Opening extract from

Gatty's Tale

Written by

Kevin Crossley-Holland

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THE CHARACTERS

THE PILGRIMS

Lady Gwyneth de Ewloe
Austin, *her priest*
Nest, *aged 17, her first chamber-servant*
Gatty, *aged 15, her second chamber-servant*
Snout, *the cook*
Emrys, *the stableman*
Tilda, *his wife, a wise-woman*
Nakin, *a Chester merchant*
Everard, *Chester cathedral choirmaster*

AT EWLOE

Crok, *an armed man*
Sir Robert de Montalt, *Lady Gwyneth's husband*
Llewelyn ap Iorwerth, *a Welsh warlord*
Griffith ap Robert, *Lady Gwyneth's baby son*
Armin, *a day-worker*
Simon, *the blacksmith*
Gruffydd, *the shoemaker*
Mansel, *his son*
Hew, *Snout's son, aged 5*

ON THE ROAD

Sayer, *a livery stablemaster in London*
Solomon, *his partner*
Syndod, *Gatty's Welsh cob*
Saviour, *Austin's horse*
John and Geoff, *two hired pilgrims*
A German envoy
A Norwegian merchant
A French nun
A monk *at Vézelay*
Sister Hilda, *a nun at Vézelay*
Aenor, *a novice at Vézelay*
The doctor's accomplices
An Alpine guide

THE CHARACTERS

Brother Benedict
The stablemaster at Treviso and his two daughters
Simona, *a translator*
Cinque and Sei, *her brothers*
Gianni Nurico, *a dentist*
Gobbo, *captain of a pilgrim ship*
Tiny, *an elephant*
A hospice nun in Venice
Alessandra Lupo, *a surgeon*
Three Saracen traders in Venice
Osman, *a Turkish astronomer*
Constance, *a sneak-thief*
Michael Scot, *a scholar*
Sir Umberto del Malaxa, *a Venetian landowner in Crete*
Mansur, *his Egyptian slave*
A justice in Cyprus
Babolo, *a Cypriot baby*
Brother Antony, *a monk at Saint Mary of the Mountain*
A Saracen fisherman and his two sons
A snake-charmer in Acre
A conjuror in Acre
A wise man in Acre
Brother Gabriel, *a Knight Hospitaller*
Sir Faramond, *a Norman crusader*
Lady Saffiya, *his Saracen wife*
The Bedouin horsemen
Gregory, *a helper at the Hospital of Saint John*
Janet, *his wife*
A blind Jewish singer
Pilgrims, Saracens, traders, and a thief in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre
A young Saracen boy
Kit the Trader
Raven, *his brother*

THE CHARACTERS

AT CALDICOT

Sir John and Lady Helen de Caldicot

Sian, *their daughter, aged 12*
Oliver, *the priest*
Slim, *the cook*
Tanwen, *a chamber-servant*
Joan, *a village woman*
Macsen, *a day-worker*
Storm and Tempest, *two beagles*
Hopeless, *Gatty's cow*

Sir Walter and Lady Anne de Verdon
Winnie de Verdon, *aged 15*
Lord Stephen and Lady Judith de Holt
Lady Alice de Gortanore
Tom de Gortanore, *aged 18*
Merlin

Arthur de Caldicot (now Sir Arthur de Catmole)

AUTHOR'S NOTE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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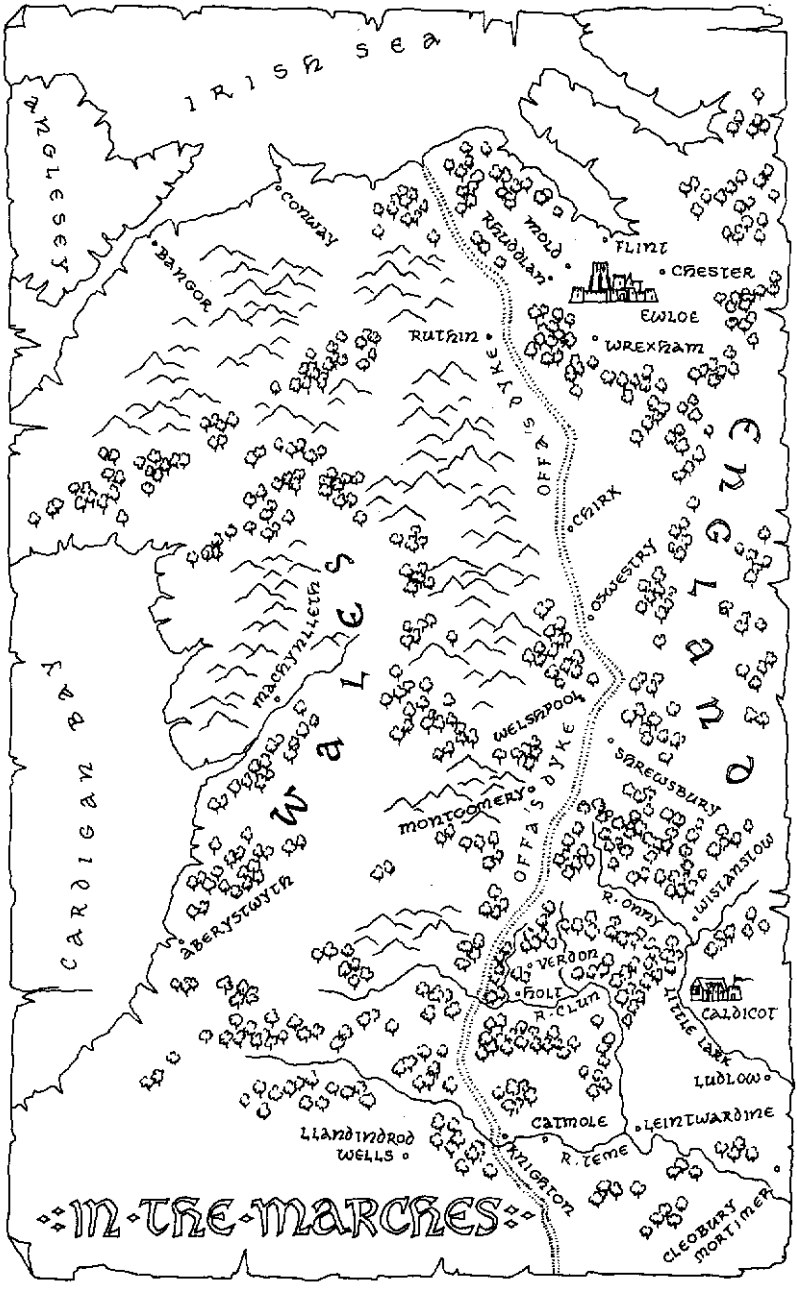
May 2006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CARDIGAN BAY
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R. CLUN
CALDICOT
LITTLE LARK
LUDLOW
CAITMOLE
LEINTWARDINE
LLANDINDROD WELLS
KNIGHTON
R. TEME
CLEOBURY MORTIMER
THE MARCHES

