

Minda grows up



Merlin Smallbone

The adventure begins. First of five volumes.

Minda grows up



An abandoned duke's daughter with claw hand, club foot and bad eye grows up to be loved by her friends and feared by her enemies. Minda brings her charming personality, guile and determination to the sometimes violent Middle Ages as she builds her strength, overcomes her disabilities, forges bonds between blacksmiths, exposes criminals and builds a team of devoted servants and friendly allies to protect her. One moment she is a legend that fights lions, the next she's dealing with the practical emotion of giving a murdered child back to its mother.

She will need all her inner strength and talent for survival in *Minda inherits*, *Minda falters* and subsequent books as she becomes one of the most powerful women in mediaeval Europe.

This is a first novel by Peter Fox who was amazed by the keyboard-driving energy and emotion that arrived on the screen. "Minda is a hero the girl's way: It is not about quests and fantasy, simply dealing with what has to be done as women always do in ways the men can't."



Preview

The full version of [Minda Grows Up](#) by Merlin Smallbone is available in the following formats.

- Paperback A5 315 pages
- PDF A5
- PDF A5 2-column (for limited width readers)

Go to merlinsmallbone.shop for purchasing options or search for [Minda Grows Up](#) at lulu.com

Warnings for self-appointed, tight-laced guardians of others morals:

- This book contains necessary violence which is intended to be shocking. *What's the point otherwise?*

More shocking for SATLGOOM, this book may contain subversive ideas, such as women are naturally strong, men don't have to act stupid, being different is an opportunity to show the rest how to make the world better. Wisdom is a thing to strive for, cherish and pass on. Religion can be a corrupting cult and God isn't all he's made out to be.

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by

Merlin
Smallbone

First book in series

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Merlin Smallbone is a pen name of Peter Fox.

Author's note: The horrible scene on page 253 is necessary as it is just one page before the defining page of the book. If you're easily disturbed by graphic violence, I am, then there's an explicit warning printed before you get to it.

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Glossary

Bantam	Fighting cock
Bill (Tool-bill)	Hardened metal spike
Billet metal	Sausage-shaped piece of wood or metal
Borseholder	Senior person in small village
Butts	Archery targets
Butt-law practise	Requirement for regular archery
Espada	Rapier sword
Forestall	Illegally buying goods before they get to open market.
Gleaning field	Picking loose grains from a harvested field
Gleaning-bell	Rung to signal start of gleaning
Haysel	Hay harvest
Hundred county	Administrative area smaller than a county
Lorimer	Brass founder and harness maker
Manor	Smallest area of civil administration.
Mark	Unit of financial accounting
Midden	Refuse heap
Quench	To harden steel by rapid cooling. Typically by plunging into water
Rake	String of pack animals.
Reeve	Civic official in charge of law and order
Solar	Private room
Stock	Wooden bit of a weapon to hold
Temper	Precise and gentle heating of steel to toughen it

Travus	Part of a smithy where horses are shod
Wattle	Hurdles typically woven of hazel or willow used for penning livestock.

1 Rejected

In the dead light of the November overcast a messenger gallops along the watery roads. Every few miles shaggy thatch and greening walls of the next village marks his lonely progress. Deserted fields give way to dark woods that have witnessed hundreds of years of wet leaf-fall.

The Duke of Avel received the news stoically. He had really wanted a second son, still, a girl could be married-off to advantage. The news about the mother was worrying. He really liked Juliana and was almost moved to return to the castle but reasoned there was nothing he could do to help her. They would continue the hunt. "Collins! Ride to Lord Humbrigg's. Tell him we'll be stopping for the night. Messenger! Return to Bartonbry with this proclamation. "The Duke is delighted at the birth of his daughter. In seven days there will be a feast-day to celebrate.'" Ha ha. It would be interesting to see what the leading citizens brought as presents. Gold, perhaps something sparkly for a daughter. The messenger hesitated but then turned and departed through the silent shrouds of mist.

Minda wasn't expected to live much longer than her mother. With a claw foot, deformed hand and messed-up face it was presumed she would weaken fast. The Duke thought of using Juliana's death as an excuse to cancel his proclamation but then with his rogue's

insight realised that a brave face would make his people generously sympathetic. The child wouldn't be around long so that would take care of itself. It was all very sad but he couldn't help that. Ellery of Worton had a nice unmarried daughter, or there was Lord Radley's widow with lots of money. Ho hum. Plenty of possibilities, but first he must work on his martyr's face.

In time the Duke remarried and Minda grew into the most cheerful infant anyone could wish for. As an embarrassment she was sent to his furthest estate to be forgotten. For the next fifteen years Minda enjoyed a carefree life combining the privilege that comes with high birth with the simplicity of being brought up in a village. While she was happy and growing strong, the dukedom was decaying and ragged patches of lawlessness spoiled the kingdom.

This is the first part of the story of how Minda fought many things to become the most powerful woman in Europe. Loved by all but without a husband. Trusted and caring but brutally ruthless. Strong in so many ways but suffering bouts of depression. Brilliantly successful but always threatened. A magical legend made from a lonely girl.

2 Selenden

The Duke's estate at Selenden was not much more than a manor house with a handful of farms in a gentle valley. Woods descended the flanks of the chalk hills, fields and orchards took the gentler ground with the little river swinging between the meadows in the bottom. The river powered mills and floated barges carrying livestock, timber, stone and bricks to villages strung along its twisting thread.

The Duke's agent, Mister Hesquery, looked after the productivity of the estate while his wife cleverly managed the accounts to ensure there was never a surplus shown in them. Baby Minda was accepted by the childless Hesquerys because they had no choice but she soon stole their hearts. Appalling ugly and destined to be a cripple she became the focus of their love. Everyone got used to Mister Hesquery harking-on about Minda's abilities at reading and sums. Mrs Hesquery would give daily progress reports on walking and screaming with pleasure when drawn round the yard in a dog cart. Enthusiasm and love is contagious, so a shoemaker's wife soon drew her husband's attention to the matter of Minda's club foot. Boot and shoe makers are prone to err on the solid and heavy side so it was fortunate that a basket weaver was instructed by his wife to try something lighter and springier. Minda's squashed face soon had an almost permanent, if lopsided, smile and her big brown eyes and blunt nose weren't that bad really.

Occasionally the special boot chaffed but with attention from the combined forces of the shoemaker, basket maker and harness maker she could roam all day. She tried to count the trees in the wood of soft smells and sighing tops that she dreamed of owning when she was a real duchess. Lying in a nest of the heathland heather she wondered if the tiny sounds of the shoals of jumping grasshoppers was chattering like the birds to tell the news. What about the wind? He was a messenger you must feel and watch his clouds if you wanted to stay dry. She made up conversations between the nodding bank-side flowers and the ears and mouths of the river's whorls. 'I'm going away. – Where are you going? – To the sea and then the ocean – Come back! – No I can't come back – Take my petals with you to Araby. Farewell.'

Her boot wasn't good enough for chasing running and skipping so Minda didn't play ordinary games with the other children. Ghostly family ties gave her the privilege of being excused the constant chores of her contemporaries. Her claw hand and clumsy foot made her abandon the pastimes of young ladies such as dancing, embroidery and playing an instrument. Instead Minda would smile and ask questions and take herself wherever she wanted. She would be welcomed, given a glass of milk and allowed to stay and watch or try her hand, as far as limited dexterity allowed, at whatever craft was being done. Spinning, dyeing, weaving. Ploughing and harrowing was boring, wet and hard on her leg. Harvest was itchy. She physically couldn't tie sheaf-knots or

pole-fork but she was allowed to ride the horses between the fields and the stack yard. After harvest comes the gleaning when the women and children pick up loose ears of corn from the fields. When she found out about this back-breaking work she kept away. It says a lot about the simple wisdom of these folk that a duke's daughter, destined to be a nobleman's wife, should be strengthening her muscles, making friends with peasants and happily discovering simple labour as one of them. Being hearty, curious and privileged she could investigate the activities of the farms as a spectator and pester the craftsmen and women at their work. She took a dislike to animals, they could crush you against a wall or knock you over. Boskew the head horseman was a funny chap, he taught her horse-riding by telling the horse! "When she pull together you better slow down Stefan." The dust of the mills made her choke. Steady grumbling thunder of the gears and stones shaking the floor signified a power she didn't trust. The millers were queer people too: The windmill was always in a hurry and angry if she held up his work for a second. The water miller was more kindly but seemed to start every sentence with a 'Don't'. "Don't ever go near the weir", "Don't touch a sack it might fall on you", and the ones that didn't begin with "Don't" started with 'Ask me'. "Ask me if I ground more barley that day than anyone before" or "Ask me if I know the answer to that one." She decided mills and millers were best left alone.

Smithing

The smithy was different, it became her favourite spot. It was a busy gossip-

house where news was discussed and rumour spread. Shoeing horses was the main entertainment for onlookers but Minda was entranced by the magic of making many other things out of sun-bright iron. The urgent sound of the bellows' breath putting life into the roaring coals, the heartbeat thumps of rough billeting then the musical smack-clang of shaping and finally the sizzle of the quench told a story. She could listen to that story all day. Dunstin the smith would let her work the bellows to turn the fire's blood-red bed into gasping claws of transparent flame. She was allowed to swing the grindstone wheel to give sheaves of red and gold shooting stars as he ground moon-silver edges onto black blades.

