but he is still far from well. Justin asked me to convey his thanks, Beletus. He'll pay his respects to your marvellous floor in the morning.'

'You're very kind, Ma'am.'

Now the master became the centre of attention, as field workers, stockmen, cooks and clerks offered their congratulations and slapped him on the back. He accepted their acclaim with grace, still expecting the inevitable.

'Are you all right, Beletus?' Helena was taking note of the odd, resigned expression on the master's face.

'Just tired.'

'Of course. You must be. Come!' she commanded her people. 'Let this poor man get some rest.' Shepherding the crowd before her, Helena made for the door.

Alone with his men, Beletus examined the damage done by the press of feet on ungrouted tiles. It amounted to a day's work on the wave design in the innermost border, nothing more. The face was undamaged. The crowd had meant well.

Promising to follow, the master sent his men away. He knelt down to study the face in the floor. He still had pomegranates to place on either side of the head. They could wait until morning.

Without warning, a voice: 'I told you, Beletus, you're a *Genius tesserae*!' The housemaid, Afrixa, had slipped in again, quietly. She was standing across from him, where Julia had been, staring down at the face in the floor.

'Do you know a man who looks like that?' he asked.

'Should I?'

'Someone around the villa?' he asked more urgently. 'Someone who looks like that?'

She saw worry in his eyes. 'Why do you ask?'

'I saw him last night!'

‘You’ve been working too hard. Come! Time to relax.’ Afrixa, extending a hand to help Beletus to his feet, was elated when his dusty hand took hers and held it instead. Hand in hand they headed through the door.

‘I was sure ... ’ he began.

By the light of the moon she watched his puzzled face search the empty courtyard, then turn to look back through the darkened door. Deep in the chamber the last little lamp burned out.

Something made him uneasy. Afrixa could tell. She would have to make light of it, to reassure him somehow. ‘Beletus, love,’ she told the master jokingly, ‘you must have seen a ghost.’

The master’s fingers stiffened in Afrixa’s grip.



## **Night of the Mowing Devils**

*Around 1540. After the dissolution of the monasteries*

‘G’ARN WI’ THEE! G’arn, I say!’ The big man with a ruddy face picked a clod of chalk from the track and heaved it at the backs of the retreating forms. It missed. The splotchy woman in a stained dun dress, emboldened by the man’s example, shrieked after them, ‘We don’ want your sort ’round ’ere!’

Some dozen villagers stood at the brow of the knoll, forming an unofficial *posse comitatus*, watching the ragged bunch of indigents hurry down the track in the direction of Sturminster, Sherborne, and God knows where. Words pursued them, crueller than the clods of earth and stones propelling them away.

Five souls formed the little group of wretched humans that the villagers had discovered in the derelict cottage at the centre of the village near the market cross. Nobody had seen them come the night before, crawling as quietly as they might into the cavity beneath the collapsed thatch. They must have waited for dark, knowing they’d be driven out if spotted, for paupers were a charge upon the parish purse. They couldn’t have had much sleep. Not one month past the summer solstice, light hung in the sky till an hour before midnight, rising again before five near the knob that was the profile of a Bronze Age earthwork near the midpoint of Hambledon’s ridge.

Now, having been roused out at point of hayforks, the paupers were hastened along with stones and abuse. Two of them had been monks, by the look of them, the older man limping badly as he beat a none too dignified retreat, leaning heavily on an ash-stick and, from time to time, relying for support on the arm of his younger companion. The younger man was tall, afflicted with what seemed to be a running ulcer on his neck, protected, if that be the word, by a rag. He was letting the hair of his head grow back in an effort to cover the tonsure. Ah, but a peasant could sniff out a monk these

days, no matter what. Thrust suddenly into a poverty beneath anything to which they were cloister-sworn, they still had to wear their threadbare habits for want of other clothes.

As to their three companions, misery seeks friends. A young woman, not past twenty and filthy in her destitution, walked with a boy of about twelve—a brother, perhaps—on one side of her, while a little girl of six or seven clutched her close on the other. Their poverty was such that, barring a rolled-up bolt of sacking that the little girl clutched against her for security, members of their party carried nothing at all.

‘That’s enough,’ opined a stout, comfortably dressed man who appeared to be a village elder. ‘God’s peace be on ’en, I d’say. They meant no harm.’

‘ ’s long as they dassn’t bide hereabout,’ said Ruddy-face.

‘Don’t ’ee take on so, Walter. Even a fox has his lair.’

‘An’ if’n you do let but one o’ they bide ’ere, Okeford had been whelmed wi’ monks. Useless, them. Soft ’ands like butter curds.’