I

'Light of light! Oh, flight! Oh, flight!' trilled the early birds.

In one corner of the cow-stall, the heap of dirty sacking shifted. Something buried beneath it made a sound that began as a gentle murmur and ended as a grouse.

Then the cock crowed and that loosed the tongues of his disciples. Half the neighers and brayers and bleaters and grunters in the manor of Caldicot welcomed the day's dawning, chill and misty as it was.

As soon as Hopeless joined in and mooed, the heap of sacking shrugged and then tossed. In one fluid movement, Gatty stood up, crossed herself, reached for her russet woollen tunic lying on a bale of hay, and pulled it on over her undershirt and baggy drawers. Loudly she yawned. She opened her mouth so wide she could hear all her little head-bones cricking and cracking. Then she stepped round to the next stall.

'Greetings in God!' she said politely to her cow. She gave Hopeless a handful of grain, pulled up her three-legged stool, and began to milk her.

The air in the cow-shed somehow smelt thick and fresh at the same time. Rank with gluey dung and musty straw, but also rinsed with the cool, clean breath of late September, that time of year when the weather begins to sharpen its teeth.

Gatty had chosen to sleep there since her father and then her grandmother had died. After all, Hopeless was company

of a sort, and Gatty preferred it to sleeping in her little two-roomed cottage on her own.

So Gatty was alone in this middle-world. There was no one to look after her, and no one for her to look after. And since Arthur de Caldicot had left the Marches to join the great crusade, for two years at least, he said, for two years and maybe three, there was no one whom Gatty could really talk to and laugh with, no one to whom she could open her heart.

But soon after her father died, Gatty had begun to sing. She sang to herself the songs she heard villagers singing as they worked in the fields, love songs sung by travelling musicians, carols for dancing, charms. Not only those! She listened to the choirs of birds and the harping wind and made up her own green songs.

As Gatty filled her pail with bubbling milk, she crooned a milking-song. She could feel how Hopeless liked it. Then, before carrying the pail up to Slim, the cook, in the manor kitchen, she went back into her sleeping-stall, yawning and rubbing her eyes, scrubbing her gold-and-silver curls with her rough fingertips. Gatty stepped over to the water-trough, and made a stoup of her hands – and at this moment she heard the sound of running footsteps.

Almost at once, Sian de Caldicot hurtled through the door of the cow-shed, yelling, 'Gatty! Gatty! Where are you?'

Gatty smiled to herself. She waited a little, and then mooed loudly.

Sian put her head into the stall. 'Here you are!' she exclaimed. 'Gatty! I've been looking for you everywhere.'

'And all!' said Gatty, cheerfully.

Sian stared at the mess of sacking. 'You don't sleep in here?'

Gatty sniffed.

'Do you?'

'What's it look like?' asked Gatty.

'Yuch!' said Sian. 'It's horrible.'

'It's not,' said Gatty. 'Not with Hopeless.'

'And mice and beetles and spiders and . . .' Sian stood on her left foot and tried to twirl round and lost her balance and fell against Gatty, laughing. 'Sir John wants to see you,' she announced. 'After you've taken the milk up to Slim.'

Gatty stiffened. 'Me?'

'I don't know why,' Sian went on. 'He never tells me anything.'

Why does Sir John want to see me, Gatty wondered. What have I done or got to do? Gatty shook her head. I can't do no more, I can't. Not unless God makes each day longer.

'I haven't told my father about us,' said Sian, 'if that's what you're thinking.'

'What about us?' Gatty asked.

'Snaring that rabbit in Pike Forest,' said Sian, 'or about tying the dogs' tails together.'

Gatty half-smiled and compressed her pretty lips – the lower one was quite puffy, as if it were bee-stung.

