

# ADAM OF THE ROAD

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# ADAM OF THE ROAD

## I

### *Adam*

AFTER a May as grey and cold as December, June came in, that year of 1294, sunny and warm and full of birds and blossoms and all the other happy things the songs praise May for. Adam Quartermayne, who had been looking for his father ever since Easter, thought that now he would surely come. Every morning when he rolled out of his bed in the long dormitory where the schoolboys slept, he said to himself, "Today he's coming! I know it!" and every night, disappointed but not daunted, he put himself to sleep making up stories about how his father would come next day.

Sometimes he made him come just at the end of choir practice, sometimes at the beginning of the lesson in grammar, sometimes in the middle of dinner when the boys ate their meat and pottage in silence while a master read aloud in Latin from the lives of the saints. However Adam's stories began, they all ended with Roger the minstrel taking Adam right out of school. Across the courtyard they would go striding, Adam with his own harp over his shoulder and his father's viol under his arm; through the gateway they would pass and over the river to the highway that led to London and all the wide, free world.

It was a famous school that the monks kept in the Abbey of St. Alban, but Adam had had enough of it. Five long months ago his father had left him there while he himself went to France, to the minstrels' school held in Lent each year at Cambrai, where he would learn new romances to tell to the lords and ladies of England.

Roger Quartermayne was no ordinary minstrel, picking up an uncertain penny telling rough yarns in inn-yards and market-places, filling in gaps in his memory with juggling and tumbling and piping as the poorer sort did. He could play the viol; he could chant long romances

in French about King Alisaunder, or Charlemagne and his knights, or the British King Arthur and the search for the Holy Grail. He was welcome at manor-houses and at great feasts in castles, and everywhere people gave him rich gifts, a length of cloth for a surcoat, a purse full of silver pennies, or a gold clasp to fasten his mantle. He went attended by a boy to carry his viol and to sing with him when there were songs in the tales or harp a little in the interludes, and that boy, from his eighth birthday till his eleventh last February, had been Roger's son Adam.

So Adam watched eagerly for his father and talked endlessly about him to the other boys in school. He always spoke of him as Roger the minstrel, as if everyone must have heard of him, and if he was a little cocky about being the son of such a man, they forgave him. They liked Adam, because he was tousle-headed and snub-nosed, wide-mouthed and square-jawed, because his grey eyes were honest and twinkling, because he sang so well and knew so many stories, and because, though he boasted about Roger, he had a humble enough opinion of himself. They watched for Roger, too, and they all expected him, from Adam's description, to be as handsome as Earl Gilbert, who came sometimes to the abbey, but kinder, as brave as the king, but younger, and as grand as the abbot himself, but more comfortable.

Three things Adam had to comfort him while the good June days went slowly to waste: his harp, his friend Perkin, and his dog Nick.

His harp was the small harp of the time, which he carried slung by a thong over his shoulder. His father had taught him to play it when he was a very little boy, living up in the north in a stone house in the shadow of York Minster. Here at the abbey school he kept it on the shelf at the head of his bed. On rainy days when they had free times in the hall after the long hours of lessons, the boys would send him to get it, and he would pluck its strings and tell what he could remember of the tales he had heard from Roger the minstrel. At first the boys from the midlands made fun of his northern dialect, but he turned to French a few times and silenced them. Not many of these sons of franklins and burgesses knew the language of the court folk. Or he would sing the verses of a song they all knew and they would join in on the refrains. Sometimes they would make up more stanzas of their own.

The masters didn't like it very well, for the church officially dis-

approved of minstrels' tales. If they heard him they would stop him, or make him tell stories about the saints instead; but more often they just pretended not to hear him. His stories were about courtesy and chivalry, never the rude fabliaux making mock of holy things that the poorer sort of minstrel told.

Perkin, his friend, who slept in the cot next to his, was a thin, tall, dark-haired boy with a high nose and an intense, brooding look in his brown eyes. He looked a little like a hawk, except when he smiled; then his white teeth would flash and his whole face would light up. He was a year older than Adam, and a great deal farther on in learning. He was looking forward to going on to the university at Oxford. "I shall study the law," he whispered once to Adam, "and some day I'll be chief adviser to the King, like Walter Langton. He started a poor man. You will see."

