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# The Waterwright

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## Introduction

Rivers remember. They carve their histories into banks of clay and willow, scribing in silt the ambitions of towns and the stubbornness of fields. In the age of mills, the river is more than a road or a boundary; it is an engine, a law, and a promise. The Waterwright arrives with that promise tucked into his satchel: chalk, a plumb line, a notebook of ratios smudged by damp fingers, and a craft learned in better days. He is displaced—by war, by a lord's favor turned cold, by the quiet betrayals of hunger and flood—but he is also appointed by need. Villages call him because water refuses to be merely watched. It must be courted, coaxed, and, sometimes, contested.

This is a story of thresholds: of head and fall, of the narrow inches by which a wheel gains a village a season's bread, of the stiller inches by which people learn to live together. The mills you will meet stand where power pours itself through wood and stone, turning grain to flour, turning work to wealth. But water wheels drive more than millstones. They tease threads into cloth, hammer iron to temper, pump fields to green. Their turning sets the rhythm of quarrels and courtships alike—the river's song braided with the creak of timbers and the scrape of oak teeth on iron pins.

The Waterwright moves from parish to parish as easily as driftwood catches and slips free, and not every welcome is warm. He climbs out upon shaky weirs, reads the bed by the bend of reed and eddy, and listens—first to the water, then to the people bound to it. Mills, like marriages, bind households into economies and villages into lords' ledgers. A mismeasured sluice deepens old grudges. A fair toll heals them. Each repair he undertakes is a bargain between what the river offers and what the village dares to ask.

You will find, woven through quarrel and journey, the plain workings of medieval craft. A notch on a gate can lift a foot of head. A shift from undershot to breastshot can turn a stubborn wheel in a slow stream. Oak teeth pinned into mortises spare a miller a winter's silence when a burr stone bites too hard. The Waterwright counts cogs and calculates gear trains with his thumb along the rim, yet he knows a gust of river-wind by smell and can judge a bearing's wear by the heat in its hush. These pages will not preach treatise, but they will not lie about how things are held together.

Power is not only mechanical. It is measured in tolls called culture, in leases writ under seals, in the hours of the Sabbath defended by bell and by habit. A widow's mill may keep a village alive or bind it to debt; a lord's survey can straighten a channel and crookedly tilt the scales of justice. At market, flour's fairness matters as much as its fineness. And when drought braids the stream to a single silver thread, people reveal the virtues and vices the river had masked: patience, envy, generosity, fear.

Innovation, in these pages, is a conversation. The river speaks in flood and trickle; the Waterwright replies with sluice and breastwall. Knowledge travels in the mouths of apprentices and along the roads walked by men without masters. Secrets are guarded, then thrown open when necessity demands. Sometimes he mends a wheel. Sometimes he mends the silence between neighbors so the wheel can turn at all. The craft is not only in tool and timber, but in the courage to stand between feuding men with a straight edge and a fair measure.

Each village offers a new problem and a new bargain: a tailrace choked by silt, a tide mill wrestling the moon, stones carted from France to bite cleaner and last longer, an icebound axle freed by a brazier and a prayer. Some triumphs are loud, marked by the first clean grind of a reborn mill. Others are quiet, measured in the way a baker smiles at dawn. All of them, together, ask what kind of wealth a community can make from the water that will not stay.

If the river remembers, so does the Waterwright. He carries a ledger of mistakes and mercies, a chart of currents drawn in human voices. This book is his map and his witness. Walk the banks with him. Feel the spray off the wheel, the tremor in the beam, the tug of history in the flow. In the turning of these pages, as in the turning of the wheel, may you hear how a land is engineered not only by hands and timber, but by the stubborn hope of people who choose to live together beside a moving, mercurial power.

## CHAPTER ONE: The Broken Weir

The road into Alderford was no road at all, but a suggestion—a rut of mud between oaks that had long since given up pretending they were part of a managed wood. Carts used it when the stream was low and the bridge at Charlock Ford had not yet been carried away, which meant it was used perhaps four months of the year. The rest of the time, a person walked. That is what the Waterwright was doing.

He carried his tools in a satchel of oiled leather that had once been fine and was now distinguished mainly by its stubborn refusal to fall apart. Inside: a plumb line wound around a brass bob, a set of chisels wrapped in a cloth that did little to protect their edges, a notebook swollen with damp and dense with figures, and half a wheel of cheese he had bought from a one-armed woman at the market in Dunmere. The cheese was doing worse than the satchel.