'You're the best, Gatty!' said Sian with some force. 'You are, now that Arthur's gone. Come on!'

2

Sir John de Caldicot inspected his field-girl. ' So, Gatty, are you always hard-working?'

'I'd starve if I weren't,' said Gatty.

'Except when you're off on some wild goose chase.'

Gatty stared at her chapped knuckles, her earth-stained fingertips. Inside her sackcloth, she began to feel smaller than she really was, and she gave Sir John a doleful look.

'What have I done, sir?' she asked.

Sir John waved at Gatty to sit down on the bench opposite him. 'You're fifteen, aren't you? When's your birthday?'

'Just after the harvest, sir. That's what my father said.'

'Yes, and you're alone now. No one to care for. No one to feed.'

'Hopeless,' said Gatty.

'What?'

'Hopeless,' she said. 'And my seven chickens.'

Gatty glared into the fire.

'We each have our place in this middle-world,' said Sir John. 'Children have duties to their parents, field-men and field-women have duties to their lord. Isn't that so?'

'Yes, sir.'

'And I have duties to the king,' Sir John said. 'Now this is most unusual, I know. But what with you being only fifteen, and Arthur's friend . . . well, for one reason and another I've decided to help you.'

Gatty knitted her brows.

'I want you to work here, in the manor house. In the kitchen with Slim.'

Gatty blinked and swallowed. Her mouth suddenly felt dry.

'Well?'

'I don't know how.'

'Don't know how?'

'I don't know almost nothing.'

'You've got wits, haven't you?' said Sir John. 'You can learn.'

'I can learn you about earth,' Gatty said, 'and the weather-clouds, and hares boxing, and high nests, and why them pigs . . .'

'No doubt,' said Sir John.

'. . . why they won't eat mast some days, and what . . .'

'Will you listen!' Sir John insisted. 'I'm not talking about that.'

Gatty lowered her eyes and her long eyelashes trembled.

'I'm talking,' said Sir John, 'about you working here in the manor kitchen. Working with Slim. That's what you're going to do, and you should think yourself blessed.'

So Gatty learned to slice and dice and knead and spice and seethe and baste and roast and all the other kitchen-skills, and it was much easier work than out in the heavy fields. It's warm in here half the time, she thought. And it's dry. I don't get soaked, and my back doesn't ache. But what about when it's spring and all the shoots and blades are pushing up again? What about when all the birds are whistling?

Gatty often sang to herself as she worked. She did feel blessed. But all the same, she chose not to sleep in the hall – she didn't feel she belonged there. Each evening, still singing to herself, she went back to her own cottage to check whether the chickens had laid any eggs, and then slept with Hopeless in the cow-shed.

'That girl!' said Oliver the priest a couple of weeks later, blinking and shaking his bald head. 'You've heard her sing?'

'Half the time,' said Sir John.

'Like a Welsh girl,' Lady Helen said.

'Even better!' said the priest. He drew himself up to his full height, such as it was, and laced his pudgy fingers over his stomach. 'She's untrained, of course, but she has the voice of an angel. An apprentice angel.'

Sir John rubbed his nose thoughtfully. 'I wouldn't know,' he said.

'In fact,' said Oliver, 'I'm beginning to think she should enter a nunnery.'

'Dear Lord!' said Sir John.

'Sister Gatty!' exclaimed Lady Helen.

'She should enter a nunnery,' said Oliver, who never said a thing once when he could say it twice, 'where she can be taught and give her voice back to God.' The priest took a deep breath and permitted himself a small smile. 'Yes!' he said. 'Yes! A little March miracle!'

'They're grasping, those harridans,' Sir John objected. 'Avaricious, that's what they are. They'd want me to pay outright for board, lodging, clothing, reading lessons, singing lessons, I don't know what. They'd charge you for the sunlight if they could figure out how.'

'Like all you English!' said Lady Helen.

'Anyhow,' said Sir John, 'they wouldn't be in the least keen to have Gatty, seeing as she's a field-girl. A scullion.'

'What about her voice, then?' asked Lady Helen.

Sir John sniffed. 'Brides of Christ! They're old crows. Rapacious crows.'

In early November, Lady Helen rode north with Tanwen, her chamber-servant, to visit her widowed cousin, Lady Gwyneth de Ewloe, and when she came home after three

weeks she reported that Lady Gwyneth was in search of a second chamber-servant.

'Well?' said Sir John. 'What am I meant to do about it? Find one under a hedgerow?'

'What about Gatty!' said Lady Helen. 'I promised I'd ask you. Gwyneth's leaving on a pilgrimage, and she needs a second girl.'

'Poor Gatty!' said Sir John. 'Not the shrine of another dismal Welsh saint. Not another mossy, dripping well.'

Lady Helen shook her head.

'Where then?' asked Sir John.

'Je-ru-sa-lem,' said Lady Helen, articulating each syllable.

'God in heaven!' shouted Sir John. 'Jerusalem! What's got into the woman?'

'And she says Gatty's voice should help to keep everyone safe,' Lady Helen added.

'Keep them safe!' exclaimed Sir John. 'Armed men keep people safe – not singing.'

'Gwyneth said she could do with her at once.'

'She'll have to wait,' said Sir John. 'We need Gatty's help here over Yuletide. Macsen can ride north with her the morning after Epiphany.'

