Crispin: The Cross of Lead

by Avi

Chapter Excerpts

England, a.d. 1377

“In the midst of life comes death.” How often did our village priest preach those words. Yet I have also heard that “in the midst of death comes life.” If this be a riddle, so was my life.

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The day after my mother died, the priest and I wrapped her body in a gray shroud and carried her to the village church. Our burden was not great. In life she had been a small woman with little strength. Death made her even less.

Her name had been Asta.

Since our cottage was at the village fringe, the priest and I bore her remains along the narrow, rutted road that led to the cemetery. A steady, hissing rain had turned the ground to clinging mud. No birds sang. No bells tolled. The sun hid behind the dark and lowering clouds.

We passed village fields where people were at work in the rain and mud. No one knelt. They simply stared. As they had shunned my mother in life, so they shunned her now. As for me, I felt, as I often did, ashamed. It was as if I contained an unnamed sin that made me less than nothing in their eyes.

Other than the priest, my mother had no friends. She was often taunted by the villagers. Still, I had thought of her as a woman of beauty, as perhaps all children think upon their mothers.

The burial took place amongst the other paupers’ graves in the walled cemetery behind our church. It was there the priest and I dug her grave, in water-laden clay. There was no coffin. We laid her down with her feet toward the east so when the Day of Judgment came she would—may God grant it—rise up to face Jerusalem.

As the priest chanted the Latin prayers, whose meaning I barely understood, I knelt by his side and knew that God had taken away the one person I could claim as my own. But His will be done.

No sooner did we cover my mother’s remains with heavy earth than John Aycliffe, the steward of the manor, appeared outside the cemetery walls. Though I had not seen him, he must have been watching us from astride his horse.

“Asta’s son, come here,” he said to me.

Head bowed, I drew close.

“Look at me,” he commanded, reaching down and forcing my head up with a sharp slap of his gloved hand beneath my chin.

It was always hard for me to look on others. To look on John Aycliffe was hardest of all. His black-bearded face—hard, sharp eyes and frowning lips—forever scowled at me. When he deigned to look in my direction, he offered nothing but contempt. For me to pass near was to invite his scorn, his kicks, and sometimes, his blows.

No one ever accused John Aycliffe of any kindness. In the absence of Lord Furnival he was in charge of the manor, the laws, and the peasants. To be caught in some small transgression—missing a day of work, speaking harshly of his rule, failing to attend mass—brought an unforgiving penalty. It could be a whipping, a clipping of the ear, imprisonment, or a cut-off hand. For poaching a stag, John the ale-maker's son was put to death on the commons gallows. As judge, jury, and willing executioner, Aycliffe had but to give the word, and the offender's life was forfeit. We all lived in fear of him.

Aycliffe stared at me for a long while as if in search of something. All he said, however, was "With your mother gone you're required to deliver your ox to the manor house tomorrow. It will serve as the death tax."

"But . . . sir," I said—for my speech was slow and ill formed—"if I do . . . I . . . I won't be able to work the fields."

"Then starve," he said and rode away without a backward glance.

Father Quinel whispered into my ear: "Come to church, Asta's son. We'll pray."

Too upset, I only shook my head.

"God will protect you," he said, resting his hand on my shoulder. "As he now protects your mother."

His words only distressed me more. Was death my only hope? Seeking to escape my heart's cage of sorrow, I rushed off toward the forest.