He had been walking since before the sun cleared the eastern ridge, and the smell of Alderford reached him some minutes before the village itself. It was the smell of a river doing what a river should do—moving water past stones and carrying the scent of wet clay and green things—but beneath it, sharper, came the sour tang of grain left too long in damp. That meant a mill that was not running.

A broken mill was a village with its hand cut off. He had learned this in ways he would rather not catalogue.

The Waterwright paused where the track widened beside a fence of woven hazel. He took a long drink from his waterskin, checked the cheese, and listened. From somewhere downhill and to the east, he heard the river. It sounded fast, agitated, and—crucially—uninterrupted by the rhythmic clatter of a working wheel. There was also shouting, though that could have been the children.

He adjusted the pack on his back and followed the sound of the river.

The stream that powered Alderford's mill was called the Brindle—so named, according to no one who could say why, for the brindled pattern of gravel visible in the shallows during summer. It ran swift and bright through a narrow cleft in the limestone before spilling into a wider basin where the village huddled around its two dozen buildings: the mill, the church, the ale-house (a single building in the case of Alderford, though some weeks the proportions reversed), and a handful of longhouses with thatched roofs furred with moss. The fields lay mostly on the south side, a patchwork of strips still holding their winter stubble. The whole scene, viewed from the ridge above, looked like a place that had been set carefully into the landscape and then forgotten

by whoever had placed it there.

The weir was just below the millrace inlet, and it was not working.

The Waterwright stood on the bank and studied it for a good ten minutes before he moved closer. This was not laziness. A weir was a negotiation between water and stone, and the first rule of any negotiation was to see what the other party thought it was doing before you started telling it what to do. The weir was a broad, low dam of timber and packed earth, designed to raise the Brindle by just enough to feed water into the millrace at a useful head. Its crest was the flat timber lip that the water was meant to spill over in a clean, even sheet.

The lip was gone. Half of it, at least, had collapsed into the pool below. Splintered wood jutted upward from the shallows like broken ribs. The remaining timbers sagged outward, and the current was scouring the earth behind them, pulling the bank away in muddy handfuls. A good portion of the impounded water was escaping through this breach rather than entering the race, and the section of streambed that should have been a steady, murmuring run was reduced to a shallow, braided mess of gravel and weeds.

The Waterwright dropped his pack, pulled out his notebook, and opened it to a blank page. He chewed the end of a charcoal stick and began to draw.

The sketch came quickly, the lines confident. He recorded the height of the remaining dam, the width of the breach, the angle of the bank, the position and depth of the scour hole below. He measured the fall of the natural riverbed above and below the weir by laying a flat stick across the current, balancing his plumb line from its center, and reading the angle against marks he had scratched into the wood. It was not precision surveying, but it was honest work. Every millwright worth his hire had a pocket full of short cuts, and nearly all of them began with a plumb line and a good eye.

From the riverbed below the weir, a man's voice called out. "You measuring it or falling in?"

The Waterwright looked up. A figure stood on the near bank—a broad-shouldered man in a leather apron, with forearms that looked as though they had been carved from the same oak that made the mill timbers. A thin boy of perhaps thirteen hovered a few paces behind him, clutching a slop bucket as though it were a shield.

"Measuring," said the Waterwright, returning his charcoal to his teeth. "What fell?"

"Same as always. The east strut gave first. The earth just sagged and then the lot shifted and there she went." The man stepped closer. He had a square jaw, a nose

that had been broken at least once, and the kind of expression that suggested he was perpetually deciding whether to be amused or furious. "Name's Harald. I'm the miller, such as it is."

"Waterwright," said the Waterwright. He took the charcoal from his teeth. "I'm passing through."

"Everyone's passing through." Harald folded his arms. "Funny how nobody passes through when the mill's working. You want a job, you've found one. The weir's been broken since the February thaw, and the lord's reeve says if it's not mended by planting time he'll fine the village a bushel a household."

The Waterwright looked at the broken structure again and then at the dark, sluggish water pooling behind what remained of the dam. "Planting's three weeks gone, isn't it?"

Harald's expression did something complicated. "It is."

The Waterwright set down his pack, pulled his chisels and a short-handled axe from their wraps, and walked to the water's edge. "Show me what's left of the east strut."

What was left was a stump of oak, blackened where it had split, jutting from the bank at an angle that suggested it had been driven sideways by the force of the current rather than rotting in place. The mortise joint that had held the strut to the crossbeam was intact—an encouraging sign. It meant the joint had held; the timber itself had simply failed.

The Waterwright pressed his palm flat against the exposed end-grain. The wood was wet through, but the break was clean and fresh. Seasoned oak did not fail this way without help. He crouched and examined the base of the stump, where it entered the packed earth and stone of the dam's foundation. There, half-concealed by silt, was a dark stain and the unmistakable impression of fungal growth.

