

CRISPIN

THE CROSS OF LEAD

AVI



Includes historical note, glossary, and author interview

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✦ *To Teofilo F. Ruiz* ✦

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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.

1

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 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 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.

Barely aware of the earth beneath my feet or the roof of trees above, I paid no mind into what I ran, or that my sole garment, a gray wool tunic, tore on brambles and bushes. Nor did I care that my leather shoes, catching roots or stones, kept tripping me, causing me to fall. Each time I picked myself up and rushed on, panting, crying.

Deeper and deeper into the ancient woods I went, past thick bracken and stately oaks, until I tripped and fell again. This time, as God in His wisdom would have it, my head struck stone.

Stunned, I lay upon the decaying earth, fingers clutching rotting leaves, a cold rain drenching me. As daylight faded, I was entombed in a world darker than any night could bring.

LONG PAST THE HOUR OF Compline, the last prayers of the night, a sound aroused me to a confused state of wakefulness.

Because of the utter darkness and the painful throbbing in my head, I knew not where I was. Though unable to see, I could smell the air and realized I wasn't at my home. Nor was I in the fields where I often slept with the ox. Only when I sniffed again did I become sure of the woodland smells and cloying air. The rain had ceased, but it was as if night itself had begun to sweat.

Then, in a burst, I recalled my mother's death and burial, my leaving the cemetery and the priest's my plunge into the woods. I remembered tripping, falling.

Putting a hand to my forehead, I felt a welt and a crust of hardened blood. Though my touch made me wince, the pain banished the remaining dizziness. I realized I was in the forest and lost. My tunic was cold and wet.

Lifting my head, I looked about. Midst the tangle of trees, I saw a flickering light. Puzzled, I came up on my knees to see better. But save that flame, all was murk and midnight mist, and silence lay as thick as death. In haste, I made the sign of the cross and murmured protective prayers.

Mind, godly folk had no business beyond their lawful homes at such a time. Night was a mask for outlaws, hungry wolves, the Devil and his minions. Then who or what, I asked myself, had caused the sound that had brought me to my senses?

It was my curiosity—another name, my mother had often said, for Satan—that made me want to see what was there. Despite fear of discovery, I crept through the woods.

When I came as near to the light as I dared, I raised my head and tensed my legs, ready to flee if necessary.

Two men were standing in a clearing. One was John Aycliffe. In one hand he held a fluttering torch. As always, a sword was at his side.

The second man I'd never seen before. Dressed like a gentleman, with a face of older years, he wore a hood attached to a flowing cape that hung down behind his legs. Gray hair reached his shoulders. His blue over-tunic was long, quilted, and dark, with yellow clasps that gleamed in the torchlight.

Within the circle of light I also saw the fine head of a horse. I assumed it was the stranger's.

The two men were talking. Straining to listen, forgetful of the danger, I rose up from the bushes where I hid.

As I looked on, the stranger pushed aside his cape and brought forth a wallet. From it he drew a parchment packet affixed with red wax seals. He handed it to Aycliffe.

The steward unfolded it. The parchment was wide and filled with what looked like writing. Three more red seals and ribbons dangled from the bottom edge.

Passing the stranger the torch so he could see better, Aycliffe took up the document and cast his eyes over it.

"By the bowels of Christ," I heard him exclaim even as he made the sign of the cross over his chest. "When will it happen?"

"If God wills, it will come soon," the stranger said.

"And am I to act immediately?" Aycliffe asked the man.

“Are you not her kin?” the stranger said. “Do you not see the consequences if you don’t?”

“A great danger to us all.”

“Precisely. There could be those who will see it so and act accordingly. You’ll be placed in danger, too.”

As a frowning Aycliffe began to fold the document, he turned away. When he shifted, he saw me. Our eyes met. My heart all but stopped.

“Asta’s son!” Aycliffe cried.

The stranger whirled about.

“There!” the steward shouted, pointing right at me. Throwing the document aside, he snatched back the torch, drew his sword, and began to run in my direction.

Transfixed by fear, I stood rooted to the spot. Not until he came close to me did I turn and flee. But no sooner did I than I became ensnared in brambles that caught me in their thorny grasp. Though I struggled and pulled, it was to no avail. I was too well caught. All the while Aycliffe was drawing closer, his face filled with hate. When he drew near he lifted his sword and swung it down.

In his haste, the sword’s descending arc missed me, but cut the brambles, so that I could rip myself away before he could take another stroke.

I ran on.

Aycliffe continued to pursue me, sword and torch up. He would have caught me if I had not, in my blind panic, tumbled over a cliff. Though of no great height, it took me by such surprise I went hurtling through the air, crashing hard upon my side and rolling farther down a hill.