Blacksmiths are generally easy-going. The first thing they learn is that a bit of metal doesn't care how angry you are. They deal with many customers in different circumstances all of whom respect his immediate application even if they can't pay today. Everyone knows not to fall-out with a smith. From Minda's point of view Dunstin had another special qualification, an eyepatch. The hearth-light turned his features orange with shifting shadows giving him a special power to make things with one constant eye, one force of mind, one storm of blows turning a billet into a knife or a coultter or, and this she thought was a special revelation of magical arts, a springy and sharp wool shears from a single piece in front of her very eyes! She desperately wanted a patch like Dunstin's for her squinty eye but was worried that you couldn't just give yourself an eyepatch, there must be

something official that adults whispered about. Nevertheless when nobody was looking she'd hold her hand across her face in front of the mirror and imagine the power she'd have.

Even though Minda was growing up strong, the sort of strength you need to hammer iron is beyond most men let alone a ten-year old girl. Dunstin let her blow the bellows, fetch the coals and do the reckoning for each job. Her deformed hand wasn't good at gripping the smooth iron handle of the quench tongs but Dunstin's eye for detail and exact knowledge of how much strength to use in every situation covered her hand with his enough to give that little extra force to hold them without making Minda feel a failure. Later he said to her. "I wonder if a little glove would give you more grip? You could ask Karel the harness-maker what he thinks." For him, like the Hesquerys, Minda was the son he didn't have.

Arm wrestling

Childrens games follow each other as the different flowers of the spring and summer have followed each other for as long as time. Arm-wrestling took its turn to be the game of the moment. Naturally the boys were fighting cocks. Minda stood back and watched with an air of superiority calculated to annoy the young Herculeses. When this sport was nearing the natural end of its popularity she called-out Constanz the generally acknowledged champion.

"Are boys stronger than girls Constanz?"

"Of course."

"Well prove it!"

"Easy – George you show her."

"Why not you Constanz? Are you afraid of being beaten by a girl?" She carefully rolled up her sleeves to show her smithing muscles.

"No – Err I don't want to hurt you with my strength."

"But I insist Constanz."

"Alright miss but if you get hurt I can't help it."

"Right you are. And if I hurt you? No hard feelings eh?"

"Pah! – Come on."

On the first grip Constanz yelped. "Ow! Let go of my hand."

"Oh sorry am I hurting you?"

"You're not supposed to crush it."

"Oh dear I don't seem to know the rules." she said innocently as Constanz nursed his hand. "So it's just gentle – Like lovers holding hands is it Constanz?" He blushed and the boys sizzled at his embarrassment. "Be quiet! It's not Constanz's fault he has lover's hands – Is it Constanz?"

"I don't have lover's hands!"

"Let's look at them Constanz – Come on show me." He held out his hands. "Ohh yes. Lovely lover's hands" she said stroking them. "To think I nearly hurt your pretty hand!"

"Come on." he said "I've let you have your girly chit-chat now I'll put you in your place."

"Oh you won't hurt me will you Constanz?" She resumed the classic arm-wrestling pose, clasped his hand, gave it a wiggle and smiled at the spectators. On the word 'Go' she smashed his arm back.

"I wasn't ready!"

"That's your fault lover boy."

Eye patch

Sometimes on a Sunday Minda would read bible stories to Dunstin and his wife May. They liked to discuss the stories imagining people they knew in them. Who was like Noah? Or his wife? Dunstin was May's Adam and she was his Eve of course, but most villagers were unknowingly used to play parts.

Minda changed the subject. "Dunstin? Do you think I could have an eyepatch like yours?"

Dunstin paused. "It depends if you want one I suppose."

"People look at my squinty eye all the time not the good one. It bothers me."

"What about seeing out of it? Don't worry about the others. Is it good for seeing?"

"Well yes and no."

"How much?"

"Err – I don't know."

"Let's go out the back and see."

"Put your hand over your good eye. Now what can you see?"

"The chickens but not their feathers, the sty, the orchard – but it's blurred – and there's rainbows."

"What about your ring. Look at that."

"That's messy."

"Now change hands and eyes. Can you see everything still?"

"Yes – That's clear. I can see each log in the log pile."

"And what about your ring?"

"Yes that's clear."

"Let's think. If May made you a patch you could wear it in the forge to try it out without anyone knowing."

"Why do I care about people knowing Dunstin?"

"Because the first attempt might not go right and people might laugh. I don't let people watch me practising and they don't see me make mistakes as I learn. That way they have confidence in my workmanship. For you they would snigger behind your back. Come tomorrow and we'll fit you up."

"Please may I ask – if you don't mind – why do you wear a patch Dunstin?"

"An accident in the forge when I was a child. Do I tell you never to pick up a hammer when I'm not looking and never ever leave anything lying about."

"Yes."

"One day I was playing with a hammer and a piece of bar while father was out. It was overhanging the anvil edge so it flew up into my face."

"How was that?" Minda was confused.

"Look I'll show you. Take that spade and lay it over the top bar of the gate. Now when you pull down on the handle what will happen to the spade end?"

"It will fly up."

"And then what?"

"I don't know."

"Right, I'm ready to catch it. Don't let go of the handle whatever you do. Now heave down. Heave!" The far end of the spade flew up as expected but kept coming back over the gate towards and above Minda. Dunstin caught it by the shaft before it could fly out of control.

"Now if that was a big nail and you hit the near end with a hammer it would fly spinning towards you before you could blink. That's why in a forge you never use the near edge of the anvil."

"I'm sorry Dunstin."

"Nothing to be sorry about miss. What's happened has happened."

Archery

There were two outcomes of this episode. Firstly Minda began wearing an eye patch. It didn't make her pretty but she wore it boldly. Secondly she became fascinated by flying bits of metal. She started by making a knife fly off the edge of table into the rafters at home when nobody was around. Then she discovered the spring of a knife blade could do the same thing. Having been found out by Mr. Hesquery he insisted she leave such dangerous sports alone and suggested archery. Another special glove and binding on the bow meant she could hold it at full draw. Her strength

was now being remarked on by the adults as well as feared by the children.

Here was something she enjoyed and could practise at on her own week after week. After the usual targets she used a sack swinging from a tree then tried for crows and fish.

When she knew she was good enough it was time to show off. She may have only one good eye, only one good foot and only one good hand but by determination Minda was going to show she was just as good as the local archers. There was supposed to be regular Sunday archery practise but it had fallen into occasional bursts of sport rather than regular duty. Minda went to the Reeve to ask him if there could be a competition.

"Mr. Hesquery didn't demand we did it every week and so we did it less and less often. It is difficult to enforce when the Duke never visits."

"Well I'm the Duke's daughter and will have to stand in for him until he can appear. He is very busy. When can you arrange it?"

"Next Sunday morning if it pleases your duchnessness."

"Please make it so. Also make it known that anyone who can't better me, a one-eyed, one-footed, one-handed girl will be fined sixpence. Best put the butts up on Saturday or before for those who want extra practise."

No official likes opinionated outsiders disturbing the established torpor by imposing tasks so the Reeve hurried to consult with Mr. Hesquery. "Minda has asked me to set up the butts on Sunday

Godfrey. She also demands anyone who can't beat her will be fined sixpence."

"What's the problem with that Simon?"

"Well, although I have tried, you know I have tried, I have come to you and asked your aid to bring defaulters to practise, and without success. So what good will restarting it now do?"

"Have you sold the targets Simon?"

"No. A couple of hours work and they will be serviceable".

"Good, so there's no practical reason why you can't do as Minda asked. Excuse me Simon I'll fetch her." After a minute Mr. Hesquery returned with Minda. "Can you tell us why you've come to consult me Reeve?"

"Err – It was just that the Butts-law has fallen into disuse and I'm sure you can see it from my position. I don't want to revive something that is dead on the word of a girl – er begging your pardon your duchnessness. Sometimes it is better to let sleeping dogs lie."

"Thank you Reeve. As far as you know the Butts-law still stands, it is only disused due to neglect."

"Yes Mr. Hesquery that's correct."

"So Minda has asked you to carry out the law."

She butted in: "Ordered. I commanded him as the duke's daughter."

Mr. Hesquery took a deep breath. "I think you *asked* Minda. And being fined a sixpence for not being as good as you isn't in the Butt-law. We will have a grown-up talk about asking and commanding in a minute. Now Reeve,

have you any particular objection to Minda's suggestion?"

"No. I was just checking before making fools of everybody."

"Fools Simon?"

"Er – It would be foolish to demand and be rebuffed by insolence."

"How about if we add 'One shilling to every man who can beat Minda' That makes it fair, and gives a sporting incentive."

"I shall do it then and the butts will be up by Friday afternoon for any who want to practise."

"I'll provide a Goose as prize for the shoot-off. Thank you Reeve." said Mr. Hesquery.

"Thank you Reeve." said Minda "Do you want any help setting up?"

"No thank you miss I'll manage. Thank you for asking miss."

When the Reeve had gone Mister Hesquery realised he'd got a lot to say to Minda without knowing how to say it. "You are the best daughter anyone could wish for. Come here and hold me. Look you're taller than me now. And sharper than I'll ever be. Mrs Hesquery and me have looked after you for over fourteen years. Every day has been a pleasure to both of us." The light faded from his face. "Soon you'll be grown up."