"Dry rot got in from the bottom," he said. "This was soft long before the flood finished it."

Harald crouched beside him and spat into the water. "So we cut a new one."

"You'll need green oak—still got the tannin in it, resists the wet. Seasoned timber won't hold in a weir that sits in water year-round." The Waterwright stood and brushed the mud from his knees. "How long since the last repair?"

Harald looked at the boy. The boy looked at the water. "My father's father put these timbers in," Harald said, "and he wasn't what you'd call generous with maintenance."

The Waterwright nodded slowly. There was a particular kind of silence that fell on villages when asked about maintenance history. It was the silence of people who had been doing the minimum for a very long time and were only now discovering that the minimum had a cost.

"How deep is the race below the mill?" he asked. It was the practical question, and Harald answered it without hesitation—five feet at full flow, perhaps eighteen inches now. The Waterwright asked about the wheel—overshot, with twenty-four paddles, eight feet across, last serviced in a season he could tell from Harald's face was ancient history. He asked about the tailrace, and Harald led him a hundred yards downstream to where the spent water exited the mill and rejoined the Brindle. The tailrace was choked with dead leaves and silt, narrowed to half its intended width by the root system of an alder tree that had decided the canal was its home and was thriving accordingly.

The Waterwright studied it all with the patience of a man who had studied many broken things and learned that they usually broke in patterns. The weir failed because the strut rotted. The wheel sat idle because the weir failed. The fields were late because the wheel sat idle and the grain could not be ground. The lord's reeve was angry because the fields were late. And somewhere in the tangle of cause and consequence, a village was hungry.

He went back to his satchel, ate two generous wedges of the damp cheese, and told Harald what he needed.

Green oak—two straight-grained lengths of at least eight feet for the new west strut and its replacement, plus shorter pieces for the in-fill planking of the dam crest. Iron bolts with squared shanks, not nails—a weir's joints took lateral force, and nails would pull. A coil of flax cord for calking between the planks, and a bucket of hot pitch. The boy's name, he learned, was Tod, and he looked capable of holding a ladder, carrying a bucket, and fetching things, which meant he could do all three.

Harald set off before noon to find the timber. The nearest managed coppice was a mile east, on the far side of the fields where a stretch of neglected hazel and oak had been left to its own devices since—by the look of it—long before anyone living could remember. The Waterwright spent the empty hours drawing the weir as it was, sketching the cross-section of the millrace, and taking notes on the flow rate. He measured this by timing how long it took a small, buoyant stick to travel a measured stretch of the Brindle. The calculation was simple: distance divided by time gave him a rough velocity, and from velocity and the cross-sectional area of flow he could estimate the volume of water the river was delivering to the site.

The answer was not encouraging. The Brindle was running at perhaps a third of its

spring capacity. The weir was broken, sure, but even repaired it would raise the water level only modestly. The millrace was undersized for the flow available, and the overshot wheel—splendid an engineering achievement as it was when the water was high—could do nothing with a trickle. The paddles would turn a few degrees, groan, and stop, like a man trying to lift something too heavy for him.

He noted all of this in his book, closed it, and walked to the ale-house, which was called the Leaping Trout despite the fact that no trout had been seen in that part of the river in living memory.

The ale-house was a single long room with a low ceiling supported by two central posts that had been carved with faces so worn by time and pipe smoke that they looked like portraits of mildly irritated ancestors. A woman of indeterminate age behind the bar—introducing herself later as Wren—poured a measure of small beer that was colder than most and marginally better than it had any right to be.

"The Waterwright," she said, looking him over. "Harald mentioned you might show up. Said you were poking at the ruin with charcoal."

"Is that what you'd call an introduction?"

"I'd call it accurate. You fixing the weir?"

"I'd like to, if the timber can be had and the village wants to pay."

Wren poured another measure—this one unasked for—and set it in front of him. "The village wants to pay. That's not the question. The question is whether the reeve wants to know you're here before you've finished and he can't find fault with the bill."

The Waterwright took the beer and considered this. He had encountered the question in a dozen villages in three years: the delicate matter of whether a traveling craftsman's presence needed official sanction. In some places, a lord required that any work on shared infrastructure be authorized by his steward. In others, a millwright could work by invitation and custom, the lord's share being collected later in grain or coin. Alderford, from what he had gathered in half an afternoon, fell into a middle zone where the reeve's authority was real but not absolute, and where the villagers operated on a complicated system of mutual tolerance that broke down precisely at moments like this, when someone had to pay for something.

