

A
Medieval
Christmas

by Denise Domning

Linda Abel, Publisher & Editor

Celebrated at
Graistan Castle
In the Year of Our Lord 1210





Lord Of Misrule

Freezing rain pattered on Pippin's hood, the day's frigid wind tugging at the hem of his cloak. His fingers were numb and his nose ran. So did his eyes, but not from the cold.

He scrubbed at his nose and dropped his head. Squires weren't supposed to cry. Resentment flared in him. They weren't supposed to be alone, either.

He looked up again, at the castle folk crossing the bailey between the lower and upper gate; the castle's chapel wasn't large enough to accommodate all its artisans, servants and soldiers at once so they'd taken Epiphany mass in the town church, just as they'd done for Christmas. Everyone wore their best this day. There were cloaks of scarlet and hoods of sky blue, tunics of forest green and stockings as yellow as the sun. His three fellow squires were already nearing the massive inner gateway. Simon, Will and Bertie, all of them older than his own seven years, were giggling and jostling each other the way they always did when free from their tutors' eyes.

Not one of them bothered to look behind and see if Pippin was still following them.

All of a sudden Simon whooped "I'll be there ahead of you!" and sprinted onto the cobblestone apron of the gateway. As his challenge echoed off the castle's thick gray walls Will and Bertie exploded into motion behind him, shouting and laughing as they

chased Simon. Tears made warm tracks down Pippin's cold cheeks. He lowered his head again.

How could his mother have sent him here? He hated it. Christmas here was nothing like Christmas at home. At home Mama always made him his own, special mince pies, his shaped in circles instead of like the Christ child's humble bed. True, the midnight Angels Mass on Christmas night here was spectacular. There were no townsmen at home to decorate the chapel with so many candles that the church seemed to be on fire, but it wasn't the same without Mama at his side while he knelt, her warmth against him. Maybe Mama was tired of him. Maybe, she hated him. The tears fell faster.

A blast of wind hit him with enough force to make his foot slip from the frost-browned grass that lined the path across the castle's lower yard into the icy mud that was the path this time of year. As his shoe sank deep into the muck, he tottered off balance for an instant, his arms wind milling. Someone caught him from behind, easily lifting him back onto the grassy verge.

"Steady there, lad. Best you save falling in the muck until the morrow's plow races, when we'll all be wearing mud then for certain," said Graistan's master-at-arms.

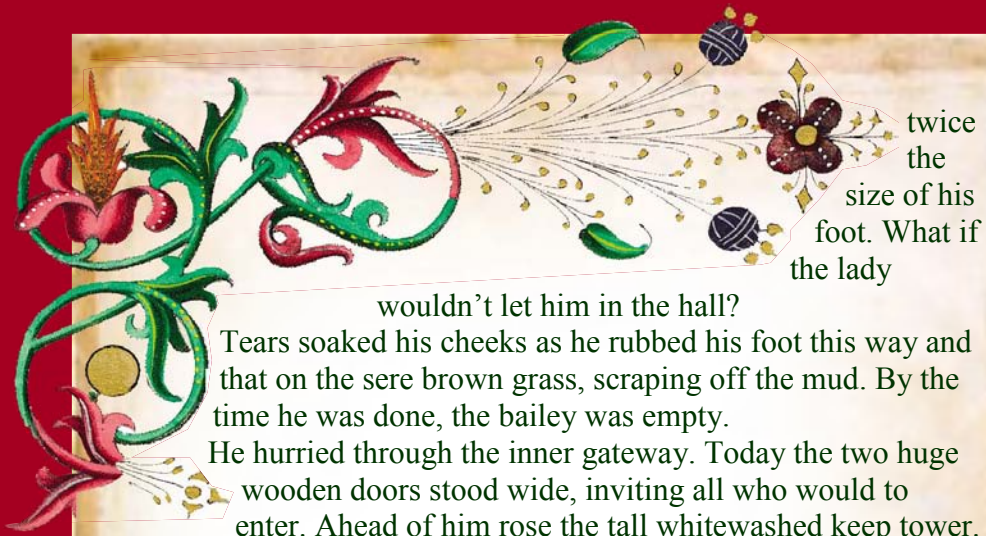
Startled, Pippin looked up at Alfric. He'd never heard the old soldier speak, except to shout orders to the townsmen and soldiers he trained.

The commoner, his hair grizzled to almost white, a pair of scars cutting across the leathery skin of his face, lifted his lips in a swift smile.

He offered Pippin a swift pat on the shoulder, then started on toward the gateway.

"Clean your shoe before you reach the hall, boy. Lady Graistan doesn't approve of those who track mud into her hall," he called back as he walked on. "I wouldn't have it on my conscience were you to miss the best meal of the year due to mud."