"Mister Hesquery?"

"Call me Godfrey – You're as good as a princess now."

"Mister Hesquery – sorry it's habit – Godfrey – no that doesn't sound right – Mister Hesquery. Dear – very dear Mister Hesquery – dear father for all it matters – why can't I command the Reeve? I'm the Duke's daughter."

"Because darling, a duke's daughter is just a duke's daughter. Not even a duchess. You don't have any authority to command anybody."

"But when I asked he called me 'duchnessness!'"

"That's ignorance. He means well and was just covering his back. People don't like being reminded of their duty by cocky girls."

"But I do have authority."

"Listen Minda. Listen very carefully. Have I ever – in fifteen years – been cross with you?"

"No."

"Occasionally very cross but I've tried not to show it. You've seen me very disappointed but not angry. Well that truce is over! You're old enough to understand anger. I'm not angry now but if you ever – ever – ever in the rest of your life demand anything instead of asking for it then I will find you and haunt you – and you'd better believe it! Anything that can be demanded should be earned if you want to keep it. Respect is a good example. Do you understand?"

"A bit."

"On Sunday you will be shooting against the village men. If you beat any of them – and I'm sure you will – then they will give you respect. You will have earned their chagrin at being beaten by a cripple. They will be viciously mocked

when word gets around and you will have your fun at their expense. Ha! And you've taken a weeks wages off them – how many of them can afford that? ..Oh dear it gets complicated. Right! Suppose John Noake owes you sixpence that he hasn't got. Now what do you do?"

"Wait I suppose until he has got it."

"If you were the Duke he'd demand it and John Noake's children would starve. Is that what you want as the result of a little girl's archery competition?"

"No."

"So what do you – *you* do?"

"I don't know."

"Find out."

"I don't know how."

"Yes you do. Don't get too worried. I'm only teaching you the facts of life. Now who do you know to ask? How about Dunstin? Why not put the problem to him?"

"But it's my problem not his. He doesn't know about that sort of thing."

"If he had a problem would you mind if he asked you?"

"No. But what do I know about anything?"

"You'd be surprised. One day you'll have estates of your own and always be needing advice and having to give it. Why do you think the Reeve came to me? To ask for advice of course. Here I'll give you a hint. Tell Dunstin I know the answer but won't let on. That way you can pretend that I am the problem."

"But you're not the problem."

"Exactly. Tell me in your own words what the problem is."

"Er – The Duke's daughter is demanding money from a family that will starve if I take it."

"And why is it a problem?"

"Because to me is just my pride but to a family it is their food for a week."

"Come to my arms again and hug me and kiss me daughter."

"Why do you twist me so? Can't you just tell me the answers?"

"So you will know about being twisted. A rope is twisted for strength, and I expect if you ask Dunstin he'll tell you that iron has to be beaten before it can be strong. You need to be strong. Really strong. As strong as iron. You need to be stronger than any of us here and we need you to be stronger. One day your strength as a powerful lady will protect us."

"I don't see how."

"There are two reasons why you need to know how to command."

"But you said I shouldn't command things but earn them."

"*Demand* and *command* are different. Demand is to use rank. Command is to use loyalty. You are surrounded here by people who would protect you because they are loyal to a charming rejected child who must be warm and charming because her father is so cold and unpleasant. And you're clever and strong as well. You can do reckoning and writing and you don't demand things."

Minda had often thought about her role in the world, how she should behave, who should be her friends, how to achieve things, what made people befriend her, where unnecessary risks were, why a bit of consideration, if you could think of it, went a long way. Also deep, very deep, inside her: What was this thing of stone called fear?

"The Duke could take you away from here tomorrow. If he says you must marry some horrible courtier then you have to do it. While you are here you are a sort of queen of the country, but if you are at the Duke's town of Bartonbry then you are nobody with no friends. Five bulls on the target won't make a pennyweight difference. I will leave you to twist over that first thing. Secondly this dukedom, the whole kingdom perhaps, has lost its backbone. Even in Selenden we don't bother with archery and the Reeve does a little smuggling. Here we keep in profit and the harvests have been good but in other parts of the kingdom there is decay and bands of outlaws. Sooner or later our part of the world will become plagued by crime and death in all its forms. You are strong. You know the people of the land and you have commanded since you could walk. As a powerful lady you will be able to hunt the killers of prosperity, for without prosperity there is no happiness. Challenging the men of Selenden to archery is the first step on that road. That's why I'm crying. You've just made that first step in the wicked wide world."

Minda was confused by this. She had never known a world that wasn't peaceful, never really thought of men fighting, never known starvation. Her

idea of fear was something inanimate that fell on you if you weren't careful. If the world was so full of misery and danger then that was just the thing she didn't want in her bit of it.

"I'm lost. Do you want me to do something?"

"We will have more talks. Let's see what happens on Sunday. No! We'll sort out how to deal with taking money from peasants now. There are many more steep steps for you to climb now you've started."

"So now I'm an adult."

"Yes I'm afraid so. Don't worry dearest. I know you Minda. You will work away at difficulties."

"I don't know where to start."

"You already have."

"Life is suddenly becoming very interesting father. It's like you've just given me a new journal with some of the pages already written which I can't turn over yet."

Minda asked the Reeve to announce that she wasn't legally permitted to fine anyone for anything but she would still give a shilling to anyone who could beat her. She had worked this out for herself, checked it with Dunstin and agreed it with Mister Hesquery. By being closely involved with the reckoning of the estate's finances Minda had discovered that the Hesquerys were putting a portion of the estate's profits aside into a secret account for her. Her original plan was to be as good as half the competition and break-even, now she was bound to

lose something overall. Still that was a price worth paying.

The butts-field behind the church was crowded. A lot of last minute practise was going on with friends heckling and jeering. There was good-humour, rumour and anticipation. Mister Hesquery called for silence and spoke. "It is too long since we had an archery competition here. Who can tell when we might need to fight outlaws at an hour's notice? There is no fine for a low score. There is one silver shilling to anyone who can beat Minda. There is a goose for the champion. Are all the archers ready Reeve?"

"Seventeen men, six boys and one girl Mister Hesquery."

"I too have fletched my arrows. Years ago I could score three eyes but today I fear my aim may be less good. Might I start to show you all that an old man is not afraid to pick up a weapon?"

"A brave gesture to be first in the field Mister Hesquery."

Mister Hesquery took his bow. Smiled at the audience. "This takes me back thirty years." he quipped. Taking his stance he aimed and loosed. All the arrows hit the target and he was awarded a round of applause when the scorer announced seventeen. When each archer had finished they picked a wooden tile from a bucket which told the next one to fire. Thus the order was random and nobody knew when they would be called to the line. Minda knew she should score about 30 but already after five shooters there were two 28s and a 30. She hadn't reckoned on the strain of waiting, especially not knowing when... "Minda

next". To her surprise the spectators gave an encouraging cheer as she stepped up to the line. This was the moment. She had to shut the sound and tensions out and make her first shot count. She aimed and in her mind's eye saw a rabbit at the centre, she was hungry and loosed. On the spot! Now she aimed at an imaginary crow and scored another eye. Now a duck and another. What else could she aim at? Wood pigeon. She took her time waiting for it to materialise in her mind and loosed to a fourth eye. Twenty-eight. The crowd couldn't remain silent when there was the possibility of a straight five. It was Minda's turn to quip. "This takes me back thirty seconds." As the banter died down she notched her last arrow and chose to aim at – there was no picture in her mind to aim at – she'd have to think of something – her secret was to have a real thing to judge the scale. At last an apple and she loosed but too quickly and only scored 4. The crowd sighed at the missed straight-five then came the congratulations and clapping. She was too upset at becoming flustered to take much notice. Before she'd had time to pick the lot for the next archer Dunstin had picked her up and sat her on his hefty shoulders. The anger of the rushed last arrow was forgotten as the crowd renewed their cheering. The Reeve interrupted. "Very well done Miss but the goose is not yours yet. Please pick a lot."

In fact the next competitor, an unknown lanky yellow-haired youth scored a straight-five in quick time without a glance at the crowd. The crowd applauded but there was a sense of disappointment that Minda's glory was so short-lived. Minda had prepared for

this. She wanted to be friends with people who were interested in the same things as she was and here was her chance. She congratulated him. "That was fast. I wish I could shoot like that. I don't know you."

"I have heard about you miss, and you did really well. My father has made me practise since I was six so I should be good. I'm Henry Trentchard."

"Pleased to meet you Henry. Where do you live?"

"Trowstead miss. Twelve and a half miles away."

"And you'll have to carry a goose all the way back!"

"There's three more to go yet miss. It might be a only half a goose."

Henry got the goose to himself. Together they shared the glory.

Mister Hesquery was speaking to a tall white-haired man. "Your Henry has filled your pot in more ways than one today."

"Yes. 'Tis a proud moment."

"Will you eat with us Harry? I think we should talk about the future."

"We will. The future is stormy and the sheep are spread all over the moor."

"Shepherds we both are. I think I have a shepherdess for you."

"The Duke's daughter?"

"Let us talk about this in private."

After the excitement Minda just wanted to go home but it was nice of some of those that she'd beaten to shake her

hand and congratulate her on her skill. Some even said they would practise a bit more if time allowed. One of the village girls came up to her and asked her if anyone could be an archer. "Yes but you need strength and patience."