When Lady Helen told Gatty about going north to Ewloe, Gatty said, 'I don't know nothing about chamber-servants and all that.'

'You can learn, then.'

Gatty looked doubtfully at Lady Helen under her long lashes.

What daunted Gatty was not so much her duties as a chamber-servant as the thought of leaving Caldicot. Leaving her lifelong friends. Leaving Hopeless who always mooed to tell Gatty to feed her. Leaving her strip of land in Nine Elms, the one she and her father had worked side by side for as long as she could remember. Leaving the glinting clods and the

high rookery, the way the cool dawn air fingered her hairline, the way the setting sun bled over Wales. Gatty had never travelled further than Ludlow in her whole life, where she went to the fair with Arthur.

'Lady Gwyneth is going on a pilgrimage,' Lady Helen told Gatty, 'and she means to take you.'

'Where?' asked Gatty.

'Jerusalem!'

'Jerusalem!' Gatty exclaimed. 'Where Jesus was?'

'The Holy Land,' said Lady Helen.

'Will I see Arthur, then?' she asked eagerly.

'That girl!' Sir John said later to Lady Helen. 'So raw! She has no idea whatsoever of all the dangers and terrors awaiting her.'

Lady Helen shook her head. 'Just as well, maybe!' she said in her sing-song voice.

'Jerusalem!' Sir John exclaimed. 'She'll be lucky to get there alive, let alone back home again.'

3

Yuletide.

It came in at a trot, broke into a canter, and left at a gallop.

It was different for Gatty this year, though. For the first time in her life, her father was not blowing the pipe and banging the tabor, leading Slim into the hall; Arthur was far away; and in twelve days' time, she herself would be leaving Caldicot.

Standing in the kitchen with both hands inside a Christmas duck, trying to grasp its slimy gizzards, Gatty suddenly wondered where she would be on the next Christmas Eve:

> Will I be standing in the manger?
> Will I be kneeling at His crib?
> I got no gift I can bring,
> But I can sing . . . I'll bring songs!

'Gatty!' roared Slim. 'What's wrong with you? Standing there like a headless . . .'

Gatty shook her head.

'Get a move on!' barked the cook. 'Jesus is waiting!'

As usual, the priest Oliver treated everyone to a particularly lengthy sermon. He reminded his flock that their hearts were like cradles, waiting for Jesus to be born. 'And if it's God's will,' he went on, 'one of our flock, one of our own Caldicot flock, will reach the Golden Gate. She will stand

inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the most holy place in holy Jerusalem.'

Gatty listened, and she felt that Oliver wasn't really talking about her at all but about some stranger.

'Let us pray for Gatty and her great pilgrimage,' Oliver said. 'May she pray for each one of us at each of the holy places.'

On Saint Stephen's day, Caldicot had visitors, Winnie de Verdon and her father, Sir Walter.

They arrived early, in time to join the games, and when they stepped into the hall, the first thing Gatty noticed was Winnie's half of her and Arthur's betrothal penny, strung on a cord around her neck.

The first thing Sian noticed, though, was Winnie's exquisite white fur mittens.

'Where did you get them?' she exclaimed. 'They look like Spitfire did. My cat!'

Winnie turned pink, and shook the mittens off. 'I don't like them, anyhow,' she said. 'They're too tight. Like my betrothal ring.'

'I love Arthur,' Sian declared. 'I wish I could marry him.'

'Well, you can't!' said Winnie. 'I'm not going to wait for ever, though.'

'You can marry my cousin Tom,' Sian went on. 'He said he'd be glad to marry you if Arthur doesn't come back.'

Winnie smiled.

'Winnie!' said Sir Walter. 'Have you even greeted Sir John and Lady Helen?'

Winnie curtsied, she clasped hands, she smiled, she said the right words, but she didn't so much as incline her head to Gatty.

She didn't even notice her.

Gatty was breathless. Her mouth was dry and there was such a knot in her throat.

She had heard all about the betrothal from Sian, of course, but this was the first time she had ever seen Winnie, face to face.

'Arthur told me about the games,' Winnie said blithely. 'He said . . . I . . . he said I . . .'

Gatty's heart ached so. She pressed her right hand against it. She turned away and, as she hurried into the kitchen, her eyes filled with tears.

Gatty was usually the first girl home when everyone chased three times round the Yard but this year she only came fourth. With Sian as her partner, though, she did win the three-legged race. And she was the only girl to lift the great mottled stone and, with her wrist bent right back, balance it on her right hand.

'I been watching you,' Joan the village-woman said. 'Your heart's only half in it.'

'I know,' acknowledged Gatty.

'Do what you do with your whole heart, girl,' Joan told her. 'It's not worth nothing otherwise.'

But Gatty kept thinking about Arthur and going away. Away from everyone, away from everything she had known since the day she was born.

All day Gatty kept her distance from Winnie, her sharp words and flashing betrothal ring, her flame of hair, her wide-sleeved gown and grass-green shoes.

In her stained sackcloth, and untanned boots, Gatty felt as if her own friendship with Arthur didn't really exist. She felt so worthless.

Yuletide! Yes, there was the time to snuggle down under the skins, to doze and dawdle and stretch and yawn; time to listen to the sound of one's own slow breathing. But how soon the twelve days were over.