Pippin's heart jerked. So much mud clung to his shoe that it was



twice
the
size of his
foot. What if
the lady

wouldn't let him in the hall?

Tears soaked his cheeks as he rubbed his foot this way and that on the sere brown grass, scraping off the mud. By the time he was done, the bailey was empty.

He hurried through the inner gateway. Today the two huge wooden doors stood wide, inviting all who would to enter. Ahead of him rose the tall whitewashed keep tower.

The great hall sprang from one side of the tower. Access to both was by the stone stairway that climbed a full storey above the ground. At its top was a small door set in a pointed arch of stone that had been carved to look like trees and leaves. As always the door was ajar in its frame. Raucous music floated out of the

opening: the rhythmic pound of the tabor kept time with the bass blat of a sackbut. The hurdy-gurdy and the pipes thrummed. The mummers had arrived on Christmas Eve and been given board here in trade for nightly entertainment. Each night something different happened, music, tumbling—one of the men could keep four balls floating in the air over his head for what seemed forever!—or mummery. On the feast of the Holy Innocents, three days after Christmas, the players had performed the tale of King Herod's murder of the children, a tale which had required one of the male players to dress as the Virgin, Herself. Pippin had never before seen a man wear women's clothing.

Up the stairs he went, easing around the open door to stop at the corner of the tall wooden screen that stood between him and the hall. The wind followed him in, moaning a little in the short corridor formed between door and screen, then tugging at his cloak as it more slowly swept around the screen's corner. It danced across the hall, stirring the thick layer of rushes that covered the hall floor, until it reached the great blaze at the center of the room. Flames leapt as the fire breathed, sending snaking smoke up and out the smoke hole two storeys above it in the hall's ceiling.

Eleven days ago the Yule log, which had taken ten men to bear up into the hall, had stretched almost to this very screen. Now, after burning continuously since Christmas Eve, barely a stump protruded from the ashes.

Pippin's homesickness worsened. More people than he knew how to count crowded around the tables placed on three sides of the fire, all of them talking at once. The music blared, the hunting dogs growled and tussled near the doorway. On the walls, torches snapped as they burned. By their oily light Pippin could see the deep green of fir boughs that decorated the walls, each swag caught up in clutch of Mistletoe. The tables, each one dressed in a white cloth, wore twisted strands of holly and ivy, the occasional red berry glinting like a jewel in the firelight.

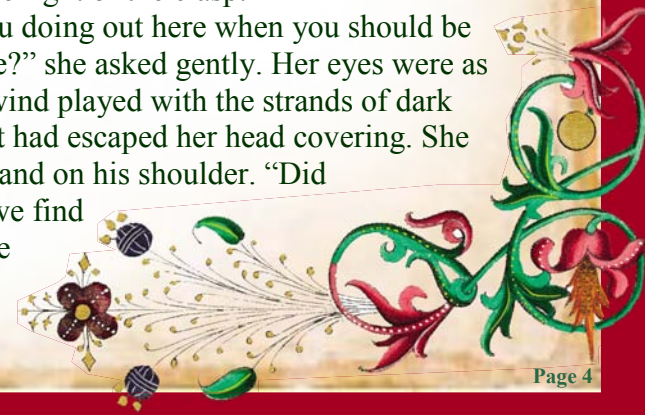
Home. He took a backward step, retreating behind the screen. All he wanted was to be at home where he knew everyone's face and even on feast days there were never more people than four times the count of all his fingers. Miserable, he put his back to the screen and sank down to crouch at its base. Leaning his face on his knees, he let his tears flow.

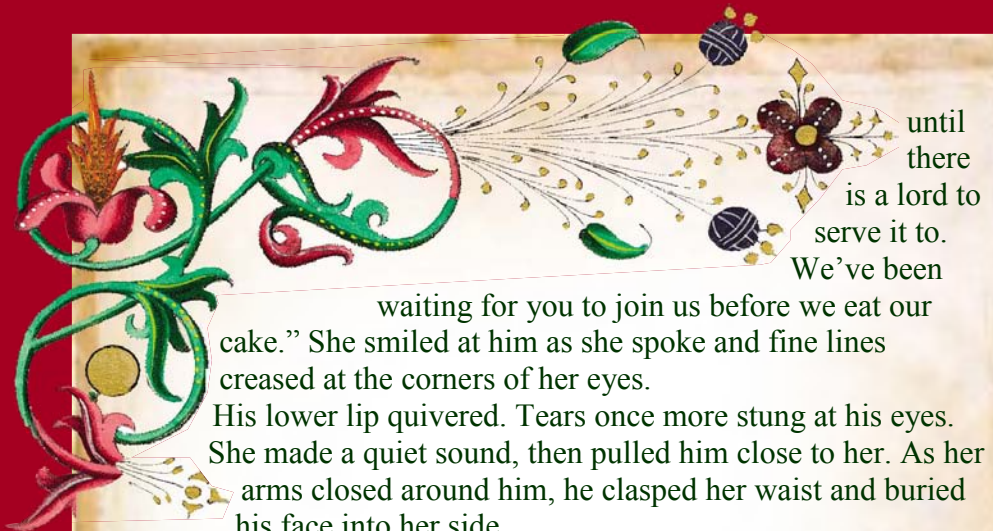
A touch on his hood startled him. He sat upright, scrubbing at his face with his sleeve, only to have panic hit him. It was his lady!