"So it's only – special girls that can do it?"

"I'm afraid so. But look at my hand." She removed her glove and showed the girl her deformed hand. "I can't do sewing with a thing like this – so you'd beat me at that. You'd beat me at running."

This seemed to make up for the disappointment of being denied archery. "Well done Minda for beating all those boys. Can I call you Minda – that's a lovely name."

"Boys have got other things to do as well so they don't always have the time to practise."

"It's still good to beat them. If I ever have a cripple baby girl – I mean any girl – I'll call her Minda after you."

"That's very nice. I must go home now." Minda slowly left the crowd entertaining itself and headed home. She'd done what she wanted but somehow victory wasn't very glorious. Henry was interesting. How quickly he stuck the eye full of five arrows. That was amazing.

Leaving Selenden

"Minda, please read this letter to your father."

My Lord Your Grace, for nearly fifteen years I and my wife have had the honour of caring for your daughter Minda. She has grown into a strong and intelligent woman who can reckon, read and write. She cannot sew, weave, embroider or play an instrument and is one-eyed and deformed in the face. She can fashion iron in the smithy to fine skill and has beaten many of the local men at archery today. She can shoot marvellously well even with one eye. She will make a wonderful huntress and to that end I am putting her in the care of Harold Trentchard of Trowstead-Underwold who will teach her the arts of the chase, traverse and reading the land. Also to visit steadings and manors to allow her to exercise her noble manners which she is beginning to assume with a stylish swagger she doesn't know she has yet.

"Who is Harold Trentchard?"

"Henry's father."

"What's a 'stylish swagger'?"

"How you tease and bully together."

"I don't bully anyone Godfrey. I listened to what you said about demand and command."

Mister Hesquery laughed. "You bully and tease like the old blind beggar cat young lady. You just don't know you're doing it. And I love you for it. Come here and hug me for you must leave this evening. Mrs Hesquery is very sad, please comfort her. Every day you've been with us has been a joy but now you must take your first

steps into the whole world. I'm sad too – but proud of you. Really proud. Tomorrow Selenden will be telling all the other villages the news that an abandoned girl cripple child who they nickname 'the ox' beat them all and we'll all be proud of you."

"Ox!"

"I'm afraid so. It's not nice but that's people for you. Most aren't very clever."

"Does Dunstin call me an ox?"

"No of course not. It's just the ones that think you're strong, stupid and ugly and there can't be many of those left after today."

After a while Minda said "Why did you tell me?"

"See, you are intelligent. Possibly the cleverest person in this village as well as the best archer. I would have told you why anyway. You will always be meeting people or making enemies who are ignorant or want to hurt you. If I tell you now then you will be prepared in the future. They will still throw darts at you but you'll have a shield."

"Will I come back?"

"I hope so. You've been playing like a boy with a fort and wooden soldiers. I know all about your experiments with nests of wicked spring knives. Now you're going to learn about real fighting. In that letter I've told the Duke what I think he wants to hear, but this Dukedom and the whole Kingdom need leaders who can fight. Fight outlaws and foreigners and fight the fear that these bring. That means killing men not rabbits and it means men trying to kill you. You're going to learn how kill without being killed. Harry Trentchard is

the man for the job. You will have a really hard time with him. He might wake you up in the middle of the night and make you prepare your own horse then take you to the forest and make you walk back through icy streams and drifts of snow to show you what's it's like if you don't have a horse because it wasn't prepared properly or you lost it. Then he'll take you visit a local lord where you're expected to be a perfectly behaved duke's daughter, and then to another manor where you frighten them by demanding a look at their tax rolls. You've got a lot of thunder and lightning ahead." Minda was silent. Mister Hesquery continued. "Harry will look after you. He knows what he's doing. We, the whole Kingdom may need you. You are the steel which will take the hardest temper and so become the sharpest blade."

"I don't understand."

"There is this room, then this house, then this farmstead, then this village, then this estate then hundred then county then Dukedom then Kingdom then the whole world. The sun shines on the whole world each day doesn't it?"

"Yes?"

"And storms fly round it causing havoc. One day fine the next grey and the next floods frosts and gales. The same happens with peace and wars. I know you have read my copies of *Treatise on war*, *Expeditions to Afric* and *Knights of Cornwall* – By the way the Knights of Cornwall is all fancy, made up for the delight of the ladies of the Court. King Denzil and Queen Karen never existed. Sir Theo never actually cut the head off Sir Jack and Mariland is an

imaginary country where there couldn't be beetles that big. Forget all that for now and practise breathing."

"Practise breathing?"

"Staying alive."

"Staying alive?"

"Staying alive when people are shooting at you with arrows and money."

"Money?"

"Money buys many things including death."

"What – Oh I see. Somebody pays someone else to kill another."

"But 'another' is you."

"Me?"

"I'm afraid so."

"It seems to be a rule that anyone who is liked will have secret enemies. Every time you smile sympathetically at some borseholder as you expose his tax-cheating ways you make an enemy for life. They cannot see that their taxes go to protect their idle selves who can't be bothered to train the archers or muster the militia."

"But why would I make deadly enemies? Who would try to kill me?"

"You won't be a village girl chasing shillings but a powerful lady able to threaten outlaw gangs with annihilation or corrupt officials with exposure. If that wasn't enough reason, power creates envy and jealousy."

"Surely it sets an example for others to follow. A girl came up to me today and asked could she do archery. She didn't want to kill me – in fact she

wanted to name her child after me and be my friend."

"Most people do but some – the snakes – lie hidden in the grass so you don't notice until they strike with their venom. The more power you have the greater their envy and jealousy. And that's not all – You may be exposing their crimes so they have nothing to lose by killing you."

"I'm confused. I'm not exposing crimes."

"But you will be. And if you want any lessons on ignorance, envy and jealousy then let me tell you that the King's court is a covey of thieves. Many can hardly read write or reckon and are there because they give the King money in the hope he'll give them ways to extort more for themselves."

"Really!"

"Yes. That's why I want you to be the best king this kingdom has ever had... .."Hold me tight Minda. Does this estate run itself? No. If the Hesquerys left it would begin to decay. That's what this Dukedom and Kingdom are doing." There was silence. "Today Minda you took your best arrows and beat the rest. I only have one arrow. You don't really know your target yet. Just fly straight for me and go to the eye. Oh and don't forget to write every week. We'll miss you."

Ambush

Harold Trentchard wasn't quite the ogre Mister Hesquery had lead her to believe. Minda, Henry and Mister Trentchard rode to Trowstead in the chilly light of

the full moon. Henry's pack had a trussed Goose. Minda's pack had a small bundle of clothes made by a very tearful Mrs Hesquery with the rest to follow. Harold Trentchard had a quiver on his back and bow latched on hisommel. Henry rode a bit behind obviously by some arrangement that Minda noted but didn't question.

"I have never seen a girl shoot as well as you today miss."

"Call me Minda."

"I shall. What you call me – what anyone calls me is up to them. Harold Trentchard is my name and I suggest for now you call me Sir. I will be giving you orders to be obeyed. Have you ever been under orders before Minda?"

"No."

"Well what it means is if I ask you to do something I expect you to do it."

Minda thought about this. Even though it had been a long day she knew that it was at times like this that strength and a clear mind really mattered. Ox! Ha! "Mister Hesquery has told me that you expect me to sleep in the snow and frighten silly borseholders. I'm not afraid of that. He's told me I have to hunt outlaws. I'm not afraid of that. He's told me there is a storm of war coming and hinted if I wanted to do anything about it I'd have to fight the courtiers as well – I don't know anything about that. Are there really outlaws lurking in the woods?"

"I will teach you why Henry is riding thirty paces behind in due course."

"But you haven't answered my question."

He paused. "I haven't and I have." Silence. "Mister Hesquery told me you were special in many ways. I've seen your shooting for myself and spent time with Dunstin. I know it's been a long and exciting day but can you remember yet one more thing?"

"I will try my best sir."

"Special and a half you are! Remember this for now. 'You are what people make you'. Dunstin showed me your secret."

"How could he!"

"Because... ..How many legs does your horse have Minda?"

"Four."

"If it had three would it be any good?"

"No."

"And see how the legs work together. Each one knows what the others are doing so they don't get knotted. I am one of the legs carrying you Minda. I need to know what the others are doing. I will be guiding you." His voice dropped as he reached slowly for his bow. "Come ride on my other side."

She obeyed. How stupid she felt as luggage without a bow – not even in her pack. How could she fight? "Have you got a spare weapon?" "No unfortunately. But don't worry – it's probably just a deer. When I whistle gallop the next mile and wait there safely whatever happens. Understand?"

"Yes sir."

A whistle blasted! Minda forced her sleepy horse into a gallop along the moonlit road. She leant forward

instinctively, doing as she was told but wondering mightily if there was anything more positive she could be doing. After what seemed ages of being tumbled on galloping Stefan she realised the stupidity of racing into the mottled unknown and slowed to a standstill to listen for pursuit. She dismounted to be herself. Without anywhere safer to go she retrieved the secret weapon from her pack then climbed into the underbrush at the roadside. On the other side of the road there was a bare field rising up. Behind her a coppice. She considered her shadow in the bright moonlight to be broken enough to fool an outlaw. But what had happened to Henry and Mister Trentchard? What could she do? Did she have to do anything immediately or just wait. What was that in the shadow... Or that shadow... Was that shadow there before... "Aim Minda!" there was a voice inside her head. Her voice. "Come on my friend Minda don't fight a shadow." The spring knives demanded to be used. "We are five death-knives. Use us! We will slaughter your enemies night or day. Push the trigger-peg."