"I'll have words with the reeve tomorrow," he said. "First things first."

Wren raised an eyebrow. "First things first is what, exactly?"

"Understanding what broke and why." He took a drink. The beer was better than he

had expected, with a pleasant tartness that came, he suspected, from a wild yeast the woman was cultivating rather than buying. "A weir is only as good as its weakest timber. If the rot got into the strut from the base, the foundation may be compromised too. I want to see what's under the bank before I cut a single piece of new wood."

"What does the foundation look like?"

"That," said the Waterwright, "is the question, isn't it?"

Harald returned an hour before dusk with the timber hauled on a farm cart pulled by a horse so old it seemed to be held together by habit and spite. Two lengths of green oak, freshly cut, still weeping sap. The bark was still on, which was right—bark stayed on green oak used in water until the wood had soaked through and the tannins had done their work preserving the heart.

Tod trailed behind, carrying an axe and looking at the Waterwright with the frank, assessing gaze of a child who had been given small responsibilities for years and was waiting to see if this new adult would give him any.

"Here's your strong back," Harald said, nodding at Tod.

"Strong enough," the Waterwright said, handing the boy a coil of rope. "We'll start first light. You got a place I can sleep?"

Harald snorted. "There's a loft above the mill store. It leaks when it rains from the east, but we're not expecting rain from the east for another month, and by then you'll either be gone or rich. Either way, it won't matter."

The loft was, in fact, leaking. The Waterwright lay on a pile of grain sacks that smelled of dust and honest labor, stared at the underside of the thatch through gaps in the floorboards, and listened to the Brindle moving past in the dark. It made a different sound now than it had when he was a boy, listening from his father's mill in the vale of Ashborne. Then the river had been an abstraction, a force that turned the wheel and filled the leat and occasionally tried to drown you. Now it was a language. If you listened long enough, it told you what was wrong and, more often than you would think, how to fix it.

He fell asleep to the river's account of itself and woke once, briefly, to the sound of a barn owl passing close overhead on muffled wings. Then the morning came, grey and cool, and he rose to inspect the foundation of the weir.

He had suspected what he would find, but suspicion and evidence are different things, and the evidence that morning was ugly. The base of the remaining west strut sat in a hollow of eroded stone. The limestone bed that should have formed the weir's footing

had been worn away by decades of seepage—water finding its way under and around, slowly, patiently, the way water does when no one is watching. The whole structure had been standing on a shallow dish of its own undermining.

Tod arrived with bread, cold from the ashes, and a crock of whey. He stood at the edge of the excavation and looked down at the hollowed stone without expression.

"You want to tell me what that means?" Harald had asked the question from above, leaning over the bank. The Waterwright sat in the shallow basin he had scraped out with a hand trowel, turning a piece of limestone in his fingers.

"It means the weir needs more than new timbers," he said. "The foundation needs to be rebuilt—repacked with stone and puddled clay to stop the seepage. Otherwise you put a new strut on and the same thing happens in five years."

"So it's a bigger job."

"Yes."

"How much bigger?"

The Waterwright climbed out of the hole, wiped his hands on his trousers, and looked at both of them—Harald with his folded arms, Tod with his bread. The morning light was catching the surface of the Brindle and turning it to hammered pewter. Somewhere above, on the ridge, the first larks of the season were beginning to sing, arriving late and sounding slightly apologetic about it.

"About twice the timber, twice the labour, and a fair amount of river stone that you'll need to haul from the bend below the church," he said. "But when it's done, it's done. Properly built, this weir should hold for thirty years without a major repair."

"And the cost."

The Waterwright said a number. Harald's jaw moved once, twice. Tod stopped chewing.

"You're not from around here," Harald said.

"Not originally."

"Neither is anyone who charges honestly."

The Waterwright sat on the bank and ate his bread. "The alternative is a patch job. New timber on the old foundation. It'll hold for a season, maybe two. Then you're back

here again, except by then the whole structure may have shifted enough that a simple repair won't be enough. You'll need a complete rebuild under worse conditions, at greater cost, and your mill stays idle in the meantime."

Harald looked at the river. He looked at the mill, its great wheel motionless and sullen against the grey sky. He looked at Tod.

"If you do it right," the Waterwright added gently, "the mill runs by week's end. Grain gets ground. The fields get ploughed."

"Done right," Harald said, after a silence in which the river made several useful observations about the patience of millers. "You do it right. The timber and stone are on the village. The ale's on the ale-house. And when the reeve comes asking questions, I'll send him to you with his answer already in his mouth."

The Waterwright reached into his satchel and took out his notebook. He turned to a clean page and began to plan.

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