He sprang to his feet, stumbling back from her as she rose to her feet.

She looked beautiful, her face framed in her sheer white wimple. Under her thick scarlet mantle, she wore a gown made up of blue and white squares, her lord's crest embroidered at the center of the breast. A jeweled belt circled her hips, her great ring of keys hanging from the right of the clasp.

"Philip, what are you doing out here when you should be at your place at the table?" she asked gently. Her eyes were as blue as her gown. The wind played with the strands of dark hair shot with silver that had escaped her head covering. She reached out and laid a hand on his shoulder. "Did you forget? This night we find the Lord of Misrule. The boar cannot be served





until
there
is a lord to
serve it to.
We've been

waiting for you to join us before we eat our
cake." She smiled at him as she spoke and fine lines
creased at the corners of her eyes.

His lower lip quivered. Tears once more stung at his eyes.
She made a quiet sound, then pulled him close to her. As her
arms closed around him, he clasped her waist and buried
his face into her side.

"Child, child," she crooned softly, rocking him a little in her
arms. "I told your parents to wait until the new year before sending
you, but they thought you would like our holiday." Releasing him,
she took a half-step back and crooked a finger beneath his chin to
raise his gaze to hers. With her other hand she brushed hair off his
forehead and stroked her fingers down the curve of his cheek. "I
promise you, it will get easier and you will come to know us.
Mayhap even like us." She smiled again. "Now, come and take
your place."

She kept her arm around his shoulders as she led him around
the corner of the screen. She didn't release him until they reached
his place, between Will, the next youngest of the squires, and the
castle's majordomo. A single slab of day-old bread lay in front of
Pippin and Will, their plate for the feast. Each of them had their
own cake, a small wheaten roll studded with raisins and nutmeats.

"Where did you go?" Will hissed at him, as the lady joined
their lord at the center of the high table. "We thought you were
right behind us."

Pippin's lip threatened to quiver again. "Nowhere," he replied
as their lord stood, lifting his cup.

Lord Graistan was a tall man, but older even than his wife. His
beard still held hints of red that had long since departed his hair.
Despite his age, he was still powerful. Pippin had seen him knock
a younger knight out of his saddle at jousting practice.

The music died and the talking ebbed into but a voice or two.
Lord Graistan glanced about the room. "I bid you all welcome to

my hall and my home, and now you will replace me. Eat," he
commanded. "Who will be the Lord of Misrule this night?"

Each and every one of them took up their cakes, biting into it.
Pippin's tooth slipped on something hard and smooth. His eyes
widened as he fished the bean out of his mouth. "It's me!" he
cried out in surprise.

"I have it!"

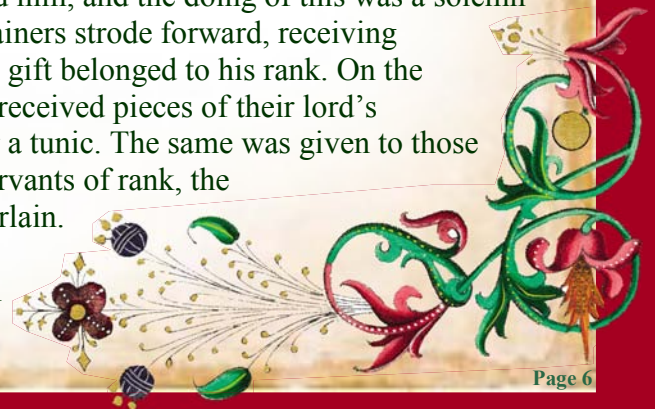
Beside him, his fellow squires groaned in disappointment.
Pippin didn't hold it against them. Much. Lady Graistan came
and led him to head of the room as his lord vacated his great
chair. Once Pippin was given his staff and his mantle, he made
Simon bear both first Will, then Bertie once around the room on
his back. Then he made them his knights and the four of them
wreaked havoc on all and sundry, asking for songs, dances and
even acts of tumbling from their betters, including all their tutors.
Not one of his elders complained or chided, not this night.