On the last morning, Gatty carried her squawking

chickens one by one to Sir John's run, and drove Hopeless up to Sir John's byre. She put her arms right round her cow's neck, and felt her calm warmth; then Gatty gave a long moo, soft as the bottom-most notes of a flute and, with an aching heart, walked away.

In the afternoon, Gatty found Oliver in the church vestry. He was sitting at his sloping desk, his feet on a footstool, writing on a piece of parchment.

'There you are!' said Gatty.

'In the service of the Lord,' Oliver replied.

'Oliver, can you write a message for me? Please.'

'Can I or will I?'

'Will you?'

Oliver looked dimly at Gatty. 'To whom?'

'Arthur!'

Oliver smiled. 'There's a surprise,' he said. 'Well, you're in luck. I've one small piece of parchment left over from my labours. My morning labours.'

'Who are you writing to?' asked Gatty.

'Lady Gwyneth's priest.'

'Why? What about?'

Oliver completed the character and then the word he was writing. Then he rolled up the little scroll and gave it to Gatty.

'Keep it safe and dry,' he told her. 'This letter could make all the difference.'

'To what?'

'You'll find out,' said Oliver. 'Now! What's your message?

'Ready?' asked Gatty. '*Where are you today I keep wondering. I often talk to you and see you easy.*'

'Easily,' said Oliver.

'No,' said Gatty. 'Easy.'

'Easy is wrong,' said Oliver.

'Not for me,' Gatty replied. 'Please Oliver! Write what I say. Then Arthur will hear me.'

Oliver pressed his lips together. 'Go on, then,' he said.

'You got the sky on your shoulders,' Gatty dictated. *'You remember when I said let's go to Jerusalem? I can't explain but somehow I thought it, I believed it, and now I'm going. You and your singing will keep us all safe, Lady Gwyneth says. Arthur, when are you coming back? I haven't forgot . . .'*

'Forgotten,' said Oliver.

Gatty gently shook her head and then, very boldly, she laid the flat of her right hand on Oliver's back.

Oliver sniffed.

'. . . I haven't forgot going upstream. You promised. Or you can ride to Ewloe. Them bulls, and me wearing Sir John's armour and rescuing Sian from the fish-pond and going to Ludlow Fair, and everything . . . It's true! It is. Best things don't never get lost.'

Oliver looked up at Gatty, so eager, her eyes shining. He knitted his brows. 'Just what are you to Arthur?' he enquired.

'Me? To Arthur? What do you mean?' And then, with a smile and a little shrug, Gatty said, 'True.'

'Yes,' said Oliver. 'True.' He wrote four more words, and voiced them as he wrote.

'By your true Gatty . . .'

'There you are!' said Oliver. 'That's your letter.'

'Will you keep it and give it to him?' Gatty asked. 'When he gets home.'

'If he gets home,' the priest replied.

'He will,' said Gatty.

'Some do,' the priest said. 'Most don't.'

'I know what,' said Gatty. Then she untied the violet ribbon she wore day and night round her waist, the one Arthur had bought for her with his last farthing at Ludlow Fair. She doubled it, tore at it with her teeth and bit it in half.

'Really!' said Oliver, wrinkling his nose.

'Half for him, half for me,' said Gatty.

So Oliver rolled up the little piece of parchment and Gatty secured it with the violet ribbon.

Gatty took a deep breath, and noisily blew out her pink, freckled cheeks. 'There!' she exclaimed. 'Writing and all!'

She smiled brightly at Oliver and then she wound her half of the violet ribbon round and round her left wrist.

4

Oliver was ringing the church bell as Gatty rode out of Caldicot and she wondered why. Steady and unhurried, neither eager nor forlorn, the bell rang and rang, and it never once occurred to her that Oliver was ringing it especially for her.

For a long while, Gatty and Macsen rode side by side in silence and then Gatty gave a heartfelt sigh.

'You all right, girl?' Macsen asked.

Gatty was not all right. Her strength was bleeding out of her as she left the only place she knew. She couldn't get the strange idea out of her head that the Marches and her body were one: this earth was her mother, and she was mother-earth.

When at noon they reached the Great Dyke, Gatty and Macsen entered a no-man's land. A hovering grey mist blotted out the sun, turned trees into roaming spirits and one-legged giants brandishing clubs, and lay on the earth on either side of the Great Dyke like a vast wraith-ocean.

For three days they rode north, and late the first afternoon they reached Montgomery just before the dark rose up out of England and clamped down over Wales. There they stayed in the damp castle guesthouse. The second day was little brighter than the first. They passed paddock and stream and twitchel, cefn, rhyd and pandy, each with its own name and unsung story. When the rain came on, Gatty checked that Oliver's parchment letter was dry in her saddlebag. Then

Macsen's horse lost a shoe, and Gatty got the squits, and they were unable to reach Chirk before dark. So they slept in a shepherd's little crouching hut, and instead of the herring and bread and beer Macsen had promised, he and Gatty had to fill their wooden mugs with stream water, and suck and chew bacon rind, and eat their last gobbets of stale ewe's cheese, crumb by crumb, as if they were the greatest delicacy in the world.

'What's she like, then?' Gatty asked. 'Lady Gwyneth?'

Macsen stared at Gatty through the gloom, and then pinched his nose.

'What? She stinks?'

Macsen shook his head.

'Perfumed, you mean.'

'High and mighty, like they all are. She's got a sharp tongue. She's Welsh.'

