

The Sheffield Thwitel.

'Ther was no man, for peril, dorste hym touche.
A Sheffield thwitel baar he in his hose.
Round was his face, and camus was his nose;'

Geoffrey Chaucer. The Reeve's Tale. Canterbury Tales.

'If it were possible to take out a licence to call up the spirits of the dead, many Sheffield people would gladly contribute to the cost of calling up Geoffrey Chaucer so that he might explain why he used the phrase.'

Mary Walton. Sheffield - Its Story and its Achievements.



1361

"Open up, open up," a deep voice bellowed. Then came heavy knocking, but William sat still in the darkness; he did not move and neither did I. We knew that voice well enough; it was Richard Bradfield the manor reeve, wanting payment for the renting of our forge.

"Open up and talk to me," the reeve ordered, his voice a little softer.

I looked up at William and rubbed my aching belly.

"Come on William, open up lad! Six weeks are gone since thy mother and father died. You cannot hide away in this cold forge forever. Tha'd do best to open up to me; next time it may be the manor guards. Have you coals? Have you food? Is young Annie still well?"

The reeve was big and strong, with a loud voice, red haired and bearded. We'd had little to do with him, for father had dealt with him. He was a powerful

man and could demand payment on the spot or give a little time, if he was in a generous mood.

“We shall have to face him sometime,” I whispered to William. “He’s not as bad as some; father always said so, and we’ve not a handful of grain, or a turnip left.”

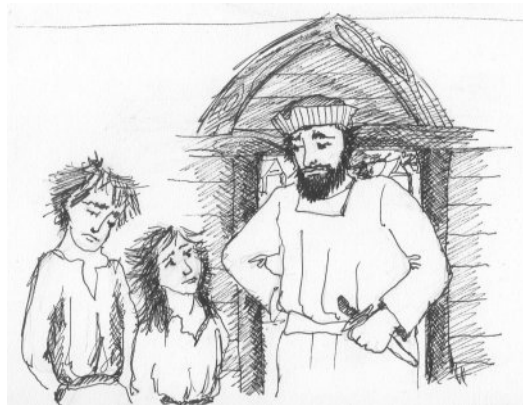
“Aye,” William agreed at last. “Nought can be worse than sitting here, with no fire and our bellies groaning for food.”

I got up from my straw pallet where I huddled beneath a rug for warmth and crept towards the door. “We hear you Mester,” I cried out, for I didn’t want the man to go away, angry.

I struggled to lift the heavy wooden bar, but William had to come over and help me, so weak I’d grown. At last we managed to push open the door, and we stood there blinking in the sudden bright light at the tall man, who came every few months to collect the rent.

“Now then,” he said. “Tha’s shown good sense. Let me come in and talk a while. ‘Tis bitter cold and tha both looks almost starved.”

He came inside and stood awkwardly in the middle of the forge, looking about at the mess of feathers and bones and iron scraps we’d allowed to pile up on the earthen floor, that mother used to keep cleanly swept.



“You’d best sit down, Mester.” William pushed forward a wooden stool. The man lowered his large frame, sitting down by father’s anvil that had seen so much heat and hammering.

“We’ve no money to pay our rent,” William spoke low, shame faced.

“Has tha wood or charcoal?” Richard asked. “Has tha supped today?”

We shook our heads. “We’ve nothing left,” William whispered. “Nothing.”

The reeve heaved a great sigh, shifted his feet and scratched his head. We could see that he was not surprised at our state. There must have been many others like us whose parents had died, as the great and terrible sickness they called the plague had once again swept across the country.

The dead-cart had come six weeks since, late at night and the old women taken away the bodies of mother and father and our two little brothers. William and I had locked ourselves up in our home, weeping and waiting for the frightening signs of sickness to appear upon us. Nobody outside would want to see or help us, we’d known that, they’d be fearful of catching the sickness themselves. Each day we’d looked carefully at each other, inspecting our underarms for lumps that might grow huge in just one day and turn black and putrid. But many days passed, and still no signs came. Slowly we’d worked our way through every scrap of food that we could find. We’d caught and killed the few chickens that scratched about the smithy. We’d finished off the oats that Mother kept in a sacking bag on the high shelf, away from rats. We’d used up all the charcoal and wood that father stacked in the corner, beside the hearth. William had spent the night before the reeve’s visit slinging stones, trying to kill the rats that scuttled about at night.

“Leave them be,” I’d told him. “Why kill them? Hasn’t there been enough death?”

“I’m going to eat them!” he’d replied.