Another inner voice asked if she had any common sense? Where was the danger? She'd been here a minute and invented enemies. How stupid! Still it would be just as stupid to stand in full view. She made up her mind there were no enemies in the shadows. What next? Now did she wait, go on, or back to find Henry and Mister Trentchard? She wasn't doing anything useful here. "Use us. Try us. Dangerous shadows!" Blast the spring knives! She daren't put it down where it might go off by mistake and it would be daft to walk into the road

and put it in the pack safely. Then she decided to stop being a silly girl hiding in the edge of the wood. In the moment between thought and action a shadow-owl swooped with a single ghost's breath wing-beat right over her head to pick something from the road in front and then away. She nearly shit her britches! For the first time in her life she knew paralysing fear. A moment of bodily collapse. She physically tried to shake the feeling from her. It was like clinging feather-down where some brushed off but some snagged and there was always another bit unseen that wouldn't be blown away.

She was about to put the weapon back in her pack then ride back with her knife ready to throw when the sound of trotting horses came from the Selenden direction. "Minda?"

She walked into the middle of the road then bellowed "Where have you been!"

Henry and Mister Trentchard appeared round the bend. They were relaxed as she'd twigged from the call. She could be relaxed as well! Nearly shitting herself at the end of a long day had drained her goodwill.

"All's well" said Mister Trentchard.

"No it isn't!" Mister Trentchard and Henry rolled off their horses and dived into the hedge and ditch. In the silence that followed Minda decided to be queen of the moonlight and stood in full view waiting for the men to make the next move.

"What's wrong Minda?" came a whisper from the ditch. That would be Mister Trentchard.

"You never told me there were owls."

"Owls?"

"Stop repeating what I say!"

"What about the owls?"

"Or men who see ghosts."

"What men who see ghosts?"

"Mister Trentchard GET OUT OF THAT DITCH NOW! It is perfectly safe Henry. I've spirited the fairies away with my special spell." When they were all together on the road Minda said "Now which one of us is going to walk in the open to the wood where one hundred and seventy three outlaws and three bogeymen are hiding?" Even in the harsh moonlight she saw realisation forming on their faces. Before they could come up with an answer she hammered her message home. "I will."

"Ah yes Minda. I think we can remount now and carry on." said Mister Trentchard.

"Sure Mister Trentchard?"

"You have done as ordered. Well done Minda now we should press on and get to our beds."

"You haven't asked me about the owls Mister Trentchard."

"They can wait until tomorrow."

"If you say so sir." Minda mounted and urged her horse to an angry gallop.

When they arrived at Trowstead Henry carried her pack which was nice because her foot was aching with riding and her hand was throbbing with everything. In the morning Mister Trentchard was absent but had left orders that as a

duke's daughter she should have anything she wished. Minda wasn't fooled, she knew her place – for the moment. She reasoned that being tested and given new tasks was a good thing if she was to grow out of the smithy into the big world. Mister Hesquery had told her she was now grown into an adult so new responsibilities would be natural. Mister Trentchard was a strong horse's leg in his own words. He'd thrown her into a pond last night and she'd learned how to swim, but no thanks to him. Trowstead was going to be a tough school. She met Mistress Marline and her daughters Raysell, a bit older than herself, and Delphia about the same age. It dawned on Minda that Mister Trentchard was not actually married to Mistress Marline even though they seemed to be a family. Brother and sister perhaps? Something to approach gently. Judging by the size and modern brick style of the hall Mister Trentchard was wealthy and yet his wiryness suggested a weaver rather than a cloth merchant. More things for her to discover.

3

Trowstead

That afternoon Mister Trentchard summoned Minda. "I have a lot to teach you in a short time. I know you are bold and brave but without craft and without experience or knowing what to do in the face of fierce odds and without quickness. When confused you will fail."

"Fail at what?"

"Fail at the job of making the country a place where men and women and children can sleep safely. Stopping the rich making the land barren by squeezing it dry. If the Kingdom decays then our neighbours will invade and conquer. Mister Hesquery and myself have been looking after this small part. He makes the land productive and I keep it safe. I expect all this talk of outlaws has been new to you?"

"Yes. Until last night I thought they were of the old times."

"I've kept them out of these parts but they prey elsewhere where pickings are easier."

"What happened last night sir?"

"You tell me."

"We were riding along and you became worried about being caught."

"'Ambushed' we call it when a gang pounces on travellers. Carry on."

"So you sent me ahead out of harms way. I think it was a ruse."

"Did you hear any fighting?"

"No."

"You're right. You saw right though me. I made it up to see what you did when you were frightened. Do you remember we'd just been talking about obeying orders? Well it's one thing to talk about them and another to follow them. You followed your orders. I'm very pleased."

"I wasn't frightened – Just doing what you told me and doing my best after that."

"What about the owls?"

"I wasn't frightened. I was just worrying about what was the best thing to do. Having cleared my mind a bastard owl swooped over my head like a black silk shadow and nearly made me shit my britches. Now I know what fear is. Please don't take me anywhere near owls Mister Trentchard."

"We're going to have to deal with that devil's knife thrower. It's deadly."

"That's the whole point. It's supposed to be."

"To us! If you'd let it loose those knives could have gone anywhere."

"It was the best weapon I had."

"I think we'll save the springing knives for special occasions. That's one of the things I want to teach you. Close up fighting. How to defend yourself against animals and men and animal men."

"Animal men?"

"Men who are full of reckless fighting strength and don't care about a feeble

sword blow. They are just as deadly as the silent assassin."

"What's an assassin?"

"Someone who meets you in the street and stabs you or creeps into your bed chamber and brings a sword sweeping down on your pillow."

"But there aren't any of those round here?"

"No Minda. Not today but if you're going to make enemies of rich men – and I hope you do – then there will be times when you will be wise not to sleep in your bed."

Minda thought about this. "So I'm the hunted one not the huntress?"

"To be hunted means you are causing grief to the enemy. The higher the price on your head the more you are hurting them."

"But I'm still being hunted."

"I'm afraid so. Exciting isn't it?"

"Is there an alternative?"

"You could ask the King if he would protect you against outlaws and his supporters the absent barons who bleed the land, but to be honest I don't think he'd bother to listen. Even if he did he wouldn't know where to start. And even if he did he'd probably use it as an excuse to tax people more and even if that worked you'd have a life of extreme boredom. Do you know what boredom breeds?"

"No."

"Backstabbing without knives. How do you fancy being called 'the ox' by people at Court? How would you deal with that? You can't make them do an

archery competition and they would scoff at smithing even though they couldn't go a day without using something that has been fashioned by a smith."

"So you want me as your sword and when your enemies see me bite they will try and break me."

"Minda, my job is not to teach you how to make enemies but how to deal with them. You'll have no trouble making enemies on your own. Do you think the Duke wants to be reminded of the shame of abandoning his crippled daughter? Or – from the highest to the lowest – what if you'd taken sixpence off every man you beat yesterday? The men may see it as one more injustice but what about their wives and children? You would earn their hatred forever and hatred breeds rash deeds. A powerful man can make enemies whenever he wants to. A powerful woman doesn't have to try – In some people's eyes a powerful woman is an enemy just for being a powerful woman."

"You're trying to get me to kill people."

"You have to know how to protect yourself. You have to be ready to do it yourself if you are going to ask others to fight for you."

"Are you sure you don't want me to go killing people for yourself?"

"No. Like Mister Hesquery and Dunstin I am your servant. We teach and protect and we believe there is a tempest ahead which will rain on every one of us. When that storm comes we will have done our bit and it will be your muscles, your brain and your determination that will fight it. We know you have courage. We are the small people but you will be a

great lady at court – You will be able to get things that need doing done. You already have strength in many ways. One day you will be in a position to use it." Minda was silent. She could feel heavy cloaks of responsibility being placed on her shoulders. "Why do we do things Minda? Things like teaching, reckoning, smithing, shooting, care for others? Why do we do that?"

She thought. "Because it's a nice thing to do?"

"Because we have nothing better to do. It's the best use of our time and skills and knowledge we can think of. If there was something better then we'd be doing that."

"So you're saying that I'm special because I'm worth spending time on."

"Of course you're special."

"Why?"

"Because you're Minda. What other girl would learn smithing? What other girl would spend a whole year at archery practise then demand a sixpence from men who had families to feed rather than attend drill musters. Yesterday you were the best in your village at archery – one day you could be best at running the whole Kingdom. Better than the King I think. Last night you dealt with danger and made me feel silly. Powerful people make powerful enemies and it's my job to see you can deal with them." Minda had never really thought about enemies before. Arrows and spring knives were an interesting pastime. Nothing was aimed at her. She wasn't sure she really understood the idea of having enemies trying to hurt her. Mister Trentchard was probably trying to frighten her again. "Are you ready Minda? I know yesterday

was a long day but we should start tomorrow. Mister Hesquery made the billet. Dunstin shaped it. My job is to give you temper and a sharp edge."