I was stunned, my breath gone, but I had enough sense to roll over and look back. Above me—at some distance—I saw Aycliffe’s torch, and his face peering down.

When I realized he had no idea where I was, I dared not move. When his light finally retreated did I pick myself up and flee.

I ran as far as strength and breath allowed, halting only when my legs gave out. Then I threw myself upon the ground, gasping for breath.

For the remainder of the night I found little rest. Not only was I in fear of being found and made subject to the stewards’ wrath, I was still engulfed by grief at my mother’s death. Then, too, I had turned from the priest when he had asked me to church. I had broken the curfew, too. Why, I’d even stolen church wine to ease my mother’s pains before she died. In short, I was certain God was punishing me.

Even as I waited for His next blow, I sought, with earnest prayers, forgiveness for my sinful life

THAT LIFE OF MINE BEGAN ON the Feast of Saint Giles in the Year of our Lord 1363, the thirty-sixth year of the reign of Edward the Third, England's great warrior king. We resided in Stromford Village, with its one hundred and fifty souls.

For as long as I could recall, my mother had simply called me "Son," and, since her name was Asta, "Asta's son" became my common name. In a world in which one lived by the light of a father's name and rank, that meant—since I had no father—I existed in a shadow. But he, like so many, had died before my birth during a recurrence of the Great Mortality (often called the Plague)—or so my mother had informed me. She rarely mentioned him.

Nor did she ever take another husband, a circumstance I did not question. It would have been a rare man who would want so frail and impoverished a woman for a wife. For in the entire kingdom of England there could have been no poorer Christian souls than my mother and I.

I had few friends and none I completely trusted. As "Asta's son," I was oft the butt of jests, jibe and relentless hounding.

"Why do they taunt me so?" I once asked Father Quinel during one of my confessions. These confessions were numerous, since I had become convinced there was some sin embedded in me, a sin was desperate to root out.

"Be accepting," was the priest's advice. "Think how our Blessed Christ was taunted on His cross."

I did try to accept my life, but unlike our perfect Jesus, I was filled with caution and suspicion, always expecting to be set upon or mocked. In short, I lived the life of the shunned, forever cast aside yet looking on, curious as to how others lived.

There was little my mother or I could do about our plight. We were not slaves. But neither were we free. The steward, John Aycliffe, never lost an opportunity to remind us of the fact that we were villeins—serfs—bound to Furnival, Lord of Stromford Village.

Yet this Lord Furnival had fought in France or had been off to mercenary wars for so many years that most villagers, including myself, had never set eyes on him.

It did not matter. Spring, summer, and fall—save certain holy days—my mother and I, like every other Stromford villager, worked his fields from dawn to dusk.

When winter came, we fed the animals—we had an ox, and now and then a chicken—gathered wood and brush for heat, slept, and tried to stay alive.

At a time when bread cost a quarterpenny a loaf, the value of my mother's daily labor—by King Edward's royal decree—was a penny each day; mine, but a farthing.

Our food was barley bread, watered ale, and, from time to time, some cooked dried peas. If good fortune blessed us there might be a little meat at Christmastide.

Thus our lives never changed, but went round the rolling years beneath the starry vault of distant Heaven. Time was the great millstone, which ground us to dust like kernal wheat. The Holy Church told us where we were in the alterations of the day, the year, and in our daily toil. Birth and death alone gave distinction to our lives, as we made the journey between the darkness whence we had come to the darkness where we were fated to await Judgment Day. Then God's terrible gaze would fall on us and lift us to Heavens bliss or throw us down to the ever-lasting flames of Hell.

This was the life we led. It was no doubt the life my forefathers had led, as had all men and women since the days of Adam. With all my heart I believed that we would continue to live the same until Archangel Gabriel announced the end of time.

And with my mother's death, it was as if that time had come.

FOLLOWING MY ESCAPE FROM John Aycliffe and my night of forest hiding, it was the sound of a tolling bell that woke me. Dawn had come, and the Stromford church was announcing early morning prayers, Prime.

In haste, I made the sign of the cross over my heart, offered up my daily prayer, and listened closely. All I heard was the sound of the bell and muted forest babble—nothing to alarm me.

Once awake, however, I could only think of what I'd seen the night before, the meeting in the woods of the steward and the stranger. Nor could I remove from my mind the steward's hateful look when he brought down his sword with the clear intent of killing me.

Even so, I tried to convince myself that it would not matter. In the past Aycliffe had treated me badly. His attack on me the night before was not that great an exception. Why should he, I told myself, be concerned that I, a nobody, had seen him at his forest meeting? It seemed my best course of action would be to return to my home and act as though nothing untoward had occurred.

With the coming of morning's light it took little to determine where I was. I made my way toward the village.