Perkin's father was a ploughman in Ewelme, and Perkin would have had to be a ploughman too if it had not been for the parish priest. He first taught Perkin his letters and then persuaded his father to let him go on and take as much learning as he could hold; it would be a good deal, the priest thought. The ploughman had to pay a fine to the lord of the manor to set his son free, and the parish priest had to persuade his brother, who was a monk at St. Alban's, to make some special efforts to get Perkin into the abbey school. Altogether, several people had been put to considerable trouble about Perkin's education, which made Perkin very serious—till Adam came.

Adam and Perkin had been fast friends since they first saw each other. The master had lifted Perkin by the belt from the table where he was bent over a parchment, and said (in Latin, for all their talk in school was in Latin, which was hard for Adam at first): "Here's a new boy. Show him around and see that he doesn't get into trouble." As it turned out, Adam soon got Perkin into trouble, through his dog Nick. Perkin hadn't minded. He was rather pleased, after having been so very good and serious for so long, to swagger a bit over his misdoings and show that he too could take a beating without flinching.

The dog Nick was a red spaniel with long silky ears and a tail that never stopped wagging so long as he was with Adam. He had followed at Adam's heels since he was a round, wriggling ball of a puppy small enough to walk underneath the other dogs without stooping; he had

slept with Adam—he was warm and soft to have in bed on cold nights—and had eaten some of whatever Adam had to eat; he was happy or tired or sad according as Adam was happy or tired or sad; his brown eyes were constantly on Adam's face and he went to great lengths to please his young god and master. He even learned a few tricks to do for crowds in the market-place or at the fair, though he was not one of those meagre, scrounging, anxious, performing dogs any more than Roger was the wrong kind of minstrel.

More than once Adam and Perkin had smuggled Nick into school and tried to keep him hidden in their beds, but he would come out and wag his tail at the master, and he made so much trouble for them that in the end they had to give up the idea. An old woman across the river kept him, and Adam paid her out of the dwindling store of pennies that Roger had left him. Every saint's day and holiday he went to see Nick, to play with him and take him for walks over the fields.

If it had not been for his harp, and Perkin, and Nick, Adam could hardly have endured the long time of waiting for Roger to come back from France.

## II

### Nick

ADAM and Perkin were going to see Nick. Adam had saved him part of his meat from dinner and Perkin had saved him a hunk of bread. That was good of Perkin, for in spite of being so thin he was always hungrier than Adam and needed to eat more—and Nick wasn't his dog. Besides the food for Nick, which he carried in the leather wallet hung on his belt, Adam had his harp over his shoulder.

It was after dinner on St. Alban's Day, and the boys were free till supper-time. There was no reason why they should not have walked boldly out of the school building, across the court, and through the gate. The porter would not have stopped them today—indeed, with the court so full of people coming and going, the porter would scarcely have noticed the two boys—but they had their own way of doing it. Nick was a secret and they were not going to lead any spies straight to the place where he was kept. To confuse the enemy farther, Adam went first and Perkin followed a few paces behind him. It was part of the proceedings that whatever Adam did Perkin must do too. If Adam chose to hop six times on his left foot, Perkin hopped too; if Adam jumped to touch a branch of a tree hanging over his head, so did Perkin. Adam usually went first, because the things that Perkin thought of doing were always the same, but Adam could think of new things.

So Adam came out of the school building a little ahead of Perkin, and at once the bright June sunshine and the crowd and the air of holiday-making excited him. He snatched off his round green cap, threw it up into the air, and caught it on his left heel kicked up behind. Perkin was wearing the linen coif tied under his chin that most men and boys wore; he had to untie it first, and when he threw it up into the air it went wide and landed in a little heap right on the head of the prior, who had just come out of the church. The prior was a very important person, second only to the abbot himself, and extremely dignified. Perkin gave a frightened squawk and dived behind a startled old man whose staff and

bag and cloak showed that he was a pilgrim.

The prior brushed the coif off his head as if it had been a fly, and sailed on, his black robes billowing behind him. Adam picked it up and stuffed it down Perkin's neck. "Here, you ninny," he said, crowing with laughter, "hang on to it."

They went on side by side, Perkin's arm affectionately over Adam's shoulder, his neat, black head close to Adam's tousled, sandy one.

The Abbey of St. Alban was like a city in itself. Here in these vast, piled-up buildings nearly eight hundred monks prayed and worked and studied, and an army of lay brothers laboured to make their holy life possible. Besides the houses that the monks needed there were the abbot's palace where he entertained nobles and churchmen and sometimes the king himself, the guest-house where lesser folk might stay, the almonry where the poor were fed, and the school. Then there were all the stables and barns and granaries, the laundry and dairy and mill and smithy. Most important of all, towering up into the June sky, was the heart and centre of it, the abbey church, whose bells rang seven different times every day for services of prayer and praise.