This was the most Macsen had said during the entire journey, but then he relapsed into his usual silence, and Gatty was unable to tempt him further.

After coming down from the Great Dyke at noon on the third day, Gatty and Macsen turned east again, and for the first time in three days the hazy sun blessed them. Down they rode from the high fields and farms, with their huge flocks of sheep and yapping sheepdogs, down into a sopping forest, and somehow their two horses sensed the journey was almost over. They raised their tucked heads; they whisked their tails.

Gatty stared ahead. Nothing but trunks, some silver, some grey-green, some ivied, some carbuncled, nothing but a prison of tree-trunks stretching to the end of the world. But then there was something.

A handsome high wall, brown as an eggshell and speckled, with teeth along the top. Five peephole windows, four of them slits but one round as the full moon.

*

Side by side, Gatty and Macsen rode across the drawbridge. They dismounted and walked up to the huge ribbed oak door.

Macsen jabbed at it twice with his staff.

'Should have warned you,' he said.

'What?'

A metal nose poked through a small opening in the door; then teeth grated in the lock and the door creaked half-open. Two large men blocked the entrance.

'Arms out!' one man shouted. 'Legs apart!'

Then a third man barged out and searched Macsen.

'Go on, girl!' the first man said. 'Arms out!'

The other man put his hands on Gatty's shoulders, and slid them straight down over her body.

'Hands off!' protested Gatty.

'Ooh-oh! Who do you think you are? Queen of Sheba?'

Gatty kicked the man in the shins, and he yelped.

'Waargh! You little shrew!'

The first man just laughed. 'Serve you right!' he said.

'I'm Macsen,' said Macsen. 'Remember? From Lady Helen.'

'Orders is orders,' the first man replied. 'No one enters this hall without he's searched.'

Gatty stepped into the hall, and she caught her breath.

She saw Lady Gwyneth at once, standing at the far end of the hall, very tall and slender and fair, with a girl on her right and a big man on her left, but in that same first long moment she saw the kind tapestries hanging on the walls and the soft honey-light of dozens and dozens of candles, she smelt scents sweeter and thicker than Fallow Field in June, she heard a cascade of notes, more notes than a climbing lark sings in May, and saw another man plucking an instrument with a forest of strings.

Then Gatty let go of her breath again, and Lady Gwyneth

turned to her, took two steps towards her, and inclined her head.

Had Gatty been able to look at herself through Lady Gwyneth's eyes, what would she have seen?

A grubby parcel of sackcloth and, sticking out of the top, a freckled and dirt-streaked face; large river eyes, set quite wide apart; and a storm of curls, now in the candlelight more silver than gold.

Gatty shuffled towards Lady Gwyneth, and grinned.

'God's bones!' she exclaimed. 'I never knew there was no place like this.'

Lady Gwyneth looked, unblinking, at this creature standing before her.

'Gatty!' she said. 'It is Gatty, isn't it?'

'That's me,' Gatty agreed, and as she nodded each of her curls seemed to have a life of its own.

Lady Gwyneth de Ewloe tilted her head slightly to the right. 'Yes,' she said. 'I rather thought so. You and . . .' she hesitated, and her pale brow creased. 'You and . . .'

'Macsen,' Gatty said in a loud voice. 'Saxon, I call him!'

'Welcome back,' Lady Gwyneth told Macsen.

'We was searched,' Gatty complained, raising her mittened hands and running them down her front.

Lady Gwyneth pursed her shapely lips. 'Precautions!' she said. 'Those *Sais*!'

'Sais?' asked Gatty.

'Saxons. You can't be too careful'.

Gatty wagged her finger at Macsen. 'Hear that, you?' she said.

A smile hovered around the corners of Lady Gwyneth's mouth. 'You do both look rather the worse for wear,' she said.

'Mucky!' said the pretty girl standing behind Lady Gwyneth.

Gatty frowned. 'No,' she said. 'I'm Gatty.'

'I said mucky. *Baw isa'r domen*! That's what you are.'

'That's enough, Nest,' Lady Gwyneth said sharply. 'How do you think you'd look after three days travelling?'

'In January,' sniffed Macsen.

'Quite so,' said Lady Gwyneth.

All at once, Gatty felt most terribly tired. She opened her mouth so wide she could have swallowed half the hall, and gave a noisy yawn.

Lady Gwyneth lowered her eyes. 'Up here, Gatty, we cover our mouths when we yawn.'

Gatty looked quite mystified. 'What for?' she asked.

Lady Gwyneth smiled. 'This is Nest,' she said, 'my first chamber-servant. And this is Snout, my cook.'

Snout nodded in a friendly way and raised his right paw. He was a large man with a mop of copper-coloured hair, and eyes to match. But the most striking thing about him was the way his upper lip was split halfway up to his flaring nostrils.

'We were just about to kneel for my retiring prayer,' Lady Gwyneth said. 'Will you join us? We will say it in English.'

Around the fire they all knelt, and in her clean, light voice, that seemed to sharpen each syllable, Lady Gwyneth prayed:

'May groaning Sword Wood and Wepre Wood praise you,
May the speckled quarries praise you,
May the hills of Clwyd rise and praise you,
Clod, grain, bough, bud, may each one praise you,
May each one of your children praise you
As, Shining Lord, we greet you in this hall.'

Lady Gwyneth got to her feet and, wearily, Gatty and Macsen followed her.