And that might be true. The roads were awash with the ragged, the wretched and the dispossessed, for the year is about 1540, and King Henry’s suppression of the monasteries is well in hand. His vengeance upon Rome had been swift and bitter. Monasteries were sacked and pillaged and their people driven out. Lord, some older monks, those who had lived their lifetime through behind a cloistered wall, could often nothing else but lay them down beside a hedge to die.

But monasteries, venal, greedy, and corrupt as many were, had provided for the sick, the destitute, and the hungry. Upon the Dissolution, a flood of misery from every corner of the land was forced to take to roads and byways, finding there what succour it might, which was little. Support of the poor now devolved from a monastic responsibility to a civil one—a charge upon each parish—and there ensued a shameful persecution of paupers such as England had not seen before, each parish hounding the poor from its bounds.



The better ones among the righteous burghers at the crest of the hill were by now beginning to feel more than a little conscience-stricken, for this was the moment when the collective self-righteousness of 'Mob' dissolves, turning at last to individual shames.

The villagers had turned their backs on the beggars and were returning to their homes when, unnoticed, a lad of ten or so slipped forward and, hot with daring, ran close behind the group of wretches and threw a lump of chalk, catching the young woman on the shoulder.

In the instant she turned and, pointing at the village lad with both her hands, she screamed: 'Damn you, damn you, heathens all! God rot your eyes, God rot your hearts, God rot your farms, God rot your crops, and God Almighty fire your thatch!'

The lad who threw the lump was by this time in terrified retreat back up the track to where his elders waited, one and all, struck dumb with horror.

'And you, boy,' the woman shrieked with passion born of destitution, 'may the arm that threw at me wither and ... !'

She didn't complete her curse, for the younger monk was upon her, turning her away, trying to stop her flow of venom by speaking softly as he could of blasphemy.

It was then that the stone-throwing lad fell, full length, tripping in his fearful retreat on a steep-sided wagon rut in the track. One of his elders pressed forward, picking him up crying.

The destitutes hurried away in retreat from the temper of the parish wrath, the young woman supported now by both monks, in spite of the older one's limp. Her two waifs followed closely, clutching to the rags of the woman's clothing, looking back with terror at the hatred in the road behind.

Minutes later, by which time the beggars had passed from sight round the corner by the Cookwell Brook at the bottom of the hill, the villagers realised that the stone-throwing lad couldn't raise his arm. He must have dislocated it.

TIME PASSED. AN EVENING FELL. The day had been hot, and still it looked warm on the ridge of Hambledon and over the brow of the downs, which here form Okeford Hill. On both sides, hills were bathed in the roseate light of evening. But appearance deceives, as the pink and scarlet feather-shapes of cirrus cloud betrayed; there was wind a-plenty up there in the heavens, harbingers of weather inbound from the Channel coast.

Young Jack Cox had planned his evening with Sarah Wycherley for some time. With the chickens shut up behind hurdles and the pigs slopped in, the evening meal and his tasks all done, Jack headed for the churchyard where he armed himself with a crock of year-old scrumpy<sup>23</sup> saved against the occasion for too long, prying it from its hiding place, the acrid, dark and deep recesses of a yew bush set above an ancient grave. Now, like a thief eager for the onrush of night, he waited for Sarah, hiding behind the flint and chalk-cob wall that backed the cottages bounding the tiny village green where stood the market cross. He heard her before he saw her, the sound of quick-footed eagerness approaching from the other side of the wall, the swish of skirts brushing through nettles and the coarse, uncut grass at the garden's edge.

'All right, then?' he whispered.

'They d'think I be to sleep,' she told him, conspiratorially.

How he loved this little girl, her passive-pretty face lost in a Tudor fluff of ringlelet curls that fell about her shoulders, balanced by another, of petticoats, below. Even a slight over-bite made her that much more earnest, more attractive. And she was all his, for so she'd vowed.

They started off down the edge of Church Field, along the line of elms and oaks and planes that had, through memory, defined the track running straight down the hill to a circle-smooth bend in the Stour. Here was the river's closest brush with Okeford, the swimming hole, a place for bathers, laundresses, and lovers of an evening, where the path-defining line of trees and sheep-cropped grasses ended in a breeze-brushed willow bank below.

But this was not to be Jack Cox's destination. He turned north, up-river, into the dying sun, human shadows trailing black through grass and willows for a stone-throw and more behind—for this was the time of day that belongs to hard shadows thrusting deep amidst a brightness cast by surfaces aglow in the red of evening light. All distance seems distorted at this hour. Close space draws in; far distance thrusts away, though details on the hills around seem somehow clearer in the flame of evening than by light of day. Evening is the time of visual deception.