On this twenty-second of June, St. Alban's own day, the great abbey was seething with life and colour. Pilgrims had come from all over England to worship at the golden shrine where the saint's bones were kept. Beggars gathered in hungry hordes for the extra dole the almoner would give out to celebrate the day. Townspeople and country folk came to see the procession led by the abbot wearing the wonderful embroidered robe that the third Henry had given to the abbey. Now that High Mass was over, people lingered in the church and outside in the court, seeing what was to be seen, and hearing and telling news.

Adam and Perkin skirted around the north side of the church and slipped into the herb garden. In one corner behind some clumps of tall lavender a monk was working. Adam squatted down and pulled Perkin down beside him. They crept on their hands and knees among the tangy, fragrant plants and wriggled through the hedge on the other side.

Beyond the herb garden were the vegetable gardens, with rows of green cabbages and leeks and peas and beans, and beyond them a bit of orchard and the fish-pond. There they stopped a minute to look at the carp, and Perkin would have thrown some of Nick's bread to them, but Adam said, "No. Come on."





They had the abbey wall to climb next. "Give me a leg up," said Adam.

It was an old bit of wall down behind the big barn. Up Adam went, a toe here and a finger-hold there, the top of the wall on knees and elbows, and a scraped hand down to Perkin to help him up. A tuft of pink valerian growing out of a crevice nodded in the breeze and shed its fragrance. Adam sniffed. He loved all the warm, bright, sweet things of the earth; he hated being shut up inside stone walls with the smell of cold and damp and books and woollen robes. So now he sat on the top of the wall and sniffed and let the wind blow through his hair and crinkled his eyes against the sun, and thought of nothing at all, but felt blissful.

"What are we waiting for?" said Perkin, who was not one to waste time.

Down below them was the little river; between it and the wall was a strip of grass and a narrow path; a gnarled willow tree stood with its roots in the water and one branch pressed up against the wall. They swung themselves down by the tree and walked along the path to the bridge.

On the other side of the river was the mill and the Fighting Cocks Inn and the road that passed by Dame Malkin's cottage near St. Michael's church. Because it was a holiday the mill was silent and the inn was noisy.

"There's a wrestling match going on!" cried Perkin. "Let's watch!"

"You can if you want," said Adam. "I'd rather go to see Nick."

"Oh, I don't really want to," said Perkin hastily.

The road led past an old, old Roman town called Verulam. Nothing was left of it now but some crumbling walls and piles of stones with grass growing in the crevices. People had taken most of the old stones and bricks to make new houses. The tower of the abbey church was built of Roman bricks, and so was Dame Malkin's little cottage.

"When the Romans came," said Adam, "the people who'd always lived here before went under ground. They're there still. They're fairies now."

"Our parish priest says there aren't any fairies," objected Perkin.

"That's what Roger told me," said Adam with finality.

Dame Malkin was a widow who lived alone except for her cow and

three sheep and seven hens and her big grey cat and Adam's dog Nick. Adam was always afraid that Nick would forget him between visits and learn to love the old woman best. He whistled as he came near the little thatched house under the big oak tree.

At once the door swung open, and out rushed a little red whirlwind with flopping ears, big fringy feet, and a frantic tail. Adam went down on his knees, Nick plunged into his arms and toppled him over, and they rolled in the daisies on the grass together. Nick's tongue was in Adam's ear, his feet on Adam's chest, and his silky hair in Adam's face, but only for a minute. Then Nick was off again. He bounced up against Perkin's shins, he ran round and round in great circles over grass and road, he yelped with joy, his long pink tongue hanging out the side of his mouth and his ears flapping together over the top of his head. There could be no doubt that Nick was glad to see Adam.

Dame Malkin had come to the door and stood watching. She was a short, round-faced woman with merry blue eyes and red cheeks. She wore a blue homespun gown, and her white wimple and cap were clean for the holiday.

"Get up off the ground, boy," she called to Adam. "You'll roll on your harp and break it, and I've been waiting this long time for a tune. Come in, come in."

First Adam had to give Nick the meat he had saved. He made Nick work for it. The little dog had to walk on his hind legs, roll over, and play dead, and even when it was set before him, even though his brown eyes were all but melting with eagerness, he had to wait till Adam gave the signal before he could fall on it and gobble it.

