

An Apprentice's Tale

By Roger Gaboury

“Trust not to battlements made by those outside of the fraternity lest these stones become your tomb.”

Philip the Noseworthy circa 1210 - epitaph

What follows is an extract of the diary of a medieval apprentice mason. Its authenticity should be doubted by all rational people—the insane may quote freely.

Day 1

Dear diary,

After my poor performance in dramatic arts at Oxford, my father undertook to purchase a mason's apprenticeship for me for the princely sum of 8 crowns, 10 shillings. Upon introduction, I sat down with quill and paper to take notes from my new professor and suffered a cuff to the head for the effort. Perhaps it was a gesture of endearment though I would have preferred a hug. Tradesmen are a rough lot!

I had brought my books from university and these were promptly used to boost the kitchen fire. Egad! Were we short of firewood? When my master left to consult on a job, I cleaned up the workplace in an effort to make a good first impression. I made kindling of all of the scrap wood I could find to feed the fire for our breakfast in the morrow as books are rare and costly fuel.

When the mason returned, he was moved to tears. Verily, seldom have I seen a grown man sob so earnestly because of a job well done. Yet I mistook the outburst for joy when in truth he mourned for the loss of something called 'forms'. These odd pieces of shaped wood that I had altered for the fire were used to support stones in archways and the like. In my defense, I proffered an old adage that stated 'things worth keeping are worth labeling.' Since my proficiency with the axe left us wanting for lumber, he went to the neighbour's house to borrow a decent stick and beat that wisdom from me.

My straw bed lies next to the horses in the stable but that is only because he waits for the livestock to return. I'm not sure why my berth is dependent on such creatures but I heard him say I would get a loft in the house when the 'cows come home.'

Day 2

The dear master woke me at 4 AM to light the fire in the kitchen, draw water, clean the latrine, fetch the eggs from the coop, shovel out the barn, slop the hogs, and start breakfast. There was no meat on my plate but the old soul said that 'corn be good fodder for working animals.' I had no shortage of this roughage.

He gave me a pair of sturdy boots, a worn leather apron, and a few rusty tools of the trade. Since safety is of paramount concern, the master dropped a heavy stone on my foot and bashed my finger with the hammer as a display of the hazards of the work. He insisted on physical demonstrations where I believe a verbal description would have sufficed. These brutal lessons often come after I mention the teaching methods at Oxford. Perhaps he is a Cambridge man as suggested by his uncouth manner.

While he attended to a customer, I experimented with the tools right away for my enthusiasm knew no bounds. With great impacts of a sledge, I eventually reduced a granite block to mere pebbles. Alas, the block had been sold to a sculptor so the master introduced me to the business end of the whip. Here was another example, I thought, where labeling would have prevented a misunderstanding but I had the foresight to keep that chestnut to myself.

No sign of cows yet.

Day 3

I mixed my first batch of mortar and it had the consistency of warm butter but tasted like poor oatmeal. I was forced to ingest some of my mistake to make sure I would never repeat it. Even starved, I found the meal wanting in flavour but rather filling.

While the master went to get supplies, I stumbled onto a formula posted on the wall and experimented with sand, stones, and quicklime and obtained a product called concrete. I could not guess its purpose so I left it in the master's cauldron. No doubt he will explain this mystery tomorrow.

I am still in the barn. Where are these cows he spoke of? He shows little concern for their tardiness.

Day 4

The concrete set as hard as stone. What an awesome invention! Liquid stone that will take a shape! I expressed my wonder to the master using the greatest terms I know of in the English language — mostly from Shakespeare. But the tradesman used words in return that sounded somewhat harsh and that I failed to find in the dictionary. (I purchased it from a passing monk and keep it hidden under my bed and far away from open flame.)

The mason tasked me to relieve the cauldron of concrete. Alas, the wielding of hammer and chisel must be a skill which takes years to perfect. I took a wild swing at the chisel and it left my hand with great speed and struck my poor master in the mouth. He took the injury in stride — wiped the blood from his lips, swigged from the whiskey jar, and spit out a tooth. He said I would lie on the rack tonight. I am so looking forward to it. I believe the rack to be one of those newly invented soft Swedish beds renowned for comfort and warmth.

Perhaps the cows will be home tonight and I may sleep on the rack in the house.

Addendum: At vespers tonight, I repeated the mason's harsh words to the cardinal and the foul language bleached the colour from his robes. He said he would visit the mason in the morning to discuss the financial remedy required to save his soul.

Day 5

Forsooth, I ache in body and spirit. The rack is of poor construction and does little to invite sleep. The Swedes have much to learn.

I was given no breakfast but was told to forage in the field and compete with the hogs for wild turnips. My master's face is horribly swollen and he has taken to cursing me as best as his lips can mutter. Sometimes he merely throws clods of dirt in my direction and I deem by the velocity and abundance of these projectiles that he has no love for me.

The cardinal kept his appointment and questioned the mason in regards to the crude words he used yesterday. My poor old master claimed to have forgotten the event but I was able to jostle his memory as I had written them down. The cardinal left with a bag of gold but the tradesman's soul is now safe from fire and brimstone.

That afternoon, I was assigned to the quarry and was taught to sever the base rock into slabs of stone using wedges and hammer. We then moved the rock using levers, ropes, and pulleys and lowered the stone into the wagon. The physics of force, distance, and acceleration were explained to me using a crude sand drawing made with a stick. I endured several kicks when I asked for the origins and discoverers of these concepts. Where are the mathematical proofs? Tradesmen are practical men and do not allow for the inquisitive nature of youth.

Armed with unproven (in my mind) new knowledge, I began to test my own combination of pulleys and knots. Verily, the theory stated that a one ton block of limestone may drop a short distance yet gain much force. This was confirmed. My experiment made a huge impression on the master but a more definite one on the wagon below. The master says that I must pay for the wagon that I crushed. I believe that is fair as he is covering the funeral expenses for the driver.

The master spent many hours in the public house seeing if other masons could use my services at a discounted price.

I took advantage of the time to hunt for the cows but they are elusive creatures.

Day 6

When one wanders over the fields of England, the traveler will encounter lush pastures bordered by fences made with dry stacked stone. Today I built my first four foot high wall. I wondered why this particular height had become a standard so I experimented

while the mason went to the quarry. I stacked the stone some twenty feet high but knew not enough to pay mind to line or center. I garnered new terms, to wit — center of gravity, critical mass, structural collapse, and collateral damage — also, legal responsibility and judgment for the plaintiff.

The master had to buy the horse that was killed when the wall fell over. He did not want the horse at that price or in that condition but the judge decreed that he did. I bought the carcass from the master at a discount so I will eat well tonight.

The tradesman offered the rack again but I said I would kindly pass on it as I preferred less technical bedding.

“Surely you have heard of feathers?” I asked. I spent the night locked in with the chickens.

I am finding the master’s jokes less amusing each day and I am beginning to doubt his ownership of cows.

Day 7

I greeted the sun today with mixed feelings. The master has refunded my money and has deemed me to be more suited to blacksmithing. He has arranged a new apprenticeship for me with his ill-favoured but heavily insured brother-in-law who owes him a considerable sum of money. The mason said that I would have many opportunities to experiment in that trade and in fact, he encouraged me to do so at the earliest opportunity.

I have used some of the money to buy my old master a present to reward him for his efforts. I purchased a cow for him. May the next apprentice profit from the gesture.♦