It wasn't long before they reached a field of standing wheat between Hayward's ford and Bere Marsh—a quiet corner for their tryst. Across the river lay Child Okeford and the forty acre meadow, Nutmead, yellow at high summer with a hay crop taken off the egrass not long since. This was some of the best-managed land in the county, people said, always in good heart, with nine tenants and a hay warden to keep them honest. Not a soul in sight over there now, though, as Jack and Sarah followed a cart track through high corn on the Okeford side. Jack paused from time to time, taking his bearings, all at once turning off to pick his way into the field, treading carefully from flint to flint, as if on stepping-stones, respectful of the crop. Here, deep within the field of sighing grain, they came across a bald patch, poor and flinty, where the crop was thin.

'We won't do no harm here, and folk don't think to look within the corn. Put 'em down here,' he told Sarah, and she did, setting hempen sacks upon the ground, side by side.

We may presume that they uncorked the jug of cider; that they drank a little, flirted more, and made fond resolutions for a future that seemed bright as life was young. Beyond which we shall draw a modest veil around the couple where they lay within the bare patch in the crop. Suffice to say, despite themselves they fell asleep, nestled on their hempen sacks like robins in a nest.

The sun went down, such stars as were not blocked by cirrus blinked, a nightjar chirred, and now they sleep.

Until the mowing devils came.

SARAH WAS THE FIRST AWAKE, dragged from sleep by a fearful, all-pervasive sound few human ears could in that former time have heard, not quite a buzz, instead a steady, growing hum, as if the wasps and flies and bees in all the glades and grass for miles around swarmed down upon our couple in the corn.

She reached for Jack, now wide awake and clutching her in turn, their hands, in terror, only for each other, until at last, without communication—they could neither think nor speak, nor could they hear another sound through this cacophony except the mowing devil's hum—they bent their heads together, blocking out as best they might the noise that rent their ears. Through this they waited, nearly lunatic, the butt of every sort of demon voice—it seemed that there were many—reaching to crescendo, sometimes yowling, sometimes steady, always gnashing, oscillating violently, never letting go.

For fear nor noise they couldn't speak, but even if they could, what would they say? The night was riven of a sudden with a nether-worldly ball of fire of such intensity that corn and soil and flints stood orangely revealed in light that in this couple's terror seemed to be as bright as seven days. As if the howling were not bad enough, this light-bright thing two haystacks large descended on them while they clutched each other and their sanity.

Was this the dying moment of a shooting star? The fall of Lucifer in shrieking, buzzing torment to the pit? Did bowels of hell gape wide beneath this Dorset field to gulp two souls too many years before their time? It must seem so, for there came up a wind as neither of these innocents had known, a wind that tore and spat at them, thrust darts of corn-shafts at their heads till they must now abandon ears to cover eyes while dancing demons shrieked, hurled clods of earth and flint, and all the while sussed at our lovers in the grain like fiendish cats.

If they had eyes to notice anything but fear, it was that corn, which all around stood straight and tall before, concealing them, was trodden flat or disappeared as far as to the outer limits of the

orange light, as if a giant with a flail in one hand and a flaming torch in t'other spun about to mow a perfect circle.

Jack made to drag himself and Sarah forth, but they had only crawled a few short feet before the power of storm raged the more, the whipsaw oscillations of the wind now sucking at one ear and now the other, boxing them with stinging sand, attacking first with weight of wind, and then a vacuum that might pluck the very eardrums from their heads; and all the while the earth and air agoan with devil voices, oscillating bass and treble, shrieking out a vomit of sharp pebbles, dirt and straws.<sup>24</sup>

FOLK FOUND THEM THE NEXT DAY, still clinging to each other for their lives and trembling their fear. Not a word of it would pass their lips. Just a cider jug and two young souls driven near to madness in a circle of stamped corn. Had the Devil placed them here? And by what agency? We must remember: within living memory, three—or was it four?—papal bulls had addressed the scourge of witchcraft rampaging through Christendom.

Or was this God's work, their punishment by way of retribution? Every one among these folk who ventured to the edge of the circle and witnessed the torment of these nearly-children had at one time daydreamed through a sermon on Old Wyclif's text in the Book of Hosea: 'Thei shuln sowe wynd, and repe whirlwynd.'<sup>25</sup>

But what possible folly had these youngsters wrought to reap this whirlwind of reproach? The villagers reasoned it best to leave the two young lovers where they were while a lad ran to fetch one of the rectors.