"I'm not going to make him do all that for my bread," said Perkin.

"Yes, you are, too," said Adam firmly. "He's a minstrel's dog and he has to learn to entertain people."

He took the bread out of his wallet and handed it to Perkin. He would have liked very much to give it to Nick himself, but of course it was Perkin's bread.

"Walk," said Perkin, and held up the hunk of bread.

Nick, however, recognized but one master. He stood on his hind legs, but instead of walking as requested he snatched the bread out of Perkin's hands and made off with it. When he was safely out of reach, he stopped and chewed with his head thrown back and his eyes rolled at

the boys till the whites showed. If either of them moved he picked up the rest of the bread and ran a little farther away before he stopped and chewed again. He was distinctly laughing at them.

"Come in, come in," said Dame Malkin. "Let him be, the scamp. It's St. Alban's Day."

So they went through the low door under the thatch into the little one-room house. It was dim inside, even though the wooden shutter at the window stood open and the sunshine came in and made a square patch on the hard earth floor. The rafters and the walls were dark with smoke, but otherwise everything was neat and clean. Dame Malkin's bed in the corner was spread with a blue coverlet, her table was scrubbed white, and her oak cupboard against the wall had been rubbed with beeswax till it gleamed. Adam and Perkin sat down on the bench and she brought out a cake made of white flour, and two earthenware cups of milk.

"Here," she said. "You two need fattening more than the spaniel does. Wet your jolly whistle and then you can sing to me."

Nick came padding in and lay down on Adam's feet. The grey cat stepped delicately through the window, gave Nick a look of disdain, and went to sharpen her claws on the leg of Dame Malkin's bed. Adam gulped his milk, ate his cake, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Then he wiped his hand on Nick's silky sides, and took his harp from his shoulder. He tightened the strings till they sounded right when he ran his fingers over them. Ripples of music followed his fingers. He wriggled a little with pleasure.

"'Sumer is i-cumen in,' " he sang in his high, clear voice, "'Loude sing cuckoo!'"

He had heard the first cuckoo on a cold wet day away back in April, and he had thought then that Roger would come any day. Now June was almost over; the cuckoo had changed his tune and soon would be flying away, and still Roger had not come.

"Groweth seed and bloweth mead,  
And springeth the wude nu—"

Anything could happen to Roger, and Adam would not know it. Kings and nobles had messengers to carry letters for them, but ordinary people got news slowly and by round-about ways, if at all.

“ ‘Sing cuckoo, sing cuckoo, nu!’ ” he finished, and even in his own ears his voice sounded plaintive.

“Give us something merrier,” protested Dame Malkin. “You sound as doleful as a hen in the snow.”

Adam could almost hear his father saying, “Remember, Adam, a minstrel sings what his listeners want to hear. It’s not for him to ease his own sorrows or tell his own joys. He’s to find out how his listeners are feeling and say it all for them.”

So now he looked carefully at Dame Malkin and saw that she was feeling holiday-happy and wanted someone to joke with her and tease her a little. He grinned and plucked his harp again.

“ ‘Herefore and therefore and therefore I came,’ ” he sang, “ ‘And for to praise this pretty woman.’ ”

Dame Malkin pretended to be displeased, but her eyes laughed. She raised her hand as if to clout him over the head. He ducked, and went on pointedly:

“There were three angry, three angry there were,  
A wasp, a weasel, and a woman.”

“Oh,” broke in the dame, “you’re as pert as a pic, and I thought you were pining away with wanhope. I’ve a mind not to tell you the news I have for you.”

There was something in the song about a magpie too. Adam sang:

“There were three chattering, three chattering there were,  
A pic, a jay, and a woman.”

He stopped abruptly. “What news?” he said.

She folded her arms and hugged herself. “Oh, I’m chattering, am I? Well, I don’t know about telling any news. I don’t know at all.”

“Have you heard something about Roger the minstrel?”

“No, boy, not for certain sure, but it might be something. A messenger came through here yesterday with the badge of the de Lises al his belt and a parchment in his hand for the Lord Abbot. I got it from William, the neat-herd who got it from Walter-at-the-well, who’s own brother to Harry the porter at the abbey gate, that Sir Edmund de Lisle with his train will be lying at the abbey tonight or tomorrow night, and they say Sir Edmund has a new minstrel with him all hot from some minstrels’ school in France.”

Adam's grey eyes suddenly shone out as if candles had been lighted behind them. "He's coming!" he cried. "Roger's coming!"