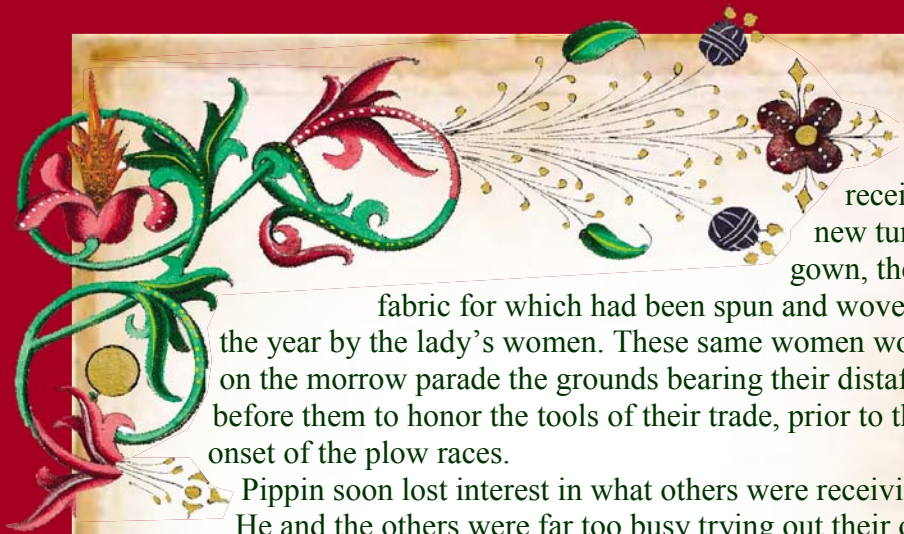
Instead, they but laughed and did as they were told.

The boar, hunted down the week before by the lord and his
knights, was served on a great plank of wood, borne around the
room so all could see the night's prize course. After that, they ate
roasted swan, stewed capons, provided by the townsmen who
held the right to feast at the lord's table, and eels and songbirds.
Hours later the feast ended with frumenty—fruit pudding—and,
of course, mince pies. Even though none of the pies were round,
Pippin liked them as much as the ones his mother made.

As the hour grew late it was time for Pippin to return rule of
the hall to his lord. Just as the Magi had brought gifts to the
Christ child, the time had come for the lord to give his yearly
gifts to those who served him, and the doing of this was a solemn
rite. One by one, his retainers strode forward, receiving
whichever time honored gift belonged to his rank. On the
whole, his knights each received pieces of their lord's
clothing, be it a cloak or a tunic. The same was given to those
among the household servants of rank, the
majordomo and chamberlain.

The rest, including the
castle's men-at-arms, all





received a new tunic or gown, the fabric for which had been spun and woven over the year by the lady's women. These same women would on the morrow parade the grounds bearing their distaffs before them to honor the tools of their trade, prior to the onset of the plow races.

Pippin soon lost interest in what others were receiving. He and the others were far too busy trying out their own gifts. Each of them had received a new wooden practice sword. This wasn't two roughly shaped pieces of wood lashed together with leather bindings like Pippin had brought with him from home. No, his weapon was a miracle of craftsmanship. It looked just like a real sword, the grip and handle tediously crafted so they fitted perfectly into the blade.

"Pip, watch my back!" cried Simon, circling around Pippin as Will and Bertie came at him, swords drawn.

Pippin didn't even mind that Simon cut short his name. As Bertie and Simon battled behind him, he laughed and held up his sword to meet Will's stroke. Wood clattered on wood and Will stumbled back, his face alive with surprise. "You're stronger than you look."

"I am," Pippin replied, his sword at the ready. Joy burnt in his heart at Will's words. It was true. He was stronger than most boys his age.

His mama had always said so.

"But not stronger than me," Will cried, his expression twisting in mock threat. "I'll drive you back to the wall!" He swung at Pippin, who ducked, still guarding Simon's back.

"Nay, you won't," Pippin retorted, fending off another of Will's blows.

"Good man," Simon called over his shoulder. "Keep him at bay."

And Pippin did. By the evening's end, which was almost morning's onset, he was certain there could never be a Twelfth Night as wonderful as this one had been. As he and the others finally found their rest on the pallets at the end of their lord's bed, Pippin couldn't wait until their lessons began again. One day he'd be a great knight, maybe as great a knight as the old earl of Pembroke had been, just as his mother had promised when he left his father's manor to come to his new home.

**A Merry Medieval Christmas
& Happy Holidays
to you and yours
from Denise, Linda and
Linda's four-legged friends
who bring you
The Medieval Chronicle**