'Now,' said Lady Gwyneth. 'First things first. Warm fingers. Warm toes. And you, Snout, find our guests some food and ale.'

'I certainly will, my lady,' said Snout, and when he spoke he sounded as if he had a cold.

Gatty rubbed her red eyelids, and wiped her dripping nose on her sleeve.

'Yes,' said Lady Gwyneth. 'Well, we'll talk in the morning.'

5

Nest screwed up her pretty face. 'Lady Gwyneth says you're to have a bath first,' she told Gatty. 'Then you should go up and talk to her.'

Gatty burst into laughter. 'A bath!' she exclaimed. 'Me!'

So before noon, Snout the cook warmed vats of water in the castle kitchen. Then he and the kitchen-boy carried them into the hall and Gatty had a bath, the first one in her life.

What warmth! What heat! It made Gatty stretch each limb, like a cat. Before long it made her yawn and yawn again. It seemed to make her stronger and weaker, both at the same time.

While Gatty was lying in the tub, naked as a needle, Snout and the kitchen-boy arrived with another vat of seething water, and they tried to walk right in. Nest shouted at them, and blocked the way, so they put it down and retreated, laughing. Then Nest told Gatty to pull up her legs, and she tipped it into the tub herself.

'Here,' she said, giving Gatty a small pot. 'Mutton fat soap. I made it with my own fair hands. Now scrub yourself all over.'

Ruefully, Gatty inspected her own chapped red knuckles and the grime under her nails. It's true, she thought drowsily, Nest's hands are fair.

Nest picked up a pair of tongs from the hearth. 'Your clothes are filthy,' she said. 'How could you have slept in them?'

'What are you doing?' asked Gatty, alarmed.

'Burning them.'

'No!' cried Gatty.

'They're disgusting.'

'I haven't got none others.'

'Ugh!' exclaimed Nest, and she grabbed Gatty's clothes and threw them into the fire anyway. 'Lady Gwyneth says I'm to lend you a gown,' she said. 'Look at you! I've never seen such revolting, scummy water.'

Gatty rose from the tub, pink and white and shiny, like a nymph from a pool. 'I'm as clean as a cat's tongue,' she carolled. 'No, as clean as a conker. You know, when it's just split out of its mucky old shell.'

'This is my solar,' Lady Gwyneth told Gatty. 'It's where I sit when I want to be alone, or to talk to someone without being interrupted.'

'I never been up to Lady Helen's and Sir John's,' Gatty remarked.

'It's quite small,' said Lady Gwyneth. 'Well, everything at Caldicot is quite small, really.'

Gatty looked around. 'It's secret in here,' she observed. 'You know, like petals and dust have settled for years and no one hasn't disturbed them.'

Lady Gwyneth looked at Gatty with interest. 'You're right,' she agreed. 'Petals and dust, and thoughts and feelings. Now, then. Let's begin at the beginning.'

'What's that?'

'Your mother. Tell me about her.'

'Can't,' said Gatty. 'She died birthing Dusty. And he died when he started laughing and choked himself, and he was born two years after me, he was.'

'I see,' said Lady Gwyneth. 'And your father?'

Gatty lowered her eyes. 'He died last spring, with pains in

his stomach. He said it was like an army of elves was jabbing their spears inside him.' Gatty swallowed noisily. 'Sir John's reeve, he was.'

'Oh Gatty!' said Lady Gwyneth. 'What was he like?'

And so, piece by piece, Lady Gwyneth began to put together the jigsaw of Gatty's life: her parents, her brother, her field-work at Caldicot, her duties in the manor kitchen. But not the piece about her friendship with Arthur. Gatty hugged that to herself.

'I got something for your priest,' said Gatty, fishing into the swinging, outsize woollen gown Nest had lent her, and pulling out a little roll of parchment. 'Oliver wrote it.'

'And who is Oliver?'

'Our priest.'

Lady Gwyneth unrolled the parchment, and as she read she moved her lips without voicing the words. 'Yes,' she said, 'your Oliver would like my priest, Austin, to teach you to read.'

'Read!'

'Yes, Gatty.'

'I couldn't never do that.'

'Why not?'

'Not me. I'm only a field-girl. Well, I was!'

'Oliver says here that Lady Helen wants you to learn . . .'

'No one at Caldicot can,' said Gatty. 'Except for Oliver and Arthur.'

'. . . and so does Sir John,' Lady Gwyneth added.

Gatty jammed her right forefinger against her temple and shook her head. 'I don't know almost nothing,' she said, grinning.

'As it happens,' Lady Gwyneth said, 'Austin is already teaching Nest to read, so maybe he can teach you at the same time.'

'God's gristle!' exclaimed Gatty, and she leaped to her feet and laughed for sheer joy. 'Me! Learning to read!'

'My chamber-servants need to be able to read,' Lady Gwyneth said.

'But you can read yourself,' said Gatty.

'Not for long,' Lady Gwyneth replied. 'The words begin to hop around, and stars and little black shapes float across them.'

'Like clouds, you mean?'

'Anyhow,' Lady Gwyneth said, 'there are few joys greater than being read to.'

Gatty sat down again, then bounced on the bench. 'I'll read to you,' she said. 'I'll read to you for ever.'

Lady Gwyneth smiled. 'Very good,' she said.

Gatty looked around the solar, wide-eyed. She gazed at Lady Gwyneth.