Now it happened that the Rector of the Montacute Portion, Master Thomas Freke, was on hand this day.<sup>26</sup> Getting a perplexing, garbled message from an overexcited boy, he seized up a bible and an empty chalice, sent for a cart to follow, and set off, praying for guidance for whatever darksome menace he would find—and it was as well he did, for what he came across would prove a trouble to the stoutest soul.

Stopping only to fill his chalice from the Stour at Hayward's ford and bless its contents at a fast walk, he soon came upon the scene of demonic visitation in the corn.

The field workers parted as the rector came up, revealing the two young bodies shivering still with dread, though 'twas broad day and warm. All around them lay the corn, trodden left-to-right-about, even roughly braided in places as if the reapers had sought to bind up ropes for stooking sheaves. The Devil's work for sure!

Old Mary Wycherley was here already, tears streaming down the bosom of her neighbour-woman's dress, the friend on whom she leaned to find support, for wasn't young Sarah all she had? And now the child didn't rightly know her mother from a clod of earth!

The rector paused a moment on the edge of the circle, absorbing the enormity of the scene, the shivering, dead-eyed children in the middle of the ring.

A voice beside him suggested ' 'Twas they devils a' th' road tother day!' It was the big man with the ruddy face who spoke.

'Devils? In the road?' the rector enquired.

'They devils what hexed young Tommy Croston's arm.'

'My friends ... ' the rector began, eager to nip rumour in the bud.

' 'Twere three days before 'ee budged his arm!' chimed in a weedy man in a smock.

'As I heard it, young Tommy was the one to throw the stone.'

' 'Tidden that, Vicar. One o' they devils swore by God to blast our corn!'

'Arh, 'twere the woman,' the weedy man added.

'Young Tommy fell down ... '

'She made 'en to fall!'

'And his arm is now fully recovered.'

'A right witch, she were.'

The Reverend Mr. Freke had more important tasks to busy him than to hark to gossip, but he well understood the importance of quashing hysteria. Lord knows, these past few years had seen too much of that, and would see more. He paused a moment at the edge

of the circle, overhearing dark suspicions about ‘reaping the whirlwind’ from folk who should have known better. Perhaps they voiced it to impress him.

Then he marched up to the young couple, his crucifix of holly wood held high—for holly repels devils—sprinkled the tortured innocents with rather more holy water than was essential, and knelt beside them in the mangled crop.

But it was minutes before holy water, crucifix or priest might penetrate to minds where relatives and friends had failed. There was just the bibbering of terror from near-children locked in the embrace of each other’s trembling arms.

‘Jack!’ said the rector. ‘Sarah!’

A chattering of teeth replied.

‘My dears, to tell the truth is to renounce the Evil One.’

No truth came back but fear.

‘The truth,’ he carried on, ‘can make you whole.’

To his astonishment, the rector felt himself grasped and tugged, whether he would or no, into the orbit of Jack’s embrace.

‘What is it, child?’

The boy’s hand moved ceaselessly, clasping and unclasping the rector’s upper arm.

‘Tell me, lad. What happened here last night?’

It seemed that an attempt was being made to speak between clenched teeth.

‘Tell but the truth and see the light.’

‘Le ... le ... le... le ...’ The lad was fighting for a word.

‘What is it, boy? Tell rector what you know.’ The Reverend Freke had once heard last confession from a mouth locked tight with tetanus, an occasion which had seemed to visit less apparent suffering on its victim than this. Gods, was that their plight? They said horses died this way, of lockjaw—all a-stagger, too—their lippen drawn right back beyond the teeth as though the devil tugged a ghastly rein so hard it bent the bit!

‘Light!’ the boy shouted, before his body collapsed, trembling anew from the exertion of it.

‘Light, my son?’

A further pause while Jack regained such limited control as he possessed, and Sarah slobbered on the rector’s coat.

‘The d ... d ... d ... d ... devil’s light!’

‘And you, my dear?’ the rector asked Sarah.

Tears found a vent to flow from eyes that had been dry for hours. But no word passed.

‘No matter,’ the rector told them. ‘A devil’s light. A light, you say, but light alone can’t trample down a crop.’

‘A wu ... wu ... wu ...’

‘A Will o’ th’ Wisp, perhaps that’s what you saw?’

The boy attempted ‘No,’ then violently shook his head.

‘Take time, lad. Take your time.’

‘A whirlwind, too!’

One look at the ground told the rector some creature had crushed these stalks with malice in its heart. On his way into the centre of the circle he had scanned the ground so very carefully for the spoor of cloven hooves. (And why shouldn’t he find it? This soil had not long since been ploughed and harrowed by four brace of mighty oxen.)