“Now then,” the reeve suddenly spoke again. “We must decide what can be done with thee. Tha’s skinny, but I can’t see any sign of the sickness on you. Enough time has passed and there’s new servants needed up at the manor.”

“Ah no,” William shook his head. “Father gained his freedom after the first black sickness came and went. He’d not like us to go back to work at the manor.”

. The reeve stroked his chin, thoughtfully. “There’s warmth and a bed and daily meals for those who go there,” he added. “And you need not go as serfs.”

William still shook his head. Father had bought his way out of serfdom by years of hard work, and his memories of it were shameful and terrible. I kept quiet, though what the reeve offered did make me long for warmth and food.

“No,” William insisted. “Father would hate us to do that. He was teaching me his trade, so that I should be a free man, too. I can make a good strong thwitel, and Annie can make the haft.”

“Aye,” the reeve was somewhat impressed. “A thwitel is a good, handy little knife, and there will be many needing such a thing, but you haven’t the means of making a fire lad, and you cannot pay the rent to keep the forge.”

There was silence for a moment, while we all stared down at our dirty, earthen floor. Then suddenly the reeve got up and started walking about, kicking the little scraps of iron with his feet. “There’s plenty of scrap lying here,” he muttered. “Have you horn or bone to make the handles for your thwitels?” he asked.

“Yes,” I told him. “Father always kept pieces of bone. And there is one fine piece of horn left. I can carve a good round haft from it.”

“Then gather together all these scraps of iron,” he told us. “And make as many thwitels as tha can. I shall fetch charcoal, and tha must pay me later. In ten days time I go to Doncaster market for the manor lord. Tha’ll get the best prices in Doncaster, from rich travellers going up and down the Great North Road, from York to London.”

“Tha’d sell our knives for us?” William asked.

“Aye, and get the highest prices that I can.” The big man stood up to go.

We both followed him to the door. “We thank you Mester,” William whispered, his voice cracking with relief.

“There’s much hard work to be done,” the reeve told us gruffly. “I’ll be back with coals. Tha’d best get those scraps picked up and the floor swept. Now then, get on with it!”

When the reeve returned that evening with a sack of charcoal, we’d got the place clean, and a pile of heavy iron scraps ready to heat up and forge into knife blades. As well as the charcoal, he brought with him some kindling, five thin rush candles that we could light from his lantern, and a pot of cold pottage made from boiled up beans, oats and peas.

“Please give our thanks to Mistress Bradfield,” I told him, as he turned to leave.

The big man’s face crumpled just for a moment, then he answered gently. “Mistress Bradfield has gone the same way as thy parents, young Annie and my bairns too, all five of them.”

William and I both gasped, understanding then that we were not as alone in our suffering as we’d thought.

“Mester,” I asked, uncertainly. “Mester Richard. Will tha not stay and share the food tha’s brought?”

He hesitated.

“Aye,” William added. “Please stay and eat with us? We’d like it well.”

“Then I will,” he said. “Now let us get this fire going.”



The next ten days we worked through all the daylight hours and sometimes late at night. I had to work the bellows and keep the fire hot. William strained and sweated as he thrust the lumps of iron into the fire with father’s pincers, then moved quickly to the anvil, hammering fast to draw the iron out, and form a good, strong blade. Every moment I could spare from the bellows, I set to carving nice round pieces of bone to form handles, and by the time darkness fell each night, we’d made a knife. The first one was a little rough and bent, but the second one was better. Each day the blades seemed to grow stronger and straighter, and my hafts rounder and smoother. On the tenth day, we

thought that we'd produced the finest thwitel ever seen, a stout, sharp-pointed knife, with a round horn handle. It would stick neatly into a sheath, and be ready to cut meat, or wood, or leather. It might even be whipped out fast for defence, should danger threaten. Father used to boast that his thwitels had saved many a man's life.

The reeve came knocking on our door, as he did every evening, bringing us food. We had put out our little row of knives on the table for him to see. He picked up each one in turn, smiling and nodding. "This will sell, and this, and this." Then he picked up the tenth knife and held it balanced in both of his hands. "This one is as fine a knife as I have ever seen. We'll stick out for a good price. This knife deserves to be bought dearly."

The reeve stayed to eat with us again, and before he went off to his home, he asked us if we should like to go with him to Doncaster. "I shall have my own sturdy horse, and a strong pack mule," he said. "We may take turns at riding, and Annie's so light she may ride up behind me. I thought it'd maybe do thee both good to get out of Sheffield and see a little of the world."

The great smiles on our faces told him how willing we were.

"It's a day's journey there and another back," he warned.