'What is it, Gatty?'

Gatty sniffed at her wrist and the sleeve of her gown. 'I'm that clean I don't even smell like me,' she said. 'I don't look like me. I don't feel like me, up here with you.'

'I understand,' Lady Gwyneth replied. 'But you'll get used to it. You'll grow into it. Now, who is going to teach you to sit right and breathe right and tighten your stomach and relax your throat?'

Gatty frowned. 'I know how to breathe right,' she said.

'Yes,' said Lady Gwyneth. 'I've heard all about your voice, and I know who can teach you to sing.'

'Lady Helen told me what you said,' Gatty said.

'What was that?' asked Lady Gwyneth. 'What did I say?'

'About helping to keep us all safe.'

'Helping to keep us all safe,' Lady Gwyneth slowly repeated.

'You didn't say that?' Gatty faltered. 'Did you?'

Lady Gwyneth smiled. 'I told Helen your singing would be like a charm. Like a spell.'

Gatty puffed her cheeks and blew out all the air. 'Why are we going to Jerusalem, anyway?' she asked.

'My lady,' said Lady Gwyneth.

'What?'

'When you speak to me, that's what you must say, to show respect. My lady.'

'I keep forgetting,' Gatty said. 'I can't help it. My lady.'

'Do you know what a pilgrimage is?' Lady Gwyneth asked.

'A journey,' said Gatty.

'It is,' Lady Gwyneth said.

'My lady!'

'What, Gatty?'

'A journey, my lady,' said Gatty, her eyes as wide as draught-pieces.

'And great pilgrimages are long journeys. To England's own Nazareth, the shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham. Over the mountains, to Rome. To the grave of Saint James, in Spain. And by far the longest and greatest of all, the pilgrimage to Jerusalem.'

'It's dangerous, isn't it?' Gatty said. 'Robbers and Saracens and beasts, and that.'

'It is,' Lady Gwyneth said. 'Any pilgrim who wishes to travel to Jerusalem must be prepared to carry Jesus's cross. But I tell you, Gatty, the more dangerous the way, the more likely God is to forgive our sins. Our terrible wrongdoing. The more likely He is to heal our grief.'

Gatty could hear the quaver in Lady Gwyneth's voice and was quite startled.

'Yes, Gatty,' said Lady Gwyneth. 'I've seen death too. Griffith! Griffith ap Robert. My own little baby.'

'My lady,' said Gatty, so tender and sorrowful.

Lady Gwyneth gazed at the little horn-window, and the two of them listened to the January wind bumping into it

and something outside the window, tapping and scratching.

Lady Gwyneth took Gatty's warm right hand and led her to the window. 'That's where he's buried,' she said. 'Down there, near the lych-gate, so I can watch over him. He was only eleven weeks old.'

Gatty shook her head. 'Little Luke,' she said, 'Lady Helen's son, he was only ten months.'

'To kiss the earth of Jerusalem!' Lady Gwyneth said. 'To see with my own eyes all the holy places. To see where He walked and died and rose again. I believe my pilgrimage will bring me forgiveness so that, one day, in heaven, I'll hold Griffith in my arms.'

'My lady,' said Gatty, 'if a mother can see her child again, do you think a child can see her mother again?'

'What do you mean, Gatty?'

'I mean, if God forgives me too, can I see my mother again?'

For a moment, Lady Gwyneth was silent. 'Pray for that,' she said quietly. The lines of her face softened, and in that moment Gatty saw how she and Lady Helen looked like beans from the same pod.

Gatty sighed a little, and then smiled. 'You won't be sorry,' she said. 'Taking me. I'll make sure of that.'

'My lady.'

'My lady,' Gatty repeated. 'Nest don't like me, though. Not from the first. I can tell.'

'First impressions are not always true impressions,' Lady Gwyneth replied.

'I'll rub along with her. I'll learn to.'

'You must,' said Lady Gwyneth. 'You have more in common with her than you realise.'

Gatty frowned.

'Neither of you has a mother or father. Nest's seventeen – two years older than you. Her father was the steward at Rhuddlan.'

'What's a steward?' asked Gatty.

'In charge of the household and all the servants,' Lady Gwyneth explained. 'When Nest was only eleven, he and Nest's mother were both burned to death when part of the castle caught fire.'

'Oh!' gasped Gatty.

'That was when I agreed to take on Nest as my young servant, and to care for her and educate her. And like her, Gatty, you must learn manners and obedience.'

'And all!' cried Gatty, enthusiastically. 'Is it just you and Nest and me, then?'

'Three people? No, of course not! There'll be nine.'

'Nine!' exclaimed Gatty, and she quickly counted the number on her fingers.

'You and Nest and Snout and me . . . Soon enough, you'll know everyone.'

'Nothing's not soon enough!' Gatty said.

'Now,' said Lady Gwyneth, 'go and find Nest in the hall. Ask her to tell you your dressing duties.'

After Gatty had left the solar, Lady Gwyneth remained sitting on her padded bench, thinking.

So eager, so staunch and somehow gay: Lady Gwyneth recognised all these qualities in Gatty, and she liked them. But so simple. So very ignorant. And so earthy. True, she thought, Gatty can learn. But she's impulsive, too. She's wilful. Lady Gwyneth bit her left cheek, concerned that Gatty might upset the other pilgrims in the party.