Young Sarah now reacted with such a fall of howls and tears the rector thought she was possessed. Did the devil, now that he was discovered, seek to take possession of the child? On the edge of the circle old Mary Wycherley responded to her daughter’s cries in kind, escaping the clutches of her woman friend; it took two men to hold her back lest she run to touch her daughter and be in turn possessed.

The rector clutched at his protective crucifix the more; but to his credit recognised that this was a beginning to some sort of end. The couple’s dam of silence had been breached.

He was kneeling on flints, embracing and embraced by two young people in a position of extreme discomfort, and taxed beyond anything in his experience. He sought escape, for all of them, and in that trice he found it, for it chanced that on the instant the sun escaped the bondage of a cloud and threw a shaft of light upon the



white gash of a steep chalk track up Okeford Hill known locally as Jacob's Ladder.

The Reverend Freke found inspiration. With the full force of authority that a choking man can muster while kneeling on flints, he shouted, 'My friends!' to the gawp-mouths and idle babblers tarrying about the circle's edge, 'did not Our Lord himself carry up his servant Elijah to his bosom in the whirlwind and the fire?'

If his voice caught his audience by surprise, it also seemed to stir the youngsters from their catatonic state.

'My friends,' the Reverend Freke went on, undaunted, 'doth not the prophet say 'the Lord hath his way in the whirlwind and in the storm'? And how doth Zechariah speak of it? 'The Lord God shall blow the tempest, and shall go with whirlwinds of the south.' Approach you sinners, come ye close, and kneel!' To the rector's slight surprise their hats came off and every man amongst the watchers knelt down with this threesome at the centre of the vanquished crop. The women still hung back.

'We thank thee, Lord,' the rector improvised, 'that thou hast shown us of thy works this day, and hast revealed thyself unto thy servants Jack and Sarah.'

Not just old Mary Wycherley and Sarah now, but every woman present bawled her eyes out in the circle-patch of devil's straw.

'Amen,' the rector called.

'Amen!' returned the people kneeling in the corn.

The rector seized upon success to hold his holly cross aloft, magnificently invoking Deity on Okeford Hill. 'Oh God, that diddest cast out devils, putting them to swine, henceforward banish from our midst the works of darkness and the Evil One, to turn our eyes but unto thee. In thy holy name we ask this of thee. Amen.'

'Amen,' came back the villagers, all of them now sagging on their knees.

It was as if this were the moment of release, for of a sudden there was not a dry eye to be found among them, man or woman, but they knelt among the stubble, blubbering like babes.

The rector extricated himself from the youngsters and, struggling inelegantly to his feet, surveyed the crowd about him. Suddenly everybody was in motion, rushing to touch the smitten children, partaking of the aura from those who had seen the Lord's own light and tasted of His power in the storm. Now the couple's fears became all's fears, their privilege the privilege of all, and their experience the stuff of tales and shared dreams far and wide.

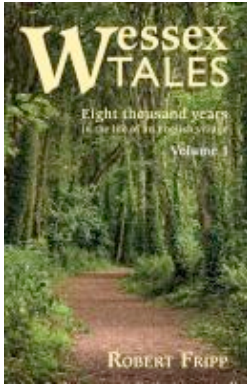
Jack and Sarah seemed at last no different from the rest. Whatever spell had held them in its thrall, its force dissolved beneath the touch of kinsmen's hands, the well wishes of friends as laughter overruled the sobbing tears.

The Reverend Freke stood back and watched this spectacle, amazed, alone, wondering all the while what he had done. At last he took a breath of deep relief and made to turn away, but something on the ground before him caught his eye. Relief becoming apprehension, he stepped up for a better look, but suddenly the thing was gone, trampled in an eye-blink by a large man and his boot.

Now the rector cast about to see if he could find again what he'd seen a moment earlier. He did so uneasily, apprehensively, amidst this gathering of weeping, laughing fools made garrulous with joy.

We may guess the rector held his crucifix of holly wood more tightly as he searched the ground around, for what he thought he'd seen—an image that would burn in memory and prayers until he died—was a signature in soil, the fine deep imprint of a single cloven hoof.





*Wessex Tales, Volume 1: Twenty short stories transport readers into "eight thousand years in the life of an English village" deep in the Dorset countryside. Features stone age hunters, Viking raiders, a troubadour lost in dark woods, a medieval wedding, and an oak tree's life. Then, a smuggler travels by night, men hoist the last stone on Stonehenge, and the Battle of the Somme. Wessex Tales tells these stories and a dozen more.*

# **Wessex Tales**

## **Volume 1**

**Order the complete book from**

**[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)**

**<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/7971.html?s=pdf>**

**or from your favorite neighborhood  
or online bookstore.**