Since my mother had been a cottar—one who held no land in her own right—she and I lived in a rented one-room dwelling that stood at the far edge of our village by the northern boundary cross. A thin thatch roof kept out most rain. Earth was our floor. And since it was at some distance from the village, I was able to remain hidden from those who had already gone to their daily labor.

I was just about to emerge from the woods and run toward our hut when I caught sight of the bailiff, Roger Kinsworthy, and the reeve, Odo Langland. Not only were they carrying pikes and axes, they were heading for my cottage.

Unsettled, I drew back quickly and concealed myself behind some bushes to observe their intentions as they entered our small building. Perhaps they were looking for me, because they emerged in moments. But then, to my great shock, they began to use their tools to pull the structure down.

The cottage, being of small, mean construction, could not withstand their assault. Within moments it was little more than a heap of thatch, wattle, and clay. Not content with that, Kinsworthy produced a flint from his wallet, struck sparks, and set ablaze the place I had called my home for thirteen years.

Deeply shaken, I fled back to the forest. As I went, I kept asking myself why they should have done such a thing. I could not believe it was merely because I'd seen the steward in the forest the night before.

Once within the woods, I decided to go to a high rock which stood near the forest edge and overlooked our village. Though the rock was difficult to climb, I'd done so before on one of my solitary rambles. It was to be hoped that I'd see something to help me understand what was happening.

It was not, however, till midmorning—which I knew by the position of the sun and the ringing of the church bell proclaiming Terce—that I reached the rock.

Once having made sure I was alone, I climbed. While the rock was not an easy ascent—at some places it was little less than a cliff—I reached the pinnacle. Once there I took the further precaution of lying down. Only then did I lift my head and look about.

Before me—like some rolled-out tapestry—was my entire world, beneath a sky as blue as Our

Lady's blessed robes, a contrast to the greening spring that lay abundant everywhere. Overhead, swallows flitted, free as birds ever are.

To the west meandered the river Strom, glittering like a silver ribbon in the golden sun. At this point the river ran at a shallow depth. Like most, I could not swim, but for much of the year, one could wade across. Above and below this ford, depending on the season, the water ran quite deep.

A few paces from the river's bank, on the village side, stood one of the stone crosses that marked Stromford's western limit. Covered by mystic markings, this cross had been erected where Saint Giles had once appeared.

There, on the rivers low, tree-lined banks, stood our noble's house—Lord Furnival's manor—the grandest house I knew. It was where the steward had lived for many years in the absence of the knight.

With stone walls two levels high and small windows, the manor was to me like a castle, high, mighty, and impenetrable. Inside—I had never been allowed to enter, but I'd been told—was an arched hall with a long trestle table and benches, several sleeping rooms, and a chapel. On the walls hung pictures of saints along with ancient battle shields. The lower level was a large storage place meant for the wheat and other foods the village produced.

Opposite the manor house, across a road, was the mill. Smaller than Lord Furnival's dwelling, it was built of stout timbers, with grinding wheels of massive stone. These wheels were turned by river water delivered by a run.

Not only did the mill grind our wheat and barley—at a cost—it contained the ovens where we villagers, by the stewards decree, baked our bread, which required yet another fee.

A road led from the riverbank. Once a traveler had crossed the river, a road lead east and reached another road that ran north and south. Where these roads met, our stone church, Saint Giles by-the-River, stood with its ancient bell.

Above and below the church were our dwelling places, some forty cottages and huts of wattle and daub, thatch and wood, dirt and mud, all in varying shades of brown.

North of the village was the commons, where we peasants grazed our own oxen and sheep. Here too were the archery butts where men of age were required, by King Edward's decree, to practice every Sunday. It was also the place where the public stocks and gallows stood.

The land for growing crops was laid out in long, narrow strips. One of three strips was planted with barley; another, wheat. The final third lay fallow for the grazing of the manor's cattle.

As for the two roads that passed through Stromford, all I knew was that they led to the rest of England, of which I had no knowledge. And beyond England, I supposed, came the remaining world: "Great Christendom," our priest called it. But in all my life I'd never gone past the boundary crosses, which marked the limits of our village.

Everything—from the woods, the cottages, the manor house, the mill, the roads, the growing lands, the commons, even the church itself, to the tiny crofts behind our cottages used for planting herbs and roots—*everything* belonged to Lord Furnival, who held it in the King's name.

Indeed, the steward said we belonged to our lord as well. Like all villagers, we were required to ask the steward's permission to be excused from work if ill, to grind our wheat, or bake it, to buy or sell, to travel from our parish, to marry, even to baptize our children.

In return we gained two things:

When we died there was a hope of Heaven.

And Lord Furnival protected us from the Scots, the French, the Danes, and the wicked infidels.

But that morning I had little doubt: I'd never be protected again.

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