"Does the iron like the fire or the anvil? Who knows but you can't fight without a blade that's been forged tempered and sharpened. I've known you for less than a day but you have put me in the hearth. That is your way of blowing the fire to white heat. I will submit to your beating sir."

Minda said "You did not answer my question last night about why Henry was riding behind."

"I did and I didn't. My answer may not have satisfied you and I promise to do so soon. It should come in its place when you will see for yourself the reason."

"Can I have my weapon back?"

"Not until you can tell me why you shouldn't have it back." This odd answer confused Minda. All her determination to be her own mistress and conqueror by flying steel knives had turned into a mire of uncertainties. "Don't try to answer that now Minda – you will understand presently. But tell me – when you pulled your stick full of spring knives out of the pack were you hoping to use the knives or to wield the stock?"

"The knives."

"Not the wooden stick?"

"No I hadn't thought of that – Oh."

"You did really well last night. You weren't afraid, you did as ordered and you made an effort to be ready to fight. But if you had to defend yourself you

wouldn't have stood a chance. How would you feel if a couple of ragged tramps had slit your throat to steal your horse?"

"Very cross I suppose."

"And dead."

"And dead, obviously"

"So would you like me to show you the alternative?"

"Yes... ..Please sir."

"Come here daughter. I am going to show you how to live when others are killed. I will take you to places to stab enemies knowing you are sharp enough. And I will try to break you – gently – to see where you are weak. Yes I will make you sleep in the snow if you can't find a better place. Yes you will be in danger. Yes you will be tired beyond tired and I'll still expect you to be awake. To live you will have to know how close you are to death."

Minda was still piqued by not getting her spring knives back but reasoned that Mister Trentchard was the sort of man who really was right all the time so she's better leave that matter to later. She ran the course of Mister Trentchard's hunt through her mind. The prey was the rottenness he spoke about. She was the hawk. All she knew about hawking was that you had to keep the hawk hungry. "I will be your hawk sir."

"No you don't understand. You are not the servant on my arm, you are the hawker not the hawk. I will teach you how to care for your hunters but to do that you need to understand everything about them and your prey in order to direct them. Most important though you need to be the mistress of your own

safety. Even when you have servants to stand close by you there may be times when threats become very personal. I expect there will be times when you should not sleep in your own bed if you want to wake up."

"How will I tell?"

"I hope to give you a sniff of the scents on that trail before you go roaming in those woods... Now I shall be away for the next few days. Please get to know my household and especially Mistress Marline and her daughters. I'm sure you will be very welcome. The girls will teach you about grace and gowns and manners you will need when you get to court. I have two servants ready to train you and I'm sure Henry will make a happy companion."

Minda sneaked into the hall garden, not a kitchen garden but a specially made place to relax in private! Two crescent fish ponds embraced an area of patterned flags. Carefully trimmed bushes grew in geometrical beds. A score of young trees had been planted to make an avenue. Square-cut yew hedges contained a little oval lawn with bench made from un-sawn branches. She sat down to think. Soon to be a great lady? Soon to be hunted? Soon to wear gowns and jewels? Soon to be sleeping in the snow? Servants and enemies to deal with. None of it made sense.

Minda had only ridden around the home fields under supervision and helped out at harvest as horse-guide. Despite her dislike of animals that menaced you with their dumb bulk she and her horse Stefan

seemed to get along. Last night was the furthest she'd ever ridden. It made her foot ache. Nevertheless hunting was obviously going to be a good excuse to explore the country and practise archery and if Mister Trentchard thought it was worth devoting two servants it must be important. She was rather troubled about being a 'graceful lady'. At Selenden there had never been any hint of luxury. For her last birthday she was given a leather smith's apron which she loved for its practicality and for the simple recognition that it was where her heart was. She was also given a new best dress in deep ochre velvet and lace trimmings, mainly because she didn't have a respectable dress that would still fit, but to her it was just something to wear. She knew very well even the prettiest dress wouldn't make her beautiful.

While she sat there cowering from Mister Trentchard's future, the game she could never win, mistress Marline found her.

"Welcome to Bridgates Hall My Lady."

"Please call me Minda. I'm not a lady."

"Oh but you are Minda." Mistress Marline smiled and sat on the seat next to Minda. "You are the flower waiting in the bud. Hiding safe in a tough skin during the spring frosts and storms but quietly waiting to surprise us."

Minda wanted to believe her but it was too much. "I know you mean well mistress but this bud has worms in it."

Mistress Marline gently put her hand in Minda's gloved pink claw and gave it

the gentlest squeeze. "All the more reason we must beat the worms eh?"

"I'll try."

"Well said Minda." said Mistress Marline "If we give up now then we've lost before we start. If we try we don't know what we'll achieve.

*Prepare to win and you might win
Prepare to lose you might survive
But if from life you try to hide
Fate will find you and decide."*

"But look at me. I'll never be pretty or graceful. I don't mind that – it's the hollow pretence that offends and stings. Would you dress an ox and call her beautiful?"

"You are not an ox."

"People call me that."

"You're a sweet and lovely person. Good news travels fast Minda. You're strong and clever as well. Everyone here knows you're crippled but how do you think that makes them feel when you've beaten all the archers of Selenden. How impressed they must be. And a girl!"

"Witchcraft."

Mistress Marline was shocked by this and took a moment to recover. "Witchcraft is fed by spite and there is none of that round here."

"But all those men I beat yesterday will hate me inside."

"Not from what I've heard Minda. They love you for being honest and hardworking. They know it wasn't easy for you. They know you didn't cheat. They know you wanted a way to show the world how hard you practised. You

beat them fairly for sport... ...Do you know the difference between a 'winner' and a 'champion'?"

"No."

"A winner wins but a champion wins hearts. A champion never has to tell people they've won because the defeated will do it for them. You're a champion Minda."

"That doesn't make me look good in a gown."

"It makes you look good whatever you're wearing."

"Huh. Not really."

"Yes it does. When people know your reputation before they meet you then they're not shocked when you have an eyepatch and odd face. Did you know your skin has a lovely complexion?"

Minda was out of her depth but could tell Mistress Marline was honest. "I'm sorry to be so suspicious mistress but I'm not really used to things girls do. You know – pretty dresses, face paint, tapestry and dancing. I can't dance with my foot."

"Have you tried?"

"No." Minda lied. (She'd imagine dancing with knights and princes a few times out of sight in a secret woodland clearing but every time ended in angry tears of frustration.)

"Don't be afraid. 'Strength will find a way'." Minda wondered why she was worried about sleeping in the snow when lace, small-talk and dancing were frost in her stomach. "It's well that we have spoken Minda for you are really are sweet and lovely. And clever and strong."

Minda and mistress Marline took comfort in the silence of joint relaxation and speculation. After five minutes Marline spoke: "Minda. Will you embrace me now? Once – for all the futures." Minda did as she was commanded not really knowing why. The strength of her arms suddenly brought mistress Marline so close that a whisper or a kiss was instinctively demanded. Minda was at a loss. What was this hugging business? She could feel Mistress Marline's bones, but she wasn't a bag of bones! The thought repelled her and she undid the hug unfulfilled... ..Then burst into tears... to be re-hugged by Marline. "Sweet Minda child. Growing-up is a well we all fall into. The people at the bottom will catch you."

A long days ride

On the first day of Minda's new routine she was introduced to Brand, a stocky old soldier still with lots of black curly hair and a cheerful grin. He would be in charge of fighting and anything outside. Flor was a servant the same age, lanky yellow hair and sparse build as Henry with a long flabby hare's face. Henry explained that the expeditions were for her to practise horse riding and learn the country. Mister Trentchard was keen that Minda would be able to recall the details where they went and what happened.

She soon saw that they had done this sort of thing many times before. Riding with them was a challenge. They were always teasing her and testing her but then making excuses between themselves for their excesses. The good-natured arguments, often using Minda's

welfare as an excuse were quite amusing.

"Now then Flor. If you hadn't led us through those trees our caps wouldn't have kept being knocked off and eyes poked out."

"Well if we'd skirted the wood we'd have been spotted by the outlaws."

According to Brand and Flor there were outlaws everywhere outnumbering them ten to one. Another time it would be "If you'd taken us around instead of through those woods we wouldn't have been spotted by the outlaws." Flor was just as critical of Brand so everyone was happy. Henry was neutral. They made their jesting way around woods, through woods, across streams, led their horses just under hill crests, trotted along roads, galloped over heaths, made fires, went hungry because 'making a fire was a bad thing to do', called at farmsteads, circuited manors, and disappeared into the woods when a solitary stranger was spied in the distance.

After the first day of this routine Brand said "Miss I was looking at your bad foot and wondered if you might spend a few minutes with the head horseman so we're not twisting you as you ride."

"Yes of course." Minda had already concluded that the only response to suggestions by her servants, for that's what they'd all volunteered to be or so it appeared, was to agree. Clearly there were things that they knew which she didn't. She went to the stables with Brand. Her horse was looking forward to peace and quiet as much as she was. "Come on Stefan – It's only for a minute while these men work out how to stop

me kicking you or something then you can get back to your oats." As she was helped up muscles that had rested a while complained about yet another stretch.

Lewin the head horseman murmured. "Aha". He stood with crossed arms and that steady look which Boskew used to see through things.