Nick got up and put his paws on Adam's knee, his tail wagging so hard that his sides shook.

"Now there was no name mentioned," said the dame warningly.

"They don't have to say his name," said Adam proudly. "He's the only minstrel worth talking about. Where are they coming from?"

"From Colchester."

"Then they'll come in over the heath. Come on, Perkin, if we go up on the hill perhaps we can see them. Come on, we've got to hurry!"

"They may not come till tomorrow," protested Dame Malkin. "It may not be your Roger at all. I only told you to give you hope, not to set you by the ears this way."

Adam flung his arms around her neck and hugged her tight. After a little gasp of surprise, she hugged him back, aimed a kiss at his smooth, hard cheek but kissed the air instead, had better luck with a swift slap at his rear, and ran after him with his harp, which he had left on the table.

He slung it over his shoulders, and it banged against his ribs as he ran. Perkin came thudding along behind him puffing and blowing, and Nick raced in front with flapping ears. Adam now and then gave a leap. He felt as if he could run for ever.

### III

## Roger

ALL the bells were ringing for evensong, the great bell of the abbey, the smaller bells of St. Peter's, the silvery bells of St. Michael's, and, distant and belated, the bells of St. Stephen's. Adam and Perkin, small and lonely figures on the high, empty heath, wondered what they ought to do.

"We don't want to miss supper," said Perkin.

"Look!" cried Adam.

Far down the wheel-tracks that crossed the heath they saw somebody coming. Several times they had thought they saw travellers approaching, and each time they had turned out to be sheep, but these were unmistakable men on horseback. The breeze brought the faint jingling of the silver bells on their harnesses. Adam stood on a grassy hillock and watched them come nearer, his heart beating so hard that it echoed in his ears. Some knights came first.

"There's one of the Cliffords—checky gold and azure with a fesse gules," said Perkin, pointing to a shield painted with gold and blue checks and a wide red stripe across the centre. Every boy tried to learn the arms of the different knights and prided himself on the number he could recognize. Perkin knew more than any of the boys at St. Alban's, partly because he had a good memory, and partly because he took a lot of trouble over anything that he thought might help him to get on in the world.

"It's the de Lisle leopard I'm looking for," said Adam.

"Gules a leopard silver crowned gold," said Perkin, showing off. The heraldic terms were almost another language.

"There it is!"

A knight rode past with the silver leopard on the red ground blazoned on his shield and on the trappings of his great war-horse. His helm was hanging down his back and his hair, which curled across his forehead and hung nearly to his shoulders, was fiery red in the sunshine. As he

passed the boys he turned and said something to the man beside him. Adam was sure he had noticed Nick and was saying what a fine dog he was.

"My faith!" exclaimed Perkin. "They've got a carriage!"

Adam had heard that some of the great nobles had carriages for their ladies to travel in, but he had never seen one before. It was a huge affair, and it made a good deal of noise as it came lurching and jolting along the road. It took four horses to pull it and two men to drive, one man riding astride the first horse and the other sitting up in front of the carriage. It had four wheels studded with nails to grip the muddy roads; they were as big and heavy as cart wheels, but the spokes were all beautifully carved. The carriage itself was shaped like an enormous sausage, all painted and gilded, with little square windows in the sides and a door at the back.

While Adam and Perkin stood and gaped at it, the embroidered curtains in one of the windows parted, and a little girl looked out. She had a pointed face with shining brown eyes and red lips. She wore a red ribbon around her brown curls, and a red dress. She was pretty.

Adam quickly commanded Nick to "Walk!" and the little girl laughed. That so much pleased Adam that he handed his harp to Perkin, and stood on his head until the blood began to pound in his face and his feet wobbled. When he turned himself right side up again, the carriage was past and the curtain covered the window. Adam felt a little silly. He had almost forgotten for a moment that he was looking for Roger.

Four more men passed in a bunch, and then a man came riding alone.

Adam really saw the horse first. It was a beautiful dappled grey, tall and strong enough to carry a knight in full armour into battle. The man who rode him was not a knight. He wore a bright surcoat striped in blue and green and tawny, and cut in points around the hem, and he carried a viol slung over his shoulder. His brown hair was cut short, his tanned face was square at the chin, and the eyes set deep under the box-like brow were grey and keen and humorous.

"Roger!" shouted Adam. "Roger!"

The man reined in the big horse. "How, boy! Why, grant mercy, it's Adam!"