So at dawn the following morning we set off with Richard Bradfield, taking our path alongside the gently twisting River Don.

Neither William nor I had been out of Sheffield before. We were wildly excited to see the rolling hills, and villages, and manor houses, bigger than our own. The most magnificent site was the great castle at Conisborough, with its huge strong keep and fierce guards. We stopped beneath its walls to rest awhile, and Richard bought us bread and ale.

As well as the excitement, great sadness touched us at every bend of the river, as we passed deserted forges, and cottages. There were desperate children, wandering by the riverside, trying to fish with old bent pins fastened onto twine, dressed in rags, looking thin, lost and desolate. When we reached Doncaster we were surrounded by shoving, shouting crowds; the town at least was filled with life.

Richard found a kindly pie-wife who allowed us to sleep in her lean-to; she gave us warm porridge to sup and plenty of clean straw to lie on. We got up

early next morning and set up our small row of knives on the edge of the pie-wife's stall. The Reeve went off to see to his master's business, leaving us to try to sell our wares. We worked very hard, shouting loudly and pointing out the usefulness of a good Sheffield thwitel. Many stopped to admire our perfect knife, but William insisted that it should not be sold cheaply and asked five pennies for it. The customers would frown at the price and shake their heads, then pick up one of the rougher knives and buy that instead. The day wore on and we grew tired and hungry. The pie-wife gave us one of her hot mutton pies that had broken and crumbled as it cooked. It tasted just as good as the others and with full bellies we grinned at each other, energy renewed, competing to see which of us could shout loudest.

By the time Richard returned to us, we'd sold all our knives, except the best one, and we clutched tightly onto our small purse, for we knew that we'd need every coin inside it.

"Well fancy," said Richard. "Has nobody bought that wonderful thwitel? If they don't move quick, I'll buy it from you myself."

But just at that moment the crowds seemed to part and people moved back fast, as a broad built, pock-marked fellow, came along. He was dressed in brightly dyed and patterned clothes. Around his broad waist he'd buckled a thick belt full of knives all shapes and sizes and a long fearsome looking sword.

"Here's our favourite miller come looking for a bargain," the pie-wife whispered, pulling a face and winking at us.

The miller picked up our thwitel and asked the price.

"Five pennies sir," William told him.

The man huffed. "Far too much," he said.



Another younger man wearing a good suit of livery came quietly to stand beside our customer. He bowed to the pie-wife, but then turned his attention back to the fellow who looked at our knife, his face alert, watching with interest and just a touch of a smile.

The miller held the knife balanced in his hand; then tried it in his belt, but there was little room left for it. So next he stuck it into the top of his fancy, embroidered leg hose.

“That’s a grand collection of blades tha’s got,” Richard Bradfield flattered him. “And this would be a fine useful thwitel to add to it.”

The man turned his leg this way and that, admiring the way the thwitel looked, stuck there in his hose. Then at last he put the knife back on the stall. “Three pennies,” he said.

William and I looked at each other, and we both turned to Richard for help. We were disappointed, but three pennies would be better than not selling at all, and we did really need to sell.

“Give the lad four pennies,” Richard suggested. “He’s worked mighty hard on that knife.”

The miller pulled a face at that, but then suddenly the younger man who’d been watching us all so quietly, put out an ink-stained finger to stroke the blade. “I’ll give six pennies for it,” he said.

We smiled at once, nodding our heads, but before we could make our sale, the fat miller turned red in the face, shaking his double chin. “Nay sir! You shall not! I shall give seven pennies!”

We gasped.

“Eight!” the young man spoke.

“Nine!” The miller’s face turned purple.

“Eleven!” came, the quiet reply.

The miller slapped his big hand down hard onto the wooden trestle. “A full shilling,” he roared.

At that, the young man smiled and patted the big fellow’s shoulder. “It’s yours,” he agreed. Then he bowed to us and turned away, and before we could say anything more to him, he’d vanished into the crowd.

We couldn’t believe our luck. We counted out the money that we owed to Richard, and still had enough left to buy meat and charcoal.

“Who was he?” I wondered. “The young fellow, who pushed the price up so.”

“Ah,” the pie-wife smiled. “He’s a quiet one he is, but full of surprises. I believe they call him Master Chaucer. He passes through here quite regularly, in the pay of the great Duke of Lancaster.”

“I think he’s saved our forge for us,” I smiled and kissed my brother.

He laughed back at me. “We made a full shilling thwitel,” said William proudly. “You and I Annie! We made a full shilling thwitel! If we did it once, we can do it again, and again, ...then one day sister, I swear we shall buy our forge!”

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