"Brand would you lead Stefan round the yard." Adjustments were made. "Miss would you leave the reins go and hold your arms straight out at the side." She did as requested.

"Aha. Thank you miss. You can lead him back now."

"Do you mind if I ask miss? Do you have much push in that toe?"

"I haven't got a toe."

"Sorry miss. Do you have an ankle?"

"Not really. More a knuckle and ankle combined."

"Thank you miss. Sorry for asking but that tells me a lot. I've watched you walk."

"And now this horse is tired and so miss if you'll let me help you down..."

What! The horse was tired! What about her, she was exhausted. Drained exhaustion. "Thank you Lewin." She began to roll off the animal with laziness but remembered tiredness was today's enemy and regained her coordination to slide off gracefully into the waiting arms of Lewin who winked cheerfully at her. Why did she blush! A pungent horseman winks and she blushes. Is she a dairymaid? Reluctantly to be truthful, she gets her balance. He is soft and comfortable like a feather bed before

dawn. "Even if you can't fix my foot you tried. Give me a hug."

"You are a bit wherrity miss but I think you'll do."

"Come and let me hug you too Brand. It was really clever of you to think of it."

"I haven't done anything miss." He submitted to his hugging.

"I've got to go back to face Mistress Marline and her daughters who expect me to hold a knife like a pen and speak when I'm spoken to. I'd rather have bread and cheese in the stables."

"Minda!" Mistress Marline's voice was frightfully close and sharp. "Go into the house. You will wash and dress for supper. Delphia will help you."

"Yes Mistress."

After Minda had crossed the courtyard mistress Marline addressed them. "Lewin and Brand you have made a good start. Our young lady needs as many hugs as you can give her. Don't over do it Brand! And I know your kisses Lewin – Quick! Give me a kiss before your missus sees."

Delphia followed Minda to the wash house. She was the same age as Minda but delicate, pretty, skipped along and she hadn't been out since first light on a horseback obstacle course. "Did you do anything interesting today? Look I have been sewing my sampler. Do you like the colours. I hate embroidery but mother says I have to. Doves are so pretty don't you think. Raysell says they mean love. She's mad on romance."

"Delphia?"

"Yes Minda?"

"I am tired, in pain, dirty and hungry."

"Oh I'm sorry to hear that. Let me cheer you up with a riddle. Raysell always/"

"/Which makes me a little irritable at the moment."

"Oh I'm sorry to hear that."

"And when I'm irritable I might do something you'd regret."

"Oh I'm sorry to hear that."

"For the short time between me picking you up and throwing you head down into the midden".

"Awesome. Are you really that strong? Go on pick me up!"

Minda slid out her polished dagger and held it pointing at Delphia's chin. "I made this with my own hands."

"Awesome. Can you make horseshoes too?"

"Where's the midden?"

"Over past the kitchen."

"Well go and make yourself useful. Tell the cook I want a double helping on your way to jumping in the midden."

"Oh all right. Your dress is laid out on the bed."

When she'd gone Minda removed her boots and placed her bad foot still wrapped in binding into a pail of cold water. Sitting alone with the deadening chill spreading up her leg she tried to ignore the sparkling daggers of irritation. She had never screamed with frustration

before but wanted to now. There was a commotion as mistress Marline dragged a silent Delphia into the wash house. Minda didn't look up.

"Minda. We don't usually threaten people with knives."

"I'm sorry mistress. I'm not used to being plagued by gabble-mouths – 'Specially when I need silence to draw out the pain. Every day I have to make an effort to live my life and today I've made more effort than ever before. You like riddles Delphia. 'If you have nothing to say say it'. Mistress can I ask a favour? Would Delphia please undo the bindings on my foot. It is very tender and needs two soft hands."

Mistress Marline was silent for a moment. "Yes of course. No I'll do it. Delphia go and get my balm."

"Yes mother."

"Plain goose fat will be fine."

"Come on Minda, let's patch you up and feed you up." Unwrapping the blood-soaked linen from Minda's foot was a trial. Delphia was horrified as the bleeding pink deformity was revealed. "Are you watching daughter? See how gentle you have to be."

Mistress Marline rebound it according to instructions from Minda with new linen and balm that smelled of sharp herbs. "Your other boots came from Selenden today. Shall we fetch those and give these ones a good clean?"

"Yes please mistress."

"I don't think you'll be out riding with this tomorrow Minda."

"But/"

"It looks like drenching wet anyway. Brand says they had only meant to go as far as the river-meet but you lead them as far the other side again. Normally a nod is all the praise anyone gets from Brand but with my own ears I heard him say you reminded him of the best general in the army. 'Took him back to his young days'. You've won an old soldier's heart there Minda. That's something to ask him about– "

But Minda was asleep.

A long wet walk

The next day dawned grey and wet through. Minda ached but was refreshed and determined not to acquire the status of an invalid. Delphia had grown-up a bit and decided that being on a mission of mercy was better than being a charming companion. She was keen to try her new role of nurse. Could she do this? Would Minda like that? No no. Minda must stay there while she fetched it and so on. Minda thought if she was a general then how should a general deal with this?

"Delphia. Would you come here please. I am not an invalid. From time to time your help will be very welcome." She slipped off her pink dummy glove and showed Delphia her claw hand. I can't do knots in laces. See how my dress has buttons and toggles while yours has eyes and laces. See how my boots have buckles while yours have laces. But that doesn't make me an imbecile. I can't sew but I can make a dagger. It is under my pillow – fetch it. Let me show it to you. See how it shines. Look – it notches this bench easily."

Minda tossed the dagger spinning into the air and caught it casually. You see how my good eye is sharp and my good hand is able? Would you like to try?"

"No."

"Now you see the hook on the door over there?"

"Yes." Minda stood up, raised the dagger then threw it. Bang! The dagger went through up to the hilt. "Awesome Minda. Can you show me how?"

"/And the second thing is that my world is a practical world. I have many other things on my mind than samplers and doves and would appreciate the time to myself to be able to deal with them."

Brand's voice came from outside. "Have you finished throwing things Minda?"

"I think so. Come in." As the door opened six inches of bright blade could be seen sticking through the other side at head height. "I was just showing Delphia how to throw a knife. Sorry it's my fault Brand. Delphia has been helping me but I got carried away. I will be ready in three minutes – or two if you can pull that out for me."

"Five minutes then. And we're going for a walk in the pouring rain."

Before they started Brand explained privately to Minda that she was not to get to the point where her foot was unbearable or damaged. They didn't expect her to be invincible. She wasn't letting them down by saying 'enough' – In fact she was helping herself and that's what they were all there for. "And that's an order."

"I understand."

"Good girl. Well done yesterday you were champion. Now let's be going."

"Men" said Brand "We are going out today because the land may change beneath our feet in the next month. There may be frost, floods and February has been known to have flocks of birds brought on a warm southern breeze only to die the next day of ice. We will be feeling the soil with our feet, scanning the treetops and watching the brooks. Henry and Minda you will write these things and the traces of any creatures when we return. In the afternoon we will have combat." Flor whispered into Brand's ear. The unmistakable expression of embarrassing realisation passed across his face. "Ahem. I just called you 'men'. I apologise miss."

Minda hadn't noticed. "Let's not worry about that Brand. The sooner we start the sooner we'll be back in the dry."

"Spoken like a – er – Let's go!"

Minda's foot soon subsided into dull ache and as she'd got no personal grievance against the rain she concentrated on comparing notes with her fellow student Henry. He was obviously good at this.

"See how the rivulets carry the soil to make little valleys. See how the soil is moved first then gravel leaving the stones until last. But the stones can't stay without the soil round them so they inch down hill."

"So why doesn't the soil from further up the hillside fill in the gaps?"

"Because it is already in a moving stream that doesn't slow until it reaches the flat."

Minda thought about this. There was plenty of surface water to observe. It all seemed to have one purpose: To draw the top of the hill to the bottom. Henry drew her attention to the way the field strips were aligned to get the best of the sun and block runaway streams taking the goodness into the quags beside the river. The track turned to a wooden causeway. Even in mid-summer a traveller would be foolish to trust to the boggy ground but now summer's uncertain tussocks were replaced by winter's promise of solitary sucking death. They all took extra care when Flor told them the tale of monks who came across the causeway one Christmas and were lead off the track by Jack 'o lanterns thinking they were holy candles. Even now, he said, a relic might appear, thrown up by the never ending motion of the mire.

"Who keeps this causeway?" asked Minda.

"We do." said Brand.

"You and Flor?"

"Yes and no. The manor of Trowstead-Underwold has the duty to maintain it. So Mister Trentchard has to see that it is kept in repair. Guess who ends up being the men who fell the trees, cart the timber, plant the posts and nail the boards?"

She wasn't used to this style of sarcasm. "I don't know. Who?"

"Flor and me. Henry has been with us the last few springs seeing how it's done and helping out."

Minda eyed the uneven ribbon of planks. "There's something that I want to say – like if it wasn't for you the grain wouldn't get to the mill and we'd all starve but I don't know what it is – It's beyond me at the moment."

Henry spoke "This is an important and busy short cut."

"Strange we haven't met anybody yet then." said Minda and instantly regretted it. Henry wasn't another empty-head like Delphia. "Er – I'm sure the weather must have put them off."

As always happens on walking journeys, the party split into couples. Henry and Flor lagged behind examining the increasing number of porridge rivulets crossing the track. There is something about trudging along in the rain that makes people want to talk or sing songs. Minda decided to draw Brand out. Mistress Marline had given her the key. "I'm not lame yet Brand but would you link your arm with mine."

"Yes of course miss."

"It gives me a bit of confidence. And please call me Minda. I know who I am then. I want to know all the secrets not just those fit for a 'miss'." After a minute or two Minda continued. "Mistress Marline tells me you're an old soldier."

"Yes miss. Fought the Grofs at Rukion and the Imperial Stinnish at Okerdam."

"What's it like in a battle?"

"Like a nightmare you can't wake from miss. A butcher's shop inside a rolling barrel miss."

"Call me 'miss' again and I'll be your nightmare! Carry on."

"Yes miss er Minda" She smiled at him and gripped his arm more tightly. He smiled back, happy to serve and shape a gem that sparkled on this dullest day. "This afternoon miss I'll kill you ten times over in combat practise. Every time I stab you to death I know you will learn and not let me do that again."

"You called me 'miss' again, you know what that means". Even sloshing through the clay track in the middle of the relentless rain she couldn't to keep a straight face.

"Nightmares miss. Horrible nightmares miss. Unnamed things with tentacles clawing at my face." He was smiling too.

"You don't care do you Brand. Your nightmare won't be unnamed things with tentacles but me – Juggling with a dagger. Oh and owls."

"Owls?"

"The most scary thing I could think of."

"How's your leg Minda?"

"It aches like hell, but that's nothing new. I'll be happy to be home but I'm not a cripple yet."

"I want you to be fit for combat practise this afternoon." Minda didn't have a reply. "Here's an order miss. See that wall. Up you go. Now up on my back... ..Now we've got a mile to get back by the High road. I want you to be lookout. We don't want anyone to see us like this do we?"

Minda was confused by this last bit. "Why not?"

"Because leaders are not invalids. They are strong and perfect. I've known a few and they were mostly sick and frightened but who would follow one of those?... ..Now Minda I want you to pay particular attention to what happens and also what doesn't happen on the way back."

They finally trudged back through the mud of the deserted village street back to the Hall. The clay-grey clouds swirled above in their haste like the tumbling turmoil in the ditches below. The rain was getting heavier. It teemed off the roofs into the swirling courtyard. Inside they found the fire. Hot soup and bread arrived in moments. Somebody had the forethought that goes with well-run establishments to make obvious arrangements. Everybody had a second helping. Someone had thought of that as well.

After that refill that makes the body warm and the heart soft; with leggings steaming nicely in front of the fire, Brand gave his orders. "Henry can you write down your notes on the land now. Flor I want you to tell the herdsman to get animals off the lower pastures by tonight and middle pastures by tomorrow noon. Tell them the upper and commons are open. If they need help – Oh they will – I know – take three village lads and Henry. Henry cancel that last order. Take two day's bread and go with Flor who will probably give you a job as a shepherd's assistant. Meet tomorrow noon at High Oak. If the banks burst then you'll have done your duty. Off you

go men. Make the most of the daylight. Take some rope." When Flor and Henry had gone Brand spoke seriously to Minda. "Yesterday we were playing at scouts and hunting. Today we are the hunted. Tomorrow the flood may spread a lake half a mile wide across the valley. Pitch black where there ought to be lights of farmhouses. We must outwit Nature the huntress. She will kill us all in the end but until then we have a chance."

"Now Minda can you tell me what didn't happen. You remember?"

"Yes I remember. You asked me to note what did and particularly didn't happen."

"Have a think. Something didn't happen that might have?"

"Nothing comes to mind."

"Take more time to think... ..Who was in our group and what were they there for?"

Minda was completely at a loss. "Err You were in charge. I was there to be shown the locality and to see if I was fit after going on a tour of the Kingdom yesterday. Henry was there because he's good at that sort of thing – making notes of stones and tracks. And Flor was there because he's useful to have around."

"Good. Well done Minda. Now can you see what didn't happen? – Say halfway between you getting on my shoulders and getting off when we entered the village?"

"No. Sorry Brand. I know the sun didn't come out but that's not what you're looking for."

"Let me put this another way. Somebody in our group, not you, not me didn't do something."

"I know you think it's obvious but I still can't see it."

"If you were walking with Mistress Marline and her daughters and say Delphia twisted her ankle would you carry her on your shoulders?"

"I'd try."

"Of course you would. What if Mistress Marline had started carrying her first?"

Minda was still lost. "I'm on the edge but the quarry is still in shadow."

"Would you think to take over the task at half-way? You're easily stronger than Marline."

Things began to dawn. "Yes. And Flor didn't offer!"

"What about Henry?"

"Oh. It never entered his head."

"Did it ever enter Flor's head?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Me neither. I think we should find out. The lesson is this: We are always helping each other. If Flor had taken over carrying you – and you're not light miss – then you wouldn't have noticed but the deed would have been done and I would have noticed. Perhaps he's got something more pressing with Henry. I guess the weather washed out his brains."

After a while Minda said "How does a girl who can't see where the foot-soldiers are slacking remind you of a general?"

Brand had hoped this particular epithet wouldn't have found its way to Minda. "It's just like red hair or blue eyes. You have the gift of strength and commanding people to help you. I can't teach you much about leadership but I can teach you a bit about staying alive."

"This thing about staying alive is a bit worrying."

"I hope you'll be making enemies miss. That shows you are hurting them. Until they're eliminated they may be paying people to slit your throat. That's a really good reason for throwing a dagger through a door when you're staying at an inn miss. When mistress Marline saw that she was only a couple of yards away when it came through the door. If I was you I'd apologise as soon as possible."

"Oh no! Will you excuse me while I do that and then we can do combat."

Body in the forge

Brand observed "It's too wet to open the doors of the little barn so we'll have to use the cartlodge."

"Why not use the travus in the forge? I saw the smithy was shut again as we passed this morning. And it's private."

"Now that's a good idea. Trust you to think of the forge. But we haven't got the key and the smith has gone away."

"I think I can guess where it is. There's a brotherhood of smiths and they have secret signs. Dunstin, the smith at

Selenden, taught me things – But you mustn't say as I'm not a proper brother yet."

"Right Minda. You go ahead and if you haven't returned in five minutes I'll follow with my gear."

Minda hurried through the noisy downpour. She found the secret sign on the hitching rail that told her which tile the key was hidden under. She opened the door and drew it nearly closed behind to keep out the hissing rain. The familiar forge smell and soft gloom, the dirt floor and half-seen racks of tools lifted her heart... Until she saw the thing hanging in the middle of the travus. No doubt but it was a body, hanging two feet from the floor, perfectly stationary as if on a rod. She'd rarely seen a completely cold forge and never an abandoned one. What made her come here now? She'd known inside there was something wrong when they passed that morning. She opened the door open a bit more and the grey light showed a man with a face creased in pain like grey cloths in a washtub. She locked the door and walked back to the Hall with every raindrop a hammer blow.

She showed Brand the key before he could ask. Emptiness on her wet face told a disaster. "Did he have a family Brand?"

"Tell me the facts first. That's an order. Always tell the facts when reporting to your commander."

"There's a body hanging from a beam." She put her arm across her face as if to hide the sight and drooped ready to be washed away as clay.

Then...

Minda's training comes in very useful dealing with smugglers. She moves to a town which is a very strange, and dangerous, environment for her. Her familiarity with blacksmiths is very important.

In [Minda Inherits](#) she has to fight in unusual ways to survive against enemies. She begins to put life back into the run-down ducal town and makes good friends with the King.

In [Minda Falters](#) the rebirth of the town takes a lot of energy, on top of which she has a school for idle rich children to teach them hard skills like she herself was. But rebels realise she must be stopped before she can become stronger. The pressure is too much for a young girl yearning for a boyfriend.

The [Black Team Escapes](#) is mainly about youngsters sent abroad to keep out of trouble. They find good friends and uncover deadly intrigue. Mind you, it's good to be a handful of boys and girls together when the grown-ups can't interfere with romance. Minda's own romantic fortunes may be taking a turn for the better.

[Into The Storm](#) is about 'Britain' needing to become strong and with one purpose to deal with possible invasion from the Baltic. Minda can't do it alone but she'd the only one with a workable plan to coax or trap lords into combining together for everyone's good.

Throughout we see young people dealing positively with pressure by working hard and intelligently together. Minda has charm, strength, great leadership skills and yet is just a very young woman. There are troubles and triumphs as she builds others.

Important: These should be read in the order given as they're a closely connected series.

The full version of [Minda Grows Up](#) by Merlin Smallbone is available in the following formats.

- Paperback A5 315 pages
- PDF A5
- PDF A5 2-column (for limited width readers)

Go to merlinsmallbone.shop for purchasing options or search for [Minda Grows Up](#) at lulu.com

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Merlin lives in Witham, Essex and writes when he's not programming computers. He is what they call a character, but whether it's a ! or ? remains a mystery. Most of his leading characters are strong and positive, although of course the interesting bits are their weaknesses and doubts. A glance at the catalogue shows a wide range of settings. Typically he writes interesting characters in interesting situations so that 'stuff happens' but there will be ideas and issues that hover in full view yet in the background until spotlighted when for many readers that's the moment they realise they've been reading a proper